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## EFFECTS OF IMPROV COMEDY ON COLLEGE STUDENTS

Colin P. Stewart

264 Pages

This exploratory qualitative study investigates the degree to which participation in college improv comedy affects academic skills, social skills, and identity development. The study reviews the experiences of students from three different campuses who are involved in improv comedy. Grounded in theories from figured worlds, creativity, student development, memory, cognitive development, identity development, and imagination, this research draws on twelve semi-structured interviews, three group interviews, and three observations of performances. This study answers the following questions: How do college students make meaning of their experience within an improv comedy troupe in relation to academic, social skill, and identity development? What potential does improv comedy have for influencing student growth and development on college campuses? The study provides a historical account of improvisational comedy leading up to the first established improv comedy organizations on college campuses.

Qualitative data analysis revealed themes and subthemes that support student development, including the following: academic, social, identity development and exploration, dropping knowledge, out of thin air, building bridges to new worlds, creating

from scratch, teamwork makes the dreamwork, a way with words, hand in hand, fearlessly true to self, widening the gaze, and way of life. The study provides recommendations for integrating improv comedy into curriculum and student affairs practice.

**KEYWORDS:** College Students, Creativity, Curriculum, Identity Development, Improv Comedy, Improvisation, Student Development, Student Development Practice

EFFECTS OF IMPROV COMEDY ON COLLEGE STUDENTS

COLIN P. STEWART

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Educational Administration and Foundations

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2016

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EFFECTS OF IMPROV COMEDY ON COLLEGE STUDENTS

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## CHAPTER I

### THE PROBLEM AND BACKGROUND

#### **Background**

Many college students go through their college career searching for different ways to get involved on campus. For a small group of students, that search will bring them to a college improvisational comedy troupe. Many U.S. college campuses include formal or informal improv comedy troupes. These improv comedy troupes can have an impact on both the students performing and the participants who regularly attend shows. Early college improv groups received their inspiration from the improv comedy scene, seasoned performers, institutions like The Second City, and improv comedy guidebooks. Although even with major institutions like Second City, Improv Olympic, or The Groundlings, there is no set of national organizational standards or principles that guide college improv comedy troupes. The first formal college improv teams had to create their own structures and performances with little resources. In order to better understand these structures and performances, it is important to have an understanding of what improv comedy means.

The Latin word for improvisation defines the word as the “unforeseen” (Maheux & Lajoie, 2010, p. 87). Others explain, “improvisation is making it up as you go along” (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994, p. 14). Crossan and Sorrenti (1997) would argue that improv is using what you know to respond in an adaptive way to a new situation. Improv comedy is typically displayed when theatre ensembles perform unscripted and

unprepared scenes that are based on audience suggestions (Hackbert, 2010; Holmes & Qureshi, 2006; Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994; Seham, 2001). This craft can be seen when improv comedy troupes perform at a variety of venues. Compared to stand up comedy or theater arts, improvisational comedy is its own art form with its own discipline and philosophies (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994). As it relates to improv comedy shows, each performance is a unique, once in a lifetime experience for that specific audience and will never be replicated (Steitzer, 2011). Today, improv comedy's influence can be seen all over the world and is a regular occurrence on college campuses.

In the state of Illinois, there are more than 12 improv comedy troupes that compete in improv festivals (Chicago Improv Productions, 2012). If one were to watch a college improv show, it might be difficult to articulate a connection between improvisational comedy and the direct value it has on higher education. However, improvisational theatre and comedy have already been researched and incorporated into various fields such as teaching and education (Aylesworth, 2008; Hackbert, 2010; Maheux & Lajoie, 2010; Sawyer, 2004), biology (Holmes & Qureshi, 2006), business (Pinnington, Morris, & Pinnington, 2003; Flucht, 2012; Aylesworth, 2008; Miner, Bassoff, & Moorman, 2001), social work (Steitzer, 2011), theatre and curriculum integration (McFadden, 2012), and engineering (Thilmany, 2005). While research has already been conducted in these various fields, little research has been conducted on college improv comedy troupes. There are, however, strong links to be explored between how improvisational comedy affects the academic & social skills and identity development of students who regularly participate in improv comedy troupes. The remainder of this section will address the problem statement for this study, present the



research questions that guide this inquiry, and share the reflexivity of the researcher.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Student affairs professionals (and faculty) encourage student involvement in extra-curricular activities. In particular, students are encouraged to join registered student organizations or clubs. Some of these registered organizations are connected to respective student affairs offices or academic departments. For example, the advisor to the residence hall association would most likely be a professional staff member from residence life and a physics club advisor would probably be a physics faculty member. In other cases, the registered student organization may have no connection to any office but would still have a faculty or staff advisor. These out-of-classroom interactions between faculty & staff, and students are important to the student experience, especially as it pertains to learning engagement in their first year (Krause & Coates, 2008).

Research shows that there are benefits for students that come with being engaged in student activities on a college campus. Students invest significant energy in various learning outcomes based activities both inside and outside of the classroom. Astin (1984) states that student engagement refers to the "amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 297). Astin's work was affirmed in a study of the first year experience of students at an Australian university, and determined that out-of-class experiences contributed greatly to their engagement when they arrived on campus (Krause & Coates, 2008). George Kuh (1995) also corroborated Astin's work in his study involving the experience of senior college students. It was noted that the classroom experience was not comprehensive enough for students to holistically learn (Kuh, 1995). It was through engagement with the out-of-class

experience that students were able to develop socially, personally and intellectually by engaging in more comprehensive academic experiences (Kuh, 1995).

In like manner, Terenzini, Springer, Pascarella, and Nora (1995) in their longitudinal study demonstrated that “changes in students’ critical thinking abilities are shaped, independently, by what happens to them both in and out of the classroom” (p. 10). In another study exploring the effect of participating in learning communities, it was demonstrated that those communities aided in student learning, development, the social experience, and enhanced their overall academic performance (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Learning communities are beneficial in contributing to the overall learning experience, but there is also a critical need to evaluate the outcomes associated through specific clubs and organizations. There are also lingering questions about how these organizations affect identity development and the amount of time it might take.

Significant and holistic changes of college students are the result of a variety of unified and thoughtful learning experiences over a set amount of time (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). This research would imply that the benefits that accompany involvement in these organizations could take time to bring to fruition. Some students spend a great amount of time during their college experience with improvisational comedy activities, exercises, and events. While student involvement is experienced through a variety of activities, these particular experiences specifically include campus life engagement. Hernandez, Hogan, Hataway, and Lovell (1999) reviewed the impact of involvement in subcategories which included athletics, fraternities and sororities, general activities and organizations, on-campus living, out-of-class involvement with faculty, peer interaction, and employment. That study indicated that involvement had a positive

impact on psychosocial, cognitive development, and learning. These experiences are pertinent to student success and critically enhancing the learning experience.

Subsequently, membership in clubs and organizations has a direct impact on students' personal development. For those students who are members of organizations, this experience increased their satisfaction with college and helped them to develop more relationships with others (Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1994). Furthermore, a longitudinal study demonstrated that involvement within student centers, student activities, and other out-of-class experiences increased self-esteem, capability of building fruitful interpersonal friendships, and increased appreciation of others that were different from themselves (Hood, 1984). There are many documented benefits to general student involvement and involvement in specific student organizations that contribute to student development such as: establishing and clarifying purpose, educational involvement, career planning, lifestyle management, and cultural participation (Foubert & Grainger, 2006). However, meaningful student experiences that are often left understudied. For example, not much is known about the impact on college students who participate in improvisational comedy troupes.

