

# CREATING IMPROVISATION-ENHANCED MARKETING COURSEWORK

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The paper begins with a review of how businesses are using improvisation and how higher education institutions are integrating improvisation into business education. The focus of the paper outlines a plan that will infuse improvisation skills and forms into two upper-level marketing electives, an advertising course and a professional selling course. The goal of the plan is to enhance student learning through the benefits that improvisation can bring to teamwork, creativity, communication and listening skills, and problem solving. After the plan is detailed, the paper concludes with both practical and research implications of creating improvisation-enhanced marketing coursework.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

My experience during the 2009 fall semester was an epiphany of inspiration. As part of a “Faculty Taking Classes” initiative (FTC Initiative) at my institution, where instructors take a class as a full-fledged student, I took the class “Improvisation” from our Theater Department. This FTC Initiative required me to do all the homework, examinations, projects, and public performances of the improvisation course. The overall point of the program is to allow instructors to better relate to the current student mindset as well as having the opportunity to observe, up close and personal, a colleague’s classroom management, instruction pedagogy, and assessment methods. However, the experience also inspired in me ancillary benefits as it opened my eyes to the connection between improvisation and the upper level courses I teach in marketing

According to Aylesworth (2008) there is very little literature available to actually apply improvisation techniques to improve business pedagogy. Thus, this paper strives to create an improvisation-enhanced pedagogy in two upper-level marketing electives: an Advertising course and a Professional Selling course. The paper has three main areas. First will be a glimpse at how businesses are employing consultants who use improvisation tactics, rules, and forms to improve employee skills, such as listening, communication, creativity and problem solving, and teamwork. In addition this first section will be a look at some of the concepts, skills, and rules of improvisation that can play a key role for businesses and businesspeople. The second main area will be a summary of how improvisation is being employed in higher education business courses. Third is a plan on how to best infuse the benefits of improvisation tactics and rules into two upper-level marketing electives courses, Advertising and Professional Selling, which concludes with research and practical implications for further study and implementation of improvisation-enhanced classrooms in marketing education.

## **IMPROVISATION AND BUSINESS**

Businesses are often very structured, with many policies and procedures that are orderly and full of rigid rules. Additionally, most businesses are combative and competitive, striving to maximize effectiveness and efficiency, which by nature makes them linear and inflexible. However, in the real world, businesses,

just like people, live in the present. Corporations need to be responsive to dynamic forces within their own organizations, their competitive set, the economies of the world, and the swirling cultures of people and life. While intuitive decision making is generally considered a poor application in business, one must also understand that intuition is a part of each of our own unique experiences. Consider the following passage from Viola Spolin's seminal 1965 book *Improvisation for the Theater* (pages 3 and 4): *Experiencing is penetration into the environment, total organic involvement with it. This means involvement on all levels: intellectual, physical, and intuitive. Of the three, the intuitive, most vital to the learning situation, is neglected. Intuition is often thought to be an endowment or a mystical force enjoyed by the gifted alone. Yet all of us have known moments when the right answer "just came" or we did "exactly the right thing without thinking." Sometimes at such moments, usually precipitated by crises, danger, or shock, the "average" person has been known to transcend the limitation of the familiar, courageously enter the area of the unknown, and release momentary genius within himself.*

This first section examines ways that businesses, through the employment of improvisational forms, are adapting better to living in the present to create a more solid future. Evidence shows that improvisation skills help dissolve some of the rigidity and structure that impedes growth in the reality of the dynamic world in which businesspeople compete.

