

Navigating the Unscripted Session: Improv Activities in Writing Center Tutor Training

Presentation Notes

Improv Background – Slide One:

- Keeping in mind the last three definitions, ‘improv’ is something we do every day. There are lots of instances in life where we have to respond on the spot or react in a particular way. I think it’s a little less daunting to think about improv in this way.

Improv Background – Slide Two:

- In other words, Gag Improv is more about the individual and landing jokes while Narrative Improv is more about the collective and the story narrative. Narrative Improv can be funny, and often is, but comedy isn’t the focus. The games we will be doing deal with Narrative Improv, so you can stash the knock-knock jokes for another day.

Improv Background – Slide Three:

- Improv “can promote spontaneity, intuition, interactivity, inductive discovery, attentive listening, nonverbal communication, risk-taking, team building, creativity and critical thinking” (Rajeev and Subramanian 150).
- Application in lots of different fields: change management training, tourism & hospitality training, graduate academics, business education, management education, marketing education, educator training & development, & more.

Introduction to Research:

- As you can see from my research question, I framed my research around the tutor’s confidence when navigating the improvisational aspects of the writing center session:
 - Responding spontaneously to a client’s writing
 - Connecting interpersonally with a new client
 - Responding in-the-moment to a client’s replies and requests

Research Methods:

- Pre-Session Survey:
 - Sent out a week before the session
 - Questions about current confidence levels and any previous improv experience
- Post-Session Survey:
 - Sent out a week after the session
 - Questions about current confidence levels, perceived impact of improv games with relation to WC work, & general opinions about the games
- Surveys were paired (so I could see any impact on confidence the session might have had), but because of numbers, the pairing did not matter as much as the general responses I received.

Participants:

- My numbers kept dwindling as the process continued, so a repeat experiment with a higher number of responses and more attendance might reveal different results.

Research Results – Pre-Session Survey:

- High base of confidence = Tutor training that we are already doing is helping tutors be confident in the Writing Lab, which is always a good affirmation to have.
- Previous improv experience = The number of tutors with previous improv experience was higher than I predicted it would be. One of the hypotheses I have concerning this higher number is that most of our tutors are working toward degrees within the College of Liberal Arts, which more closely aligns with the performative arts than STEM disciplines tend to. In the future, it would be interesting (and, I think, worthwhile) to consider the tutor's degree when considering not only improv background, but also confidence in the Writing Center.

Research Results – Post-Session Survey (Slide One):

- Instead of thinking of the improv exercises as confidence boosters, we can think of these improv activities, and their potential usefulness to Writing Center work, in different ways.

Research Results – Post-Session Survey (Slide Two):

- Timing:
 - Some tutors mentioned that the session did not impact their confidence because they had already been tutoring for a while.
 - If we relocated this session to the beginning of tutor training and focused more on students beginning their tutoring journey, it might have more of an impact on tutor confidence.
- Frequency:
 - Some tutors mentioned that the session might have had a greater impact on them and their tutoring practices if the sessions occurred with higher frequency.
- Enjoyment:
 - From the post-session survey responses, there was unanimous enjoyment of the session, but for different reasons.
 - Some mentioned they liked how the session encouraged interaction with other tutors. These activities could definitely serve to foster community within the Writing Center.
 - Others appreciated the session's interdisciplinary approach to Writing Center work. Improv activities are an active and different way to look at Writing Center topics.
- Popular Game:
 - The most popular game was Fortunately, Unfortunately.
 - The tutors who picked this as their favorite said that this game felt most representative of the interactions that happen in Writing Lab sessions, especially concerning feedback sharing and the tutor's role of seeing both sides of a project.

OK, Now What?:

- Like I've mentioned throughout this presentation, I see a lot of opportunities for further study.
- What this workshop ultimately focuses on is equipping you all to be able to do this Writing Center + improv activities research in your own Writing Centers. Part of this, of course, is being familiar with improv games to play, which is what we are going to get into now.

Alien, Tiger, Cow – Hand Gestures:

- *I kept this slide up during the game so that participants could remember what the hand gestures were.*

Alien, Tiger, Cow – WC Connection:

- In the improv world: For instance, if one scene partner notices the other staring intently at them, it could be a silent cry for help; if this scene partner is paying attention and notices this visual cue, they can then take over the scene, helping their partner and preventing the scene from crashing.

Fortunately, Unfortunately – WC Connection:

- In the Writing Center: Active listening is inherently in-the-moment and impromptu, because you cannot listen and think of a response at the same time.

Three-Line Scene (“Yes, And”) – Get Ready to Play:

- Story arc knowledge: Try to align your three lines with the three main parts of the story arc: the inciting incident (background), the climax (the problem), and the resolution (the solution).

Three-Line Scene (“Yes, And”) – WC Connection:

- In the Writing Center: Both improv actors and tutors must be quick to establish constructive agreement and do so in an unscripted environment.

Questions?

- Overall, I see a lot of potential for tutor growth within the intersection of Writing Center work and improv activities.
- Explain that QR code is for handout.