Improv troupes spend a significant amount of time with one another. The troupe builds or models structures for their organization and performs on a regular basis. During a performance, improvisers are creating connections to history and popular culture while simultaneously constructing new worlds and exploring different identities (Johnstone, 1999; Spolin, 1999). Improvisers can create comprehensive characters that they develop over time through dynamic storytelling. These characters have attributes that come from somewhere within the improviser. With the amount of time and energy invested in this

activity, one could surmise that involvement affects the student improvisers. The effect that improvisation has on a participant is not limited to their identity. There are also implications for the effect that participation would have on overall success in college. Does improv comedy impact the way a student learns, and if so, could this contribute to improved learning, greater success, and improved graduation rates?

Earning a college degree has never been more critical than it is now in the current economic climate. There is also a need for college students to be equipped with skills to persist to graduation and be ready for the world of work. Matthews (2005) argues that “the need for higher education has never been greater, the demand for it is growing rapidly, and the higher education system will play an increasingly important role in the functioning of the U.S. economy” (p. 111). Obtaining a college degree also leads to greater access to employment and higher income (Haskins, Sawhill, & Isaacs, 2008; Taylor, Fry, & Oates, 2014). Furthermore, Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2010) indicated that by the year 2018, there will be 3 million job openings requiring degrees which the United States does not have the educational capacity to provide. With the increased need for successful college graduates and the number of jobs requiring degrees, there is a critical necessity for producing successful college graduates.

In addition to the increased need for college graduates, there is a growing body of research indicating that college graduates are not ready for the world of work (American Marketing Association, 2010; Wagner, 2008). Wagner’s (2008) research on the Global Achievement Gap demonstrates that graduating seniors require critical thinking and problem-solving skills, collaboration and leadership, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurship, effective oral and written communication, accessing and analyzing

information, curiosity, and imagination for surviving in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce. Moreover, the American Management Association (2010) inferred that critical thinking and problem solving, effective communication and team building, creativity, and innovation were the most critical skills that postgraduates should have. Furthermore, tomorrow's graduates must be adaptable in order to fit into multiple careers in this complex society (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Students will require the ability to adapt to this complex world and should be provided the tools to do so effectively.

Colleges and universities have also had issues with successfully graduating all of their enrolled students. On the national scale, "fewer than four in ten students (38.9%) complete a degree after four years. The degree completion figure increases by 17.5 percentage points to 56.4% after five years, and by only another 4.8 percentage points to 61.2% after six years" (Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran, 2011, p. 6). Furthermore, the U.S. Census Bureau (2009) indicated that only 27.4% of the adult population has earned a college degree. With the growing future need for college graduates, there will not be enough of an educated workforce to meet the demand.

With the low number of college graduates and the disparagingly low graduation rates; the strategies increase to produce college graduates have never been greater. It is essential that higher education employ new strategies that not only engage and retain college students, but also improve upon learning inside and outside the classroom. There is a need for college graduates who have the skills to be successful in and out of the classroom. With these needs in mind, the researcher will look to the understudied and underutilized practice of improv comedy to determine its contributions to student learning. There are several benefits that come with participating in improv comedy

ranging from participants using creative outlets, cognitive development, and social development (Bynane, 2008; Hackbert, 2010; Lockford & Pelias, 2004; Russ & Wallace, 2013). However, little is known about a validated connection between college improv comedy and how it might impact a student's social experience and learning experience on campus. Thus, the purpose of this study is to determine what role improv comedy plays in the identity development and exploration of college students and how this involvement affects growth and development. The following section will define the research questions that guide the research study.

### **Research Questions**

The exploratory study will answer the following questions:

RQ1. How do college students make meaning of their experience within an improv comedy troupe in relation to academic, social skill, and identity development?

RQ2. What potential does improv comedy have for influencing student growth and development on college campuses?

As the researcher explores these questions, it will be critical to reflect upon their personal experience with the topic. For this reason, in the next section I describe my experiences with improv comedy and how it led me to this topic.

### **Reflexivity**

Both my higher education journey and my improvisation journey began at the same time. During my first year of college, I became involved in the theater department through auditioning, volunteering for the backstage crew, and taking classes. I founded an improv troupe that regularly performed for 100-200 students. When I moved to Seattle, Washington, to pursue my master's degree at Seattle University, I formed another

team where I continued to teach students how to perform. This team included a mixture of undergraduate and graduate students. That team generated audiences between 150-200 students. I then decided that I wanted to combine my passion for improv comedy with my coursework. For a qualitative research project during graduate school, I interviewed student improv participants, and their responses were remarkable. I found that all of the participants benefited in a variety of ways from improv comedy. The reported benefits included increasing their social networks, stress relief, and increasing their confidence in the classroom. This coincided with what I was experiencing as well. I loved performing on stage and I loved creating these scenes and socializing with my peers in such a unique way. I was also able to articulate the benefits that improv had on my life.

I realized that improv comedy not only had an impact on the participants, but also had affected me. It was through that process of reflection that I discovered that I was able to create connections between abstract concepts seamlessly. Both on and off stage, I experienced moments of joy unmatched by most experiences. I was also able to work through challenging situations with my coursework and professional life by utilizing improvisational techniques. I also felt more creative and confident when I was on stage performing. I could see that improvisational comedy had affected me both on and off stage.

After I moved to Denver, I knew that I wanted to continue my involvement in improvisation and took classes at the Bovine Metropolis Theatre. I also auditioned and earned a spot on two house teams (the 'Fillers' and the 'On the Spot' team). I regularly practiced and performed while taking improv classes. I also started to incorporate these improv strategies into my professional student affairs practice and began presenting on

how to infuse improv comedy principles into student affairs at local, regional, and national conferences. When I moved to Switzerland, I started an improv team where I taught the students how to play the games but was not there long enough to see the ultimate impact. Once I arrived in Bloomington, Illinois, and started working at Illinois Wesleyan University, I found a flyer for an improv class downtown, enrolled in a basic class at Theatrescool, and was soon asked to start teaching classes. I also enrolled in a course at Second City Theatre in Chicago, Illinois. I taught classes at the Theatrescool for about a year, until the theatre owners moved to California, which was around the time that I started the Ph.D. program.

### **Significance of the Improv Study**

While there have been studies conducted on improvisational comedy and how it can affect various fields (Aylesworth, 2008; Flucht, 2012; Hackbert, 2010; Holmes & Qureshi, 2006; Maheux & Lajoie, 2010; McFadden, 2012; Miner, Bassoff, & Moorman, 2001; Pinnington, Morris, & Pinnington, 2003; Sawyer, 2004; Steitzer, 2011; Thilmany, 2005), there is no research on the impact improvisation has on student development. Magerko et al. (2009) also indicate that improvisational comedy is relatively understudied from a scientific cognitive perspective. However, creativity has definitive connections to improv and has been demonstrated to influence cognitive development (Lockford & Pelias, 2004). There have been no published studies that have connected student development theories, identity, and academic skill development in the collegiate context with improv. With the gap in the literature, the purpose of this study is to build a practical guide for educators to engage students in academic and social skills and identity development and exploration. These guides have the potential to begin to fill the gap in



skills required for the world or work and contribute to higher graduation rates.

Several years ago I interviewed undergraduate students and graduate students about the effect improv had on their lives (Stewart, 2009). Their responses were supportive of others work, and it was clear that there was a connection between participating in improv comedy and their life beyond the stage. For some, it helped them be more comfortable in social situations. For others, it helped them be more confident speaking up as well as deepened their learning in the classroom. Improv impacted their creativity and ability to make connections. However, the work that started with those interviews is not complete. Those interviews merely scratched the surface about the impact that improv comedy is having on college students.