*Improvisation-based Business Consulting:* Alain Rostain had his own epiphany in the early 1990's as he found that using improvisation had positive implications for aiding businesses in creativity and brainstorming. (Salopek, 2004) Mr. Rostain formed Creative Advantage in 1993, and since, this New York-based consulting firm has helped many clients, including Kraft, Starbucks, GE, and RJ Reynolds. (Salopek, 2004) Rostain's continued success revolves around helping with a vast array of business needs and concerns (Source: Salopek, 2004):

- A. Reducing costs in product categories
- B. Training new managers in conducting difficult conversations
- C. Listening and making people "present"
- D. Teambuilding
- E. Training in corporate values and ethics
- F. Innovativeness and responsiveness
- G. Fostering collaboration and teamwork

Clearly Mr. Rostain is not alone. There is much evidence that corporate America is using improvisation techniques more. To illustrate, corporate training company, "Performance of A Lifetime" creates customized issue scenarios that take business clients out of their own industry area so they don't get caught up in mostly irrelevant activities, such as talking about last week's meeting. (Salopek, 2004) In addition, "Performance of A Lifetime" has partnered with Duke University's Corporate Education Program (once voted the number one corporate education program in the U.S. by Business Week and The Financial Times) to design the program's experiential learning classes. (Salopek, 2004) "They Improv" Business Consulting Services, with regional offices throughout the U.S., has an impressive client list that includes American Express, Coca Cola, Apple, and BP. ([www.theyimprov.com](http://www.theyimprov.com)) An international consultancy, On Your Feet: Improv for Business, is an organization that has helped corporate giants NIKE, FedEx, and Pricewaterhousecoopers with branding, organizational development, and creativity. (Huffaker and West 2005)

*Improvisation in Business:* The skills and rules of improvisation have clear benefit to businesses and businesspeople. Important skills such as teamwork, communication and listening, and creativity and problem solving can be enhanced when improvisation techniques are employed. There is even a term coined “Organizational Improvisation,” which is cited by Aylesworth (2008) via Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche (1999) as “conception of action as it unfolds, drawing on available material, cognitive, affective and social resources.” There has been evidence of its context in business in many ways, including studies of new product development, organizational, learning, organizational design and analysis, as well as organization restructuring. (Aylesworth, 2008) Surely, given the evidence highlighted in the previous section on improvisation for business consulting, improvisation is something that businesses and industries are, or should be, embracing.

Many concepts inherent in improvisation apply to skills and concepts that play a large role in running a business. Below are some of the ways improvisation skills and rules can help aid businesses and businesspeople:

1. Build community and Group expression. (Spolin, 1963; Salopek, 2004; Smrczek, 2009; Huffaker and West, 2005; Aylesworth, 2008) A foundation for improvisation and/or teamwork to happen. It’s inherent and critical for all improvisational concepts as one must feel free and open to improvise, while if improvising with others, there must be unconditional group support. According to Spolin (1963, page 9) “A healthy group relationship demands a number of individuals working interdependently to complete a given project with full individual participation and personal contribution.” In business there is no way to avoid it, one must be able to work with others, and feel comfortable doing it!
2. Pay attention and be present. (Salopek, 2004; Smrczek, 2009; Huffaker and West, 2005; Aylesworth, 2008) Businesses need to stay realistic with what is happening in the present- the moments at hand need rapt attention in business, and it’s a skill all businesspeople need.
3. Make your product look good. (Salopek, 2004; Smrczek, 2009; Huffaker and West, 2005; Aylesworth, 2008) Just like the teamwork needed in an improvisational show to make everyone look good, the focus of many in business, through creativity, new product development, and product improvements, needs to make everyone and the product look good.
4. Don’t censor yourself and say the obvious thing- the first thing that comes to mind- there are no wrong answers. (Salopek, 2004; Smrczek, 2009; Huffaker and West, 2005; Aylesworth, 2008) Often in business, people overanalyze, dredging over and over a point where sometimes the most basic and obvious ideas are lost.
5. Say “Yes, and.....” instead of “Yes, but.....” and Build (accept what is said and build on it.). (Spolin, 1963; Salopek, 2004; Smrczek, 2009; Huffaker and West, 2005; Aylesworth, 2008) Argumentation or contradiction often only degenerates into a political-based fray, where egos are involved instead of solving problems. One should build upon the ideas of others, accept the “gift” (a common lingo term in improvisation) and proceed from there while also giving “gifts” to help others to build. Put in a more articulate manner (Spolin, 1963, page 10) states “A highly competitive atmosphere creates artificial tensions, and when competition replaces participation, compulsive action is the result.”
6. Listen generously. (Salopek, 2004; Smrczek, 2009; Huffaker and West, 2005; Aylesworth, 2008) This is extremely important in all facets of business, from interpersonal communication with a co-worker all the way to gathering feedback from customers.
7. Take risks, embrace failure, and relinquish control. (Salopek, 2004; Smrczek, 2009; Huffaker and west, 2005; Aylesworth, 2008) Similar to “Saying Yes, and....” it’s often counterproductive to stay safe and under control. It’s also beneficial to relinquish control and follow others’ lead- this builds trust and teamwork.