In fact, a person's identity matters and directly impacts their college experience (Astin, 1999). If improv does play a role in students' identity development, it is important to explore that connection. There are also strong considerations for the impact that improv comedy might have on both the social and academic skill development of college students. As indicated earlier, there are serious concerns about the attrition rates of college students along with the skills that college students have developed when they graduate. If improv comedy has an impact on academic and social development, it is important to explore those connections. It will also be important to produce a practical guide for educators.

This guide for educators could be generated in the form of a theory. This theory would develop new and practical applications for education. Even though creativity might be considered impracticable by some in education (Runco, 2007), professors could use these tools to engage students in their learning in new ways and find new solutions to

complicated problems. Improv could be used to apply key topics in real time through a variety of scenarios based on real life issues. Theoretical constructs could be used for student development professionals who are exploring identity development or developing their teams. The research could be utilized in team building, leadership development, developmental conversations, and identity development. These practices could be used by the students to engage with each other and build stronger relationships with their peers, increase their ability to problem solve, and communicate better with others. This research could impact the ways students learn and even identify new tactics to engage identity development. With these results, there are unlimited possibilities for higher education, student development, and student learning.

### **Assumptions**

This study will utilize a grounded theory approach. This framework suggests the researcher does not enter the study with strong predictions. If the researcher has strong assumptions, those could influence the outcome of the theory. However, it is anticipated that improvisational comedy will have an impact on learning, cognition, and identity development. With this topic being understudied in this context, there could also be unforeseen conclusions that come from the study. It is also assumed the participants will be authentic in their performance and honest with their responses to interview questions. There is also an assumption that researcher will be proficient in analyzing the multiple forms of data to create themes that will lead to a guide or theory.

This study is framed from a qualitative constructivist paradigm with a grounded theory research approach. Therefore, it is an assumption that constructivism will be used throughout the study. As indicated by Glaserfeld (2005), constructivism is “understood

to be complex and fundamentally nonlinear in nature” (p. 11) and will require flexibility and adaptability on the part of the researcher. Additionally, qualitative research is context bound, and this improv comedy experience should be framed from the perspective of the improvisers and not my own. To ensure my own biases do not unexpectedly impede the study, I have documented these biases and how I will monitor them in Chapter III.

### **Definition of Terms**

The current research study includes certain words that are commonly used either in student development or within the improv community. To prevent misunderstandings, definitions are included below.

*Creativity*: having an attribute of novelty while generating, imagining, making something original (Welling, 2007).

*Identity development*: working through seven vectors of development that contribute to the definition of self (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

*Imagination*: "transforming, creative activity directed from the concrete toward the new concrete" (Vygotsky, 1991, pp. 84-85).

*Improv comedy*: Improvisational comedy is typically portrayed when theatre ensembles perform unscripted and unprepared scenes based on audience suggestions (Hackbert, 2010; Holmes & Qureshi, 2006; Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994; Seham, 2001).

*Yes, and*: to accept and build on another player's suggestion by adding a new component to the scene (Aylesworth, 2008; Magerko et al., 2009; Moshavi, 2001; Salinsky & Francis-White, 2008; Sawyer, 2004).

## Summary

The primary focus of the research is to study how involvement in improv comedy affects identity, academic, and social development. There are many benefits to participating in improv, however, with the lack of research, theoretical frameworks, and practical considerations, the focus of this study will be directed towards college student improvisers. While there are improv troupes spanning beyond the collegiate environment, the focus of this study will be on college student improv troupes because those other improv troupes have been studied.

There is a need in the workforce for graduating college students who have the ability to adapt, be creative, work in teams, and problem solve. Across the higher education landscape, attrition rates are high and students require new strategies to remain engaged in student learning. The demands to learn efficiently and effectively are more prevalent than ever. Further research that studies how improvisation affects growth and development is necessary for the development of practical tools for educators.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### **Introduction**

President Barack Obama set a goal that by the year 2020 America will have the highest percentage of college graduates in the world (Whitehouse, 2015). This is an impressive goal considering the current state of higher education's graduation rates and overall college graduates (Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran, 2011; Ryan & Siebens, 2009). America is also calling for more prepared college graduates that are ready to enter the workforce (American Marketing Association, 2010; Wagner, 2008). With dwindling resources and increased accountability, higher education needs as many tools in their academic toolbox as possible to enhance the academic experience. Higher education should explore and utilize educational practices that encourage creativity, curiosity, and imagination. Specifically, one of those creative practices is improvisational comedy. This practice and the benefits it produces could have an impact on increasing student engagement, learning, and overall matriculation. However, before conducting the research, there must be a literature review.

The literature review will include the history of improv spanning back to its origins in Italy, along with an essential review of the rules and guidelines that are included in improvisation. This chapter will also include perspectives from Viola Spolin, who is the "Godmother" of improv. Also included, will be an overview of the concepts of imagination, play, and figured worlds. Additionally, with the many intersections between

ingenuity and improvisation, there will be a brief discussion on creativity. Chapter II will also include a synopsis of how intelligence, memory, the brain, learning, and cognitive development can connect to improvisation. A brief summary of selected identity development theories will conclude the literature review.

The purpose of this study is to research how involvement in a college improv troupe affects academic, social skill, and identity development of the participants. This study will not be researching high school improv troupes, formal training grounds (like Second City or Improv Olympic), or improv troupes that exist in community theaters. However, much of the modern improv comedy movement has stemmed from organizations like the Second City. The study focuses on higher education, and, therefore, the study is limited to that specific scope. There are dissertations that primarily focus on improvisational structures, the history of improv, and exhaustive literature reviews (Charles, 2003). Previous dissertations written on this topic also include historical reviews with particular influences, curriculum, and exercises from Josephine Forsberg (Duffy, 2011).

Previous dissertations on improv have also included parallels between community, social, cultural development and longform improvisation (Fortier, 2008). Further, Drinko (2012) researched the connections between cognition, mental ordering, and improvisation. There has also been a growing body research on the connections between leadership and improvisation (Kelly, 2012; Tabae, 2013). These dissertations and articles are related to the topic; however, the focus of these previous studies excluded college improv troupes and did not include specific research on college identity development and exploration, developing academic skills in the classroom, or

participant's social skill development. However, there was one dissertation that utilized improvisation in a high school classroom.

In Welsh's (2014) dissertation, improvisation was used to teach literacy in a high school classroom. Welsh used Figured Worlds as a tool to frame the data. Welsh's study, however, did not focus on the world of higher education and excluded both identity and artifacts from his analysis. There was also no practical guide for college educators. While there has been limited research on improvisation and gender/race, Seham (1997, 2001) has been a catalyst in this area. For example, her approach utilized a critical race/feminist theoretical framework to explore the imbalances occurring in the Second City organization, not the college improv experience. The overall hope of this study is to explore the impact that improv comedy has on academic skills, social skills, and identity development and to contribute to the scholarship.

### **Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion**

The general criteria for inclusion of the review of literature include the history of improv, guidelines, and text from Viola Spolin. This chapter also includes a review of imagination, Figured Worlds, creativity, intelligence, memory, brain, learning, and cognitive development. Imagination and creativity were included because imagination is needed to participate in improv comedy. A improv participant must use imagination and creativity to see beyond what is in front of them. The brain and memory were included because everything that is achieved in improv comedy is drawn from a participant's brain and their memory. Intelligence, learning, and cognitive development were also included because of the direct connections to learning and social development in improv comedy. There is also a brief review of selected identity development theories. Identity

development theories were reviewed because of the exploration of identity development and the impact that improv comedy might have on those areas. There was a conscious choice to exclude theatre education practices, because improvisational comedy is its own craft and while it can include theatrical components (setting, lighting, etc), improv comedy is a stand-alone creation requiring no theatre background for success. I also chose to exclude research on the plasticity of the brain, because while plasticity is the brain's way of changing itself, there were no direct connections to the research questions.

### **History of Improv Comedy**

While the unique art form has become pervasive over the past 60 years, its history is expansive. In the fifteenth century, a group of Italian comedic performers traveled great distances to combine theatre, comedy, and elements of modern improvisation (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994; Salinsky & Francis-White, 2008; Duchartre, 1966). The Comedia Dell Arte discovered that “impromptu comedy throws the whole weight of the performance on the acting, with the result that the same scenario may be treated in various ways and seem to be a different play each time” (Duchartre, 1966, p. 32). The group had a measurable influence on the modern improv world and stood the test of time. For three centuries, the Comedia Dell Arte influenced Europe along with literature, music, and painting (Duchartre, 1966). Aristotle also used improvisation in his language describing the Greek tragedies and according to Charles (2003):

The Italian-born Commedia Dell Arte exerted enormous influence on the shape of European comedy, providing artistic impetus to some of the most celebrated Western playwrights of all time. Jonson, Moliere, Goldoni, Gozzi and Shakespeare all received inspiration from this pervasive spontaneous form. (p. 2)



While there are elements pulled from the Comedia Dell Arte that influence modern improvisational comedy, one of the most pivotal architects of the modern improvisational comedy movement was informed by Viola Spolin in the 1930s.

Viola Spolin began working with youth in Community Theater settings while creating foundational improv games to help them better understand theater (Salinsky & Francis-White, 2008). By recognizing the potential of a child's playful imagination, her work laid a strong foundation for modern improvisation today. In the 1950s, Spolin's son Paul Sillis joined forces with David Shepard, whom started the Compass Players and later evolved into The Second City (Salinsky & Francis-White, 2008; Seham, 2001). Second City has grown in their practice of improvisation over the years and ultimately crafted the modern sketch movement that can be viewed on shows like 'Saturday Night Live', 'Seinfeld', '30 Rock', and several famous traveling theater groups.

Another seminal improv comedy architect includes Keith Johnstone. His approach and improv theory was more about generating the do and do not's of improv comedy (Johnstone, 1999) compared to Spolin, who was much more about transformation and letting things unfold intuitively (Spolin, 1999). It was during 1970s, after many years spent in London on the quest for truth of improvisation, that Keith Johnstone "moved to Calgary and developed Theatresports, one of the most popular ways of 'packaging' improvisation for public performance yet devised" (Salinsky & Francis-White, 2008, p. 4). This format includes a competitive style format where two teams perform against each other in a pseudo competition. In the 1980s, partners Del Close and Charna Halpern left Second City to establish the Improv Olympic, which featured primarily improv comedy, instead of sketch comedy (Salinsky & Francis-White, 2008). These organizations

typically produced their own handbooks comprised of guidelines and descriptions of games. While there have been many significant troupes that have made an impact on the modern improv movement (like the Groundlings and Upright Citizen's Brigade), these organizations have laid the foundation for the modern improv college team.

The oldest college improv troupe was established at Boston College in 1980. This group is called "My Mother's Fleabag" and they derived their performances from the Groundling's handbook (improvcomedy.org, n.d.). Yale University, on the other hand, claims to have founded the oldest collegiate "longform" improv team in 1985 and they are called "Purple Crayon of Yale" (Purple Crayon of Yale, n.d.). Del Close taught Yale's improv troupe how to perform long form improvisation. Following in Yale's footsteps, Harvard University students started their improv comedy troupe "The Immediate Gratification Players" in 1986 (The Immediate Gratification Players, n.d.). However, even with these college improv organizations existing for over 35 years, strangely enough, there is little to no scholarship on college improv troupes. There are only vague references made by famous comedians of their involvement in their college improv troupes. For example, Amy Poehler was a part of the college improv troupe "My Mother's Fleabag" (Wurtz, 2009) before making it big in Hollywood.

### **Improv Comedy Guidelines**

Several guidelines and rules emerged over the years that influence college student improv troupes today. Structure, playing in the moment, commitment, teamwork, risk-taking, agreement, and the concept of "yes, and," are fundamental guidelines to college improv comedy troupes. While there is often an ethos of "anything goes," improv games are broken into three categories including: no content constraints, low content constraints,

and high content constraints (Magerko et al., 2009). No content constraints include open play, and high content constraints might include a game where participants must follow several rules to play well. These various structures are typically played out in either shortform or longform styles. Short form games are typically 2-10 minute games that usually include many rules. Longform improv can include many guidelines, but could also be depicted as an improvised one-act play. Both of these forms begin with an inspiration or prompt (Miner et al., 2001), which typically comes from the audience in some form and involve some sort of problem/crisis. Spolin (1999) said that “ingenuity and inventiveness appear to meet any crisis the game presents, for it is understood during playing that a player is free to reach the game’s objective in any style chosen” (p. 5). Throughout these games, players should be living in the moment and strongly discouraged from thinking about what is coming next or how their actions, comments, or character might influence the scene (Aylesworth, 2008).

Both current college improv troupes and traditional performances are commonly viewed in an ensemble or group performance. These teams follow a format that consists of the following: “(a) the creation process of narrative content is completely in real-time, (b) there is no explicit coordinator between the improvisers, and (c) the constraints on a performance follow the form of a set game rules plus audience suggestions” (Fuller & Magerko, 2011, p. 1). Teams must also concentrate their attentiveness on the group goals and objectives above that of any individual (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994). While some college improv troupes will occasionally place individuals who have never performed together, typically teams have built trust and have played with each other before. Often great bonds are developed among teams and it is a product of those

kinships that the teams' efforts result in superior playing (Spolin, 1999).

When improvisers practice this team approach and finally learn to trust their fellow players, the occurrence can be transformational and comes from the groups' efforts (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994). Trust involves being vulnerable and taking risks. Improv comedy trains participants to trust each other, and the benefits include overcoming personal doubt and anxiety (Steitzer, 2011). To embrace this type of trust, there is one pivotal understanding between improvisers and that is 'agreement.' Teams also typically practice and perform on a regular or irregular schedule to create their best narrative. Baumer and Magerko (2009) identified that the "Narrative is heavily constructed on stage by improviser through this interaction of offering and accepting. The three types of responses are classified by how they interact with the offer: Yes, And (Accept, Augment), Yes, But (Accept, Redirect), and No, But (Reject, Direct)" (p. 144). This form of understanding can never be denied or else the scene will suffer (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994).

Holmes and Qureshi (2006) also suggest that the basic skill set "of improvisational theatre include creating the ensemble group through listening, making and receiving offers, and 'yes and'" (p. 24). To "Yes and" is to accept and build up another players suggestion by adding a new component to the scene (Aylesworth, 2008; Magerko et al., 2009; Moshavi, 2001; Salinsky & Francis-White, 2008; Sawyer, 2004). When suggestions are offered in an improv scene, those offers are accepted, and a new layer of the story is added. This can be one of the most difficult aspects of working with the team. It requires individuals to simultaneously suspend their version of reality while co-constructing a new one. However, when suggestions are denied, this is a violation of

the pivotal ‘yes, and’ rule and disproves the universe that was created by their fellow players (Aylesworth, 2008). While this does happen from time to time, only skilled improvisers and trusted members between teams have the ability to recover. This ‘yes, and’ concept is a code, an instrument, and it ensures the team narrative can be developed (Holmes & Qureshi, 2006).