## **IMPROVISATION AND BUSINESS EDUCATION**

According to Damast (2007), a growing trend in business schools is the integration of theater and improvisation classes and coursework into programs. These programs actually require or highly recommend business students to take theater and improvisation classes (either as electives or part of the core program) to strengthen “soft skills” that help in enhancing listening, communication, teamwork, and leadership. (Damast 2007) Reinforcing this notion of theater and improvisation skills as beneficial to business education is an impressive list of schools that infuse improvisation into coursework. Among these are: As previously mentioned in this paper, Duke University’s Corporate Education Program (Salopek, 2004), Columbia (Huffaker and West, 2005), Stanford (Huffaker and West, 2005), MIT’s (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) Sloan MBA Program, Virginia University’s Darden School of Business Administration, Carnegie Mellon’s Tepper School of Business, and Babson College. (Damast, 2007)

There has also been some scholarly evidence of improvisation being beneficial to business education. Moshavi (2001) and Gibb (2004) both explore introducing improvisation and arts-based training techniques into management coursework. Huffaker and West (2005) sought to explore how improvisational forms could enhance learning in a 10 week business management course. This study had three primary objectives: 1) build community and encourage risk taking, 2) facilitate experiential learning about key course themes, and 3) provide a dynamic alternative to traditional class discussion, capitalizing on creative, nonlinear expression and idea exchange. (Huffaker and West, 2005) The majority of the outcomes, both the anecdotal and descriptive and the objective measures (midterm and final evaluations) show a lot of positive assessment of the objectives, and as described by the authors, “we have no doubt that using improv greatly enhanced our students’ classroom experience. . . . [and] enhanced the amount of exchange and exploration that took place.” (Huffaker and West, 2005)

Taking a different spin regarding course approach, Aylesworth (2008) looked at the effects of integrating improvisational forms into case studies in a graduate marketing class. Aylesworth (2008) cites Barnes, Christensen, and Hansen (1994) in defining case studies: “real life business problems confronting business managers at a particular moment.” The author of this work outlines five steps to incorporate the “improvisation-mind set,” with associated learning objectives; concluding the work with positive results, especially those obtained through anonymous student feedback. (Aylesworth, 2008)

## **CREATING IMPROVISATION-ENHANCED MARKETING COURSEWORK**

The focus of this paper is to now formalize a plan of action to create “improvisation-enhanced” marketing elective coursework (the aforementioned Advertising and Professional Selling courses) that will substantially supplement student learning outcomes and be a basis for further intellectual marketing education study. The plan is threefold. First will be a summary and examination of both courses to be integrated with improvisation tactics and rules, outlining the basic connection between the course and the improvisation skills that can enhance student learning. Second, a template process will be developed that will guide each course’s use of improvisation-based games or activities relevant to the basic connections made between improvisation and each of the two course’s content. Third will be a plan of assessing both the practical and research implications of this improvisation-enhanced marketing education.

*The Advertising Course: The Basics of Improvisation-Enhancement:* The need for creativity and strategy to be coupled is paramount in advertising planning. Idea and concept generation, as well as execution of appropriate copy and design principles, all based on target audience research and a complete

understanding of the product being advertised is the structure for the project of this course. The fact that students, just like professionals in the real world, work in teams for this project, and given the “drudgery” the students feel during the research phase, the improvisational concepts of “Build community and Group expression” and “Pay attention and be present” (Spolin, 1963; Salopek, 2004; Smrczek, 2009; Huffaker and West, 2005; Aylesworth, 2008) are important. Building community and group expression during the research phase of the project helps foster teamwork and trust, while improvisational games and rules that demand you to pay attention and be present can help illustrate the vital importance of thorough, topical research in advertising planning. Additionally, it must be noted that prior to linking any improvisation skills and games to the course content that “Build community and Group expression” games should be used simply to introduce all students of the class to the notion of “accepting improvisation” as part of the course pedagogy.