Improv comedy requires the team to build connections with the ensemble. Improvisers are proficient in seeing the networks between everything, are aware of the circumstances of their actions, and can react quickly without hesitation (Aylesworth, 2008). Connections can be made with the players, the content, the audience, and culture. Building these specific networks is achieved seamlessly by listening, recalling, and reusing information so that patterns begin to develop between the various games and scenes (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994). When connections are made, this provides endless opportunities for thoughtful exploration, enhanced co-creation, character development, and relationships to form. Spolin (1999) taught that improvisation, which she also called “transformation,” is an embrace of the unknown and a trust that all things are ultimately connected.

Another guideline of improv is to search for the truth of the scene (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994). One of the common mistakes made by new improvisers is to try to be funny instead of searching for the truth in a character or in relationships between others. Inexperienced improvisers do this because they are searching for the laughter as reassurance, instead of being genuine in a scene. For example, instead of going for a quick joke and ending a scene, an experienced improviser will perform as they believe a specific character would if they were alive. It’s almost as if the character has an identity,

their own world, and a constructed set of social and physical rules. Part of that process involves getting over the individual's ego.

It is an unfortunate side effect of society, but the result of peer pressure, privilege, power systems, and perception often eliminate other's truth. Those who conform to society do not know themselves and this can have detrimental affects on identity development and learning (Spolin, 1999). In both life and improvisation, the ego is a roadblock to creating great scenes and one must learn to trust themselves fully to make the right decisions (Halpern & Close, 2001). Being truthful in improvisation is a guideline, even in the midst of humorous situations.

Within improvisational comedy, it is also important to have an awareness of the environment that is created. When an environment is created, this helps both the fellow players and audience become engaged with the scene. For example, if a table is created in the middle of the room, a player should not just walk through the table. Players are required to completely immerse themselves in the worlds that they create (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994). When this is done well, an audience member can actually see what the improviser has created, but requires more than just words and physicality, it requires commitment. This commitment is beyond mere observation and requires an improviser to experience "penetration into the environment, total organic involvement with it. This means involvement on all levels: intellectual, physical, and intuitive" (Spolin, 1999, p. 3). It can be difficult for some improvisers to understand the environment that another player has created. However, Halpern, Close, and Johnson (1994) state that when it comes to environments "it is simple to cause such a re-creation in one's mind because everything perceived comes from the inside the head" (p. 101).

Improvisers typically enjoy the actual feeling of participating in improvisation. They leave feeling more confident, in a better mood, and happier. Improvisers also have difficulty describing what happens after they participate in improv. This feeling could be described as a flow state. Flow is “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great costs, for the sheer sake of doing it” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, p. 4). During these experiences when your filter is completely removed, hours may have seemed like minutes and one might also have trouble remembering everything that occurred.

### **Imagination, Play, and Figured Worlds**

Most children grow up using their imagination, playing, and fantasizing to help make sense of their worlds and who they are. When children use their imagination, it helps them develop and learn (Berk, 2004; Russ & Wallace, 2013; Yawkey & Bloh, 1977). Using one's imagination helps give humans the opportunity to unlock their creativity and look beyond what is in front of them (Weisberg & Hirsh-Pasek, 2003). With limited resources and greater accountability, it is critical to use one's imagination. Research studies demonstrated that using imagination develops counterfactual reasoning and making sense of complex environments (Buchsbaum, Bridgers, Weisberg, & Gopnik, 2012; Singer, 1999). Another study demonstrated that children who use their imagination are more creative, display problem-solving abilities, and are more creatively expressive (Russ & Wallace, 2013). From this viewpoint of cognitive function, imagination can be used to make sense of the complex world we live in (Singer, 1999). Unfortunately, eventually adolescents are discouraged from using their imagination, draw inside the

lines, and follow the rules. Participation in improv comedy troupes might be the perfect place to pull students back into the creative fold.

It is ironic that children are discouraged from using their imagination because as adults we spend a significant amount of time in fictional fantasy worlds (Gopnik & Walker, 2013). For example, adults play role-playing fantasy games where they take on other identities. Others might play video games where they immerse themselves in other universes for hours on end. Some adults enjoy fantasizing about a better life. Higher education might benefit from focusing more energy on imagination, creativity, and innovation. Singer (1999) states that "imagination is a special feature or form of human thought characterized by the ability of the individual to reproduce images or concepts originally derived from the basic sense but now reflected in one's consciousness as memories, fantasies, or future plans" (p. 13). Vygotsky (1991) suggested, "imagination...is a transforming, creative activity directed from the concrete toward the new concrete" (pp. 84-85).

Play and using your imagination increases a child's capacity to develop other practical developmental tools like creativity. Russ and Wallace (2013) argued that pretend play is some sort of social and practical tool that can be used regardless of the situation and that if educators could "enhance their ability to play, doing so should give them an advantage in creative problem solving and creative expression as they grow older and become adults" (p. 146). Yet, still at a certain point in time, children are discouraged to use their imagination. One argument for this could be that children learn differently than adults do (Buschsbaum et al., 2012). However, imagination is critical to human development and one's ability to understand certain situations. The concepts of



play and imagination are closely connected to Figured Worlds.

According to Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (2001) people “develop more or less conscious conceptions of themselves as actors in socially and culturally constructed worlds” (p. 40). These cultural worlds are created all the time. One example might be the world of high school where identities and social rules are formed and replayed through various means. Figured Worlds are defined as “socially produced, culturally constructed activities” (pp. 40-41). In order to qualify as a Figured World, there must be a cultural or historical phenomena where individuals are invited to join and must be contributed through works. Second, their position, rank, and point in time within social context matters. Third, Figured Worlds are socially ordered and replicated and then individuals interpret and construct meaning for themselves. Fourth, these Figured Worlds allocate individuals by linking them to landscapes of action and then “spreading our sense of self across many different fields of activity but also by giving landscape human voice and tone” (p. 41). During pretense, young children construct elaborate universes with rules and guidelines and do this while playing with others (Gopnik & Walker, 2013). It appears that there is a great deal to learn from the imagination of children. A child’s fantasy seems to us to be richer and stronger compared to adults because of the greater excitability of feeling the intensity of experience, and uncritical judgment (Vygotsky, 1991, p. 82).

Welsh (2014) conducted a study utilizing a partial Figured Worlds approach. He selected one chapter from a book and analyzed conversations between secondary students. Critical literacy development can arise from scenes of learning. Welsh (2014) said that:

If figured worlds are created through an improvisational process and serve as ties of socially situated improvisations between individuals, then perhaps improvisational theatre arts could provide a means of reflecting on the improvised quality of that process in such a way that reflection allows for critique which leads to greater choice and control of the improvisation with then a particular figured world. (p. 61)

However, I have some critiques of Welsh's approach. A significant critique is they way he used the Figured Worlds approach. He demonstrated a strong use of the Figured World approach to explore student literacy through the use of improvisation. However, he failed to utilize the breakdown of identity, discourse, or artifacts completely. For example, Hatt (2004, 2007) provides a really strong example of Figured Worlds discourse, identity, and artifact analysis in her approach to analyzing smartness of secondary students. It appears that Welsh never unpacked a student's identity or identified any artifacts in his study. He did, however, unpack some of the discourse between the students, but the samples were minimal. Welsh (2014) also suggested "that there are no wrong choices in improvisation, but that improv theory is another tool that can be used to reflect on choices that are made" (p. 121).

### **Creativity and Intelligence in Improv**

Creativity is hard to define, understand, track and measure. There also proved to be varying definitions of creativity. Kaufman and Baer (2005) said that creativity should be thought of "as a construct in abstract, domain-transcending ways, all creativity products come into being in some domain or field of endeavor" (p. xiv). While Singer (1999) said that creativity is simply to "reproduce image or concepts originally derived from basic sense but now reflected in one's consciousness as memories, fantasies, or future plans" (pp. 13-14). From a system's perspective "Creativity is any act, idea, or

product that changes and existing domain, or that transforms and existing domain into a new one” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 28). Welling’s (2007) definition of creativity indicated “the most defining characteristic of creativity is that of novelty. To be creative means producing or thinking something new” (Welling, 2007, p. 164). While Kleiman (2008) said “though there may no single, ‘hold-all’ definition of creativity, there seems to be a general coalescing of agreement amongst creativity researchers that creativity involves notions of novelty and originality combined with notions of utility and value” (p. 209).

The true understanding of creativity is lacking for many, as “in fact, creativity has (unlike other mental ability constructs such as intelligence) long been viewed as a “difficulty” trait that is hardly amenable to research, and empirical studies on this topic were extremely scarce” (Fink & Benedek, 2013, p. 207). While the definitions could go on and on, steps to the creative process have been identified. Researcher Graham Wallas created a four-step process in 1926, which is still applicable today. Wallas (1926) explained four linear stages: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. The preparation stage includes identifying and investigating the problem from many angles. The incubation process is when your consciousness is working out the problem even if you are not thinking about it. The illumination stage is when the answer comes to you and the verification stage is confirming it works through testing. While Welling (2007) suggests that originality is the sole requirement for cognitive function, he suggests there are four applications to creativity and cognition: application, analogy, combination, and abstraction. With these varying definitions and applications of creativity, assessment can be troublesome.

Improv comedy is a distinctive source of material when researching the social and creative processes (O-Neil, Piplica, Fuller, & Magerko, 2011). However, who could be considered a master improviser? This would be challenging as guidelines for assessing creative standards can be drastically different from craft to craft (Kaufman & Baer, 2005). When it comes to assessment in any specific field (especially creativity), the evaluator must be familiar with the standards, guidelines, and techniques along with being familiar with the particular craft (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). With creativity being so difficult to evaluate and changing from domain to domain, it is no wonder why so many do not consider themselves creative. However, if individuals had the knowledge and knew the rules of a certain craft such as improvisation, they might actually be “talented.” With the varying definitions and challenges in assessment, the struggles with creativity do not end there.

Creativity also comes with a set of misconceptions and stereotypes. Moran and John-Steiner (2004) highlighted that creative individuals often have four characteristics including impatience, ownership, conflict, and unfriendliness. Additionally, creativity can be associated with many mental health issues (Runco, 2007), and creativity is often only expected of odd eccentrics. However, Cho et al. (2010) found that the mental operation of creativity may be different from that of intelligence, and crystallized knowledge may be used as a resource for the mental operation of creativity. Jensen (1998) also acknowledged that creativity and intelligence are not the same things. Certain aspects of creativity can be linked to intelligence, depending on how you define creativity.

Pfenniger and Shubik (2001) argued that “any theory on creativity must be consistent and integrated with contemporary understanding of brain function” (p. 217)

and student development theory is included within that framework. Improvisers have a remarkable ability to creatively personalize, customize, and be wildly imaginative. They can create an entire story, poetry, music, and/or works of art on stage in moments. Creativity contributes to our efforts to bring vigor, statements, and defies any work (Treffinger, 2007). Applying creative practices while improvising comes with many unforeseen benefits. With the increase of social experiences and maturation of both emotion and intellect, adults enjoy creativity with depth and complexity (Tsai, 2012). While your imagination can take you anywhere, actual “experiences” bring an additional layer of intensity to your creative strengths.

Intelligence and creativity are two major mental abilities that largely contribute to the behaviors and achievements of individuals. Cho et al. (2010) said, “creative thinking is generally attributed to two abilities, Fluency and Originality” (p. 126). Sternberg and Rubarts (1995) put forward that there are six possible resources required for creative work: intelligence, knowledge, thinking styles, personality, motivation, and environmental context. Ellamil, Dobson, Beeman, and Chritoff (2011) indicate that creative thinking recruits an optimized, unique configuration of neural processes typically not used together in “regular” thinking. Additionally, Ellamil et al. (2011) concluded that creative individuals have a heightened ability to engage in contradictory modes of thought including cognitive and affective, and deliberate and spontaneous processing. Cho et al. (2010) offered a more exhaustive and creative attribute list that includes:

Flexibility, Elaboration, Abstractness of Titles, Resistance to Premature Closure and so on. Flexibility is defined as the ability to generate responses in a variety of categories, Abstractness of Titles is defined as the ability to recognize the essence of something and to capture it in an abstract title, Elaboration is defined as the ability to generate pertinent details, and Resistance to Premature Closure is

defined as the ability to keep an open mind and delay decision making long enough to make the mental leap that enables the generation of original ideas. (p. 127)

Recent findings point to the possible involvement of specific networks and brain regions in the different components of the creative process (Ellamil et al., 2011). While intelligence and creativity may be based on two different mental operations, intelligence tests and creativity tests have significant correlations (Cho et al., 2010). Additionally, “creative problem solving appears to involve the integrative application of strategies with respect to distinct types of knowledge” (Mumford & Caughron, 2007, p. 51). Creativity can also be developed and is not inherent, especially in the collegiate environment. These skills mentioned in creative individuals are closely connected to the survival skills and skills required for college graduates (Wagner, 2008; American Management Association, 2010).

Individuals can learn about their creative abilities and styles, while developing and applying useful strategies in appropriate ways (Treffinger & Isaksen, 2005). In fields like the social sciences, creativity appears to be more strongly based on linguistic skills more than on visual images (Mumford & Caughron, 2007). What’s more, the dichotomy between generation and evaluation appears to be ubiquitous in psychological theories of the creative process (Ellamil et al., 2011). Also, those who are competent in creative problem solving and the basics of content areas will be lifelong learners, readers, and problem solvers who can live and work effectively in a world of constant change (Treffinger, 2007).

Treffinger and Isaksen (2005) realized that creative thinking was about making and expressing meaningful new connections. They also made the connection that

effective problem-solving is often initiated as a result of strong emotional issues, concerns, and needs. Almost every aspect of student development is about creating those connections and bridges. This is where divergent thinking, convergent thinking, and improvisation can be applied. Convergent thinking involves a single solution (Cho et al., 2010; Runco, 2008) and the process of divergent thinking refers to the ability to come up with multiple solutions for a problem (Foos & Boone, 2008). Runco (2007) also said “early research confirmed that creativity (in the research, defined in terms of divergent thinking or some paper-and-pencil measures) was not dependent on traditional intelligence” (p. 3). Improvisational techniques and philosophies are tools that can be used to address complex and challenging issues and develop intelligence. However, most forms of intelligence and the current ways of measuring intelligence do not include improvisation comedy.