Upon completion of the research phase of this course’s project, idea and concept generation is front and center. During this stage an implementation of improvisational tactics that focus on creative, non-linear expression and exchange (Huffaker and West, 2005) is needed. On one hand student teams must be creative while adhering to the research that they just gathered, but they also must understand that through open, free brainstorming and creativity, ideas that uniquely fit the background research can emerge. Thus skills and rules that apply include (Salopek, 2004; Smrczek, 2009; Huffaker and West, 2005; Aylesworth, 2008):

1. Make your product look good- just like you make others look good in improvisation, make your advertising team and product look good- support your team and your product unconditionally.
2. Don’t censor yourself and say the obvious thing- say the first thing that comes to mind- there are no wrong answers. Overanalyzing can thwart creativity; sometimes the most basic and obvious ideas are lost.
3. Say “Yes, and.....” instead of “Yes, but.....” and Build (accept what is said and build on it.). Argumentation or contradiction often only degenerates into a political-based fray, where egos are involved instead of solving problems.
4. Listen generously.
5. Take risks, embrace failure, and relinquish control. Similar to “Saying Yes, and....” it’s often counterproductive to stay safe and under control.

Concluding the project is a presentation of the campaign concept and the various advertisements created. During this conclusion phase, it’s important that the students in each advertising team work as a coherent and cohesive group to best present their campaign clearly, enthusiastically, and persuasively. Thus, the improvisational skills and rules learned in the research phase of the project that focus on teamwork and trust need to be reinforced if they have not been kept strong throughout the term of the course.

*The Professional Selling Course: The Basics of Improvisation-Enhancement:* This course strives to teach students relationship selling, with a focus on developing and improving communication and listening skills, while persuasively and professionally presenting custom-fitting value-added solutions for prospects/customers. Thus, communication skills or as Damast (2008) points out, soft skills, must be refined and students must also learn to apply harder skills, such as analytical problem solving.

This course employs multiple projects where students make presentations both in front of classmates and in videotaped scenarios. The culminating project is a professional, persuasive presentation of a product, where all the aforementioned improvisation-enhanced skills (soft skills and analytical skills) will be

applied. However, prior to developing any of these skills or employing any of the course projects, students need to become comfortable with the basics of improvisation. Or as noted previously, students need to be taught to accept the mindset of “accepting improvisation.” Thus initially the improvisation concept of “Build community and Group expression” is imperative so that all in the classroom accept and become comfortable with the improvisation-enhancement that will take place throughout the course term.

Improvisation concepts “Pay attention and be present” (Salopek, 2004; Smrczek, 2009; Huffaker and West, 2005; Aylesworth, 2008), say “Yes, and.....” instead of “Yes, but.....” and Build (Salopek, 2004; Smrczek, 2009; Huffaker and West, 2005; Aylesworth, 2008), and “listen generously” (Salopek, 2004; Smrczek, 2009; Huffaker and West, 2005; Aylesworth, 2008) can all aid students in the development of soft skills such as communicating properly and listening, which is a key skill in relationship and solution selling. These skills will be developed and employed after the initial “build community and group expression” phase, and will be incorporated into many of the projects during the majority of the course delivery.

A good salesperson customizes value-added solutions for prospects/customers; consequently problem solving and analytical skills are needed. This fits perfectly with many improvisation concepts, and will play a critical role in employment of the culminating project of performing a professional, persuasive presentation of a product. To illustrate:

1. Make your product look good- support your prospect’s needs and make your custom-fitted solution (product) the hero to those needs.
2. Don’t censor yourself and say the obvious thing- say the first thing that comes to mind- there are no wrong answers. Overanalyzing can thwart creativity; sometimes the most basic and obvious ideas are lost. After a solid, trustworthy relationship is built, both a salesperson and prospect should be able to discuss openly all ideas, needs, and options, from the most basic concept of first thought and inquiry to the very end, where a complex, customized product may be the solution.
3. Say “Yes, and.....” instead of “Yes, but.....” and Build (accept what is said and build on it.). Argumentation or contradiction often only degenerates into a political-based fray, where egos are involved instead of solving problems. Selling is solving problems- build, build, and build with your prospect!
4. Listen generously.
5. Take risks, embrace failure, and relinquish control. Similar to “Saying Yes, and....” it’s often counterproductive to stay safe and under control. With the proper identification of a prospect’s communication and business style, a salesperson can take risks as to product solutions. Also, we all know that trial and error or failure can be a building block to better decisions. And finally, with many prospects, collaboration is key- salespeople could relinquish much control and let the prospect set parameters in order to close a sale.

*A Template Process for Implementation of Improvisation-Enhanced Coursework:* Aylesworth (2008) outlines five steps in preparing students to use improvisation in case study discussion. A hybrid of this process or procedure is developed and illustrated below so that students understand the basic forms of improvisation that are to be used, and more importantly, how they can be used to enhance learning of the course content and its application.

Improvisational concepts are integrated at points where they can enhance the regular content’s learning outcomes and development of the course projects, and then presented to the students both in how they are

performed and the enhancement it will bring to the course content. Table One matches up the improvisation concepts that are relevant to each course and project’s material.

TABLE ONE: Matching Improvisation Concepts with Course Content

<b>COURSE</b>	<b>COURSE/PROJECT MATERIAL</b>	<b>IMPROVISATION CONCEPTS</b>
Advertising	*Acceptance of Improvisation *Team Building *Project Research *Campaign Presentation	*Build community and Group expression *Pay attention and be present
Advertising	*Idea and Concept Generation	*Make your product look good *Don’t censor yourself and say the obvious thing *Say “Yes, and.....” instead of “Yes, but.....” and Build *Listen generously *Take risks, embrace failure, and relinquish control
Professional Selling	*Acceptance of Improvisation	*Build community and Group expression
Professional Selling	*Communication and Listening Skills	*Pay attention and be present *Say “Yes, and.....” instead of “Yes, but.....” and Build *Listen generously
Professional Selling	*Problem Solving and Analytical Skills	*Make your product look good *Don’t censor yourself and say the obvious thing *Say “Yes, and.....” instead of “Yes, but.....” and Build *Listen generously *Take risks, embrace failure, and relinquish control

Improvisational skills, forms, and activities (games, role plays, etc.) will be performed by all students as soon as possible after each concept of step one has been presented to the class. There are a myriad of possible activities and games that can be employed, and it most be noted that it is critical to match the proper activity/concept with the content being delivered in the course. However, as noted by Goldberg (1991, page 125) there first should always be a “warm-up” exercise/game for the entire class to not only get everyone ready for the skills to be practiced, but also to allow all the students in a class to be together performing to lessen pressure on individuals or smaller groups of individuals that otherwise would have to perform first. Table Two shows a sample of resources where possible activities or games (including warm-up exercises) can be found and then matched with the appropriate improvisation concepts and the enhancement it gives to the course content. An immediate discussion and analysis will take place in the classroom whenever students perform improvisation games or activities related to course content.