Intelligence is a significant element of the college experience. Grading, evaluations, test scores, and transcripts are all a part of the higher education machine. There are various forms of intelligence highlighted by various student development practices (Gardner, 1987, 1993), but intelligence can also be quite complex. Intelligence can be difficult to define due to extensive & various forms that exist, but it is also can be difficult to comprehend. Gardner (2011) suggests that the contemporary approaches “of assessing the intellect are not sufficiently well honed to allow assessment of an individuals potentials or achievements...The problem lies less in the technology of testing than in the ways in which we customarily think about the intellect” (Gardner, 2011, p. 4). Many would argue that the intellect is no more than the determined aptitude, which is regulated by how well someone does on an evaluation (Beaumont, 2008). Other

theorists like Howard Gardner would disagree.

Howard Gardner's concepts of "multiple intelligences" has aided in redefining what intelligence can mean. Gardner suggested that intelligence is the creation of something that is of value in society or eliminates problems (Gardner, 1999). The various forms of intelligence include linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist intelligence. While these forms of intelligence go beyond the traditional definitions, it would be naïve to assume that that the categories of intelligence would end here. Furthermore, improvisation can be applied in every one of these categories. For example, notes of music can be improvised to create amazing music. Higher education should also look to other forms of intelligence too.

Educators should continue to look for practices that best serve students and look beyond traditional intelligence traditions. For example, "insight" is a clear or deep perception of a situation, a feeling of understanding, the clear understanding of a complex situation, or grasping things intuitively (Bowden & Jung-Beeman, 2007). These researchers also revealed "insight is used in contrast to step-by-step analytic problem solving (p. 88). Treffinger and Isaksen (2005) explain that effective problem-solving is when those consider more than facts when they are defining and solving a problem. Parallel to problem solving is the ability to participate effectively in abstract thinking. This process is characterized by the ability to assume mental states, to consider different aspects of a given situation, to dissect and synthesize the elements of some object, and to plan ahead and think symbolically (Beaumont, 2008).

Insight can also empower individuals to break free of unwarranted assumptions, or forms novel, task-related connections between existing concepts or skills (Bowden &



Jung-Beeman, 2007). Insight can be a useful tool for improvisers. Dietrich (2004b)

explains that:

Once an insight occurs, the prefrontal cortex can bring to bear the full arsenal of higher cognitive functions to the problem, including central executive processes such as directing and sustaining attention, retrieving relevant memories, buffering that information and ordering it in space–time, as well as thinking abstractly and considering impact and appropriateness. (p. 5)

Insight is also an act of creativity because it requires the individual to view the problem in a new way. The problem solver must desert the customary tactics for more original methods to solve the problem (Bowden & Jung-Beeman, 2007). Those skills can be readily applied to adaptation, divergent thinking, and/or improvisation. In improvisation, traditional models might be explored, but are often eliminated quickly. Insight also requires the detection of competing processes and switching from one solution strategy or set of associations to another (Bowden & Jung-Beeman, 2007, p. 96), and that can also be applied to improvisation.

### **Memory and Improv**

If improvisation is using what one already knows to apply to new situations (Crossan & Sorrenti, 1997), it is pertinent to define and explore the function of memory. One of the brain's greatest strengths and weaknesses is the memory. Everything someone does can be connected in some way to his or her memories. A person's memory "refers to the encoding, storage, and retrieval of learned information" (Purves et al., 2011, p. 695). Memory is critical to behavior, enabling organisms to draw on your past experiences to direct choices and actions (Shohamy & Wagner, 2008). Mumford and Caughron (2007) stated, "working memory may be for creative thought, the origins, or basis, for creativity is held to lie in the cerebellum (p. 50). Far too often, memories are overlooked in the

process of development and processing change. However, if memory is an important component in student development, that “should lead to greater integration among the areas of neuropsychology, neuroscience, and cognition” ( Craik, Govoni, Naveh-Benjamin, & Anderson, 1996, p. 160). As suggested earlier, memory can be difficult to control and recall because it can be unknowingly altered by several factors.

Furman & Gallo (2000) suggested that the very “act of remembering is actually the act of replicating a previous state, originally caused by the agglomeration of sensory patterns during a perception” (Furman & Gallo, 2000, p. 101). In other words, you are recalling data by perceiving what you believe are the patterns of your moment. Your memories can also be altered by your emotions. For example, it was revealed that a feeling permeates everything someone does, and our emotions have important implications for understanding why our perceptions and thoughts are altered when we experience emotions (Davidson & Begley, 2012). Emotions can play a huge role in the decisions and the lives of the improviser. This can also be problematic when it comes to an individual’s ability to generalize specific occurrences (Shohamy & Wagner, 2008). For example, one might experience a specific situation and believe that will be a pattern in every situation. Although, one should not be surprised as humans search for patterns everywhere. Looking for patterns is our way of sharing and decoding data to make sense of life (Furman & Gallo, 2000).

The capacity for memory depends on what the information in question means to the individual and how readily it can be associated with information that has already been stored (Purves et al., 2011). Although, if improvisers are creating dialogue, they must be pulling these linguistic skills from somewhere. There are also various types of memories

that exist within the human brain. For instance, episodic memory refers to the laborious recovery of comprehensive and relative information about individual personal occurrences (Skinner & Fernandes, 2008). Declarative memory “is the storage and retrieval of material available to the consciousness” and non-declarative memory is “not available to consciousness” (Purves et al., 2011, p. 695).

An improviser who utilizes declarative memory could recall a favorite movie and quote their favorite comedian while non-declarative memory might be engrained with a particular belief about their identity. In order to access a non-declarative memory, you might need to provide thoughtful reflection. Long term memory includes remembering information in a more permanent form of stored for days, weeks, or even a lifetime (Purves et al., 2011). This is compared to immediate memory which “is the routine ability to hold ongoing experiences in mind for fractions of second” (p. 696). Adjacent to immediate memory is the working memory which includes the “ability to hold and manipulate information in mind for seconds to minutes while it used to achieve a particular goal” (p. 696). Improvisers must use various modes of memory for particular games. For example, in the game backward, forwards, players need to use utilize several different types of memory to recall lines of dialogue that were already said multiple times through a scene (<http://improvencyclopedia.org>, n.d.). Although, Dietrich (2004a) shares “the amount of information that must be held concurrently in the focus of attention, and thus working memory, far surpasses the capacity limit” (p. 752).

College students who are improvising on stage can have their attention pulled in multiple directions. As one might expect, memorial retrieval often occurs amidst distractions (Dudukovic, DuBrow, & Wagner, 2009). The process of accessing the

memory trace probably places relatively light demands on attention while there are effects of concurrent load on response latency (Baddeley, Lewis, Eldridge, & Thomson, 1984). Furthermore, the extent to which attention influences memory retrieval may depend on the type of processes involved in the memory decision (Dudukovic et al., 2009). For example, in a study conducted by Dudukovic et al. (2009), results demonstrated that individuals who divided their attention during memory retrieval were detrimental for future remembering.

### **Cognitive Development and Improv**

If improvisation is about creativity, adaptation, and creating connections; the human brain must also be briefly explored and how those various concepts connect to the brain. The human brain handles everything that you are and how you live in this intricate and ever-changing world. The brain is a complex network that has more than 100 billion interconnected neurons (Kandel, Schwartz, & Jessell, 2000). The human brain handles every creative inspiration that is brought to life by human hands. It dictates your personality, regulates your heartbeat, and enables you to learn new languages. This neuro-network is responsible for solving the most complex problems, remembering important milestones in your life, and your emotional well-being. The brain makes meaning of your senses along with helping you determine your purpose.

The brain also helps individuals respond to change. The process of change is not only a part of improvisation but also the design of humanity (especially in responding to cognitive dissonance). Humans are both pattern-producing, and pattern-detecting bio-aggregates and this process aids in understanding our existence (Furman & Gallo, 2000). Certain individuals and cultures can trade tradition and comfort for much-needed shifts.