TABLE TWO: A sample of sources for improvisation skills/activities/games

<b>SOURCE</b>	<b>COMMENTS</b>
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<p>Aylesworth, Andy (August 2008), web sites listed:  <a href="http://www.yesand.com">www.yesand.com</a>  <a href="http://www.improvencyclopedia.org">www.improvencyclopedia.org</a>  <a href="http://www.secondcity.com">www.secondcity.com</a>  <a href="http://www.improvboston.com">www.improvboston.com</a>  <a href="http://www.improvforlife.net">www.improvforlife.net</a></p>	<p>Aylesworth’s paper in the Journal of Marketing Education is a must read for any one interested in improvisation in business education, and the author lists these web sites as sources for games.</p>
<p>Huffaker and West (2005)</p>	<p>This Journal of Management Education paper presents many improvisation games, along with the authors’ basic premise or course goal for each activity discussed.</p>
<p>Goldberg, Andy (1991), “Improv Comedy”</p>	<p>This book organizes and outlines practical guidance on improvisation, which includes many activities that can be used.</p>
<p>Spolin, Viola (1965), “Improvisation for the Theater”</p>	<p>This book outlines teaching improvisation and contains many activities relevant to the skills that can enhance marketing education.</p>
<p><a href="http://www.fuzzyco.com/super/improv/games.html">www.fuzzyco.com/super/improv/games.html</a></p>	<p>This web site has over 100 games listed with some games only briefly described, with other games having better descriptions.</p>
<p><a href="http://www.learnimprov.com">www.learnimprov.com</a></p>	<p>Detailed and well organized source for all sorts of improvisation games from warm-ups to long forms.</p>
<p><a href="http://www.unexpectedproductions.org/living_playbook.htm">www.unexpectedproductions.org/living_playbook.htm</a></p>	<p>Contains over 400 improvisation games with short descriptions.</p>

Students will keep a running journal as the semester progresses regarding their performance and understanding of the improvisation-enhancement taking place. In addition, an online message board will be made available to all students to share comments and feedback regarding the ongoing improvisation-enhancement of the course.

Simultaneously throughout the term of the course, standard examinations (three exams per semester for each course) will include improvisation concepts studied and performed so that students can be assessed on basic improvisation knowledge and benefits learned.

At the conclusion of the course, supplementing the standard faculty performance evaluations used, students will be given an anonymous evaluation instrument that will include both objective and subjective evaluation of the improvisation-enhanced course as well as the performance of the instructor in delivering the enhanced concepts.

*Practical Implications:* Executing this plan will take serious organizational and preparation skills and patience. The first time formally using this improvisation-enhanced pedagogy will have a primary goal of following the preceding template process. In January 2011, during our institution’s spring semester, two sections of advertising (with 25 students per section) will be the first to be formally managed via this plan for improvisation-enhanced learning. During the Fall 2011 semester, one section of the Professional Selling course (25 students in this section) will follow with improvisation-enhanced delivery. Clearly a full delivery of both courses should be made before any major practical changes are made to the procedure of implementing improvisation-enhanced instruction.



Student feedback, both objective and subjective measures taken during and at the conclusion of the courses will most likely guide most of the practical changes that may be needed. Supplementing these evaluations will be an honest as possible critical evaluation of the benefits and drawbacks of this improvisation-enhanced pedagogy. A sample of practical implications that could arise includes:

1. Is there enough time in a semester to infuse a sufficient amount of improvisation and its benefits into a course's content?
2. Will the level of preparation needed to infuse improvisation detract from other duties and tasks of my job?
3. Will students accept a classroom environment where they must perform improvisation?

Research Implications: The research implications of this endeavor are many. However, the primary research needed would be comprehensively reviewing and examining the results of the plan executed. Questions that will be evaluated from this upcoming comprehensive review are as follows:

- Q1: Was student learning of course concepts enhanced by improvisation?
- Q2: At what level did students learn about improvisation and its benefits for the course content?
- Q3: What future adjustments, if any, should be made to the process or procedure for delivery of improvisation-enhanced pedagogy?
- Q4: What further practical and research implications need to be explored?

The future research methodology for these four questions needs to be as rigorous as possible, including a quantitative analysis of data. For example, for Q1 student objective evaluations of course and instructor effectiveness can be assimilated and compared to previous courses that did not formally infuse improvisation. For Q2, examination data and journal and message board information can be compiled to glean answers related to the learning of improvisation and its benefits. Regarding Q3, interviews, focus groups, and even the data collected for Q2 can be used to analyze any future adjustments to improvisation-enhanced learning. Q4 can be measured via many of the means already mentioned here, as well as in the aforementioned comments made regarding practical implications.

## CONCLUSION

It was truly an enlightening experience in taking an improvisation course. My epiphany of inspiration continues through this paper on creating a plan to infuse improvisation-enhanced learning into upper-level marketing electives. Improvisation clearly fits into business and business education, and there is much more research to explore to grow the fit further.

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