One reason for this might be the risk of generalizations made by certain groups. The human experience can often overlap in their content, presenting opportunities for generalizing across them (Shohamy & Wagner, 2008). It is possible that those individuals have a right to be cautious about change, as organizations that are able of such elastic restructuring might be accompanied by an unwelcome change (Pascual-Leone, Amedi, Fregni, & Merabet, 2005). For example, synaptic connectivity between neurons is a dynamic entity that is constantly changing in response to neural activity and other influences (Purves et al., 2011). The brain is also responsible for who an individual becomes.

Pascual-Leone et al. (2005) suggested that the human “brain, as the source of human behavior, is by design molded by environmental changes and pressures, physiologic modifications, and experiences” (p. 378). This would suggest that students are influenced by their environments/experiences at the university and therefore shaped by the brain’s efforts to respond to change. Human behavior is also the manifestation of the coordinated workings of the entire nervous system (Pascual-Leone et al., 2005). Zatorre, Fields, and Johansen-Berg (2012) explain that the “brain is the source of behavior, but in turn it is modified by the behaviors it produces. This dynamic loop between brain structure and brain function is at the root of the neural basis of cognition, learning and plasticity” (p. 528). Therefore, the human brain is not only affected by the environment, but it is also impacted by the behavior it produces and is in a constant state of change. These notions are intricately connected to our work as student affairs professionals. Not only does student development work include facilitating the creation

of healthy environments on college campuses, but also includes empowering students to make their own decisions.

As much as one would like to think that the brain is the apex of the biological kingdom, the brain is limited. As calculated by Frank J. Tipler, “the human brain is, in fact, a finite state system having  $10^{10^{45}}$  possible quantum states” (Furman & Gallo, 2000, p. 101). While that number is rather large, it is still a limited system. Not only is limited by quantitatively, but it is also limited qualitatively as well. There is no absolute reality a part from how it is perceived by each individual. From moment to moment, humans do not experience reality as direct as they might think; they experience it comparatively (Furman & Gallo). One can only describe their experience in ‘like’ terms. For example, I can say the weather feels ‘like’ the sun is 100 feet away. Furthermore, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1991), “it seems we can manage at most seven bits of information-such as differentiating sounds, or visual stimuli, or recognizable nuances of emotion or thought-at any one time, and that the shortest time it takes to discriminate between one set of bits and another is about 1/18 of a second” (p. 29).

As I delved deeper into my research in search for creative “neuro” connections to student development practice, more challenges than solutions were uncovered. While there is some agreement on understanding the divisions of the brain, there is no one area where creativity is located or consensus on the overall location of creativity in the brain (Beaumont, 2008, Runco, 2007). However, the brain’s cognitive functions are developed on a foundational basis, which can lead to flexibility and adaptability (Dietrich, 2004a). This would suggest that improvisers would be more adaptable if they had the basic cognitive functions developed.

Improvisation has the potential to contribute to various areas of human development. When someone experiences and practices improvisation, their freedom is liberated, and the entire person is brought to life (Spolin, 1999). Improvisational comedy also produces players who are communicative, strategic, playful, fluid, sensual, and capable of being vulnerable. Players can also use intuition, cognitive, and emotional abilities at a moment's notice (Lockford & Pelias, 2004). Several techniques in improvisation can develop and enhance kinesthetic and verbal thinking tools of participants (Hackbert, 2010). While there are many connections to cognitive development, many participants do not join improv comedy troupes to develop those proficiencies. For many, they just enjoy playing the games, even though there are many benefits.

There are several games and exercises that draw on these specific cognitive functions. For example, a game might command a performer to express emotion through acting as an animal while speaking in rhymes with no preparation. To draw on those various tasks would require a participant to engage in multiple complex intellectual tasks. Within certain improv troupes, there are loose connections to theater arts programs that supplement several opportunities for learning and development. For example, advanced college improv comedy troupes might use improvisation for team building or writing sketch comedy that requires critical thinking and analytic skills. This type of critical thinking can be mirrored in theatre arts programs that require writing, mathematics, critical thinking, problem-solving, and reasoning (Kindelan, 2010).

Magerko et al. (2009) demonstrated that an improviser "engages in cognitive processes such as inference, schema generation, mental imagery, theory of mind, and

decision-making while performing a scene" (p. 121) along with executing shared mental models, narrative development, and referent use. This cognitive application can be seen when performers are engaging with an audience, their fellow players, and constructing new scenes with or without restrictions. Furthermore, Limb and Bruan (2008) confirmed the connection between improv, creativity, and the brain when studying jazz improvisation. Additionally, improvisers develop social skills and it is by learning to be honest with the created characters that they achieve those goals (Bynane, 2008). Baumer and Magerko (2009) stated that:

An improviser must, in real time, be aware of one's fellow performers, interpret their actions, make both decisions about current events, make predictions about future events, remember what has already happened in the performance, correct errors, control their own physical movements, and integrate this process into a performance. (p. 143)

With the cognitive functions that improvisers are developing, there are strong connections to the skills required to be successful in college. For example, college students must be aware of social cues between their peers, interpret their course of study, be prepared to take action when asked questions in class, must make decisions that are impacted by current events, and make predictions about their future. Students must also be able to reflect upon their decisions, be able to learn from mistakes, have a balanced life, know their limits, and be able to sustain this process until graduation.

### **Learning and Improv**

Another critical component to change, development, and the collegiate experience, is how college student improvisers learn. Learning is the process by which new information is acquired by the nervous system and is observable through changes in behavior (Purves et al., 2011, p. 695). Furthermore, whenever new information is



introduced, it is an opportunity for learning. Information is a transmission of variance, which is detected by senses acknowledging small deviations around us (Furman & Gallo, 2000). In other words, it occurs when something is new or change occurs around you. When you learn something, there are also many different regions of the brain being activated and operating in tandem (Zatorre et al., 2012).

Conditioned learning can be defined as “the generation of a novel response that is gradually elicited by repeatedly pairing a novel stimulus with a stimulus that normal elicits the response being studied” (Purves et al., 2011, pp. 699-700). While explicit learning is not to be mistaken with the act of “learning-by-doing,” but proceeds through the conscious application of rules. In this process, the explicit system forms a mental representation that includes not only the actual information but also knowledge about what and the fact that it was acquired (Dietrich, 2004a). Perceptual learning involves relatively long-lasting changes to an organism’s perceptual system that improve its ability to respond to its environment and are caused by this environment (Goldstone, 1998). Relational learning is the problem of learning structured concept definitions from structured examples (Roth & Yih, 2001).

Students who are participating in different types of learning will be more successful if they are in an environment that is conducive to do so. Furthermore, college students can be better learners if they are actively engaged in the learning process. Zumbunn, Tadlock, and Roberts (2011) suggest that self-regulated learning is a “process that assists students in managing their thoughts, behaviors, and emotions in order to successfully navigate their learning experiences” (p. 4). Giani and O’Guinn (2010) also discussed the importance of appreciating the whole person and how that can influence a

students ability to learn even when facing adversity.

The human brain has been described as a sponge for new information, but there are limits to what it can take in. For example, “Human beings rarely report expiring more than 45 to 50 discrete neurocognitive states over any given 7-day period” (Furman & Gallo, 2000, p. 101). There is also a misnomer that when a human ages, their ability to learn will be diminished. It is true that your neurons do decrease rapidly as you age, however, the brain can alter its own structure in accordance with new learning (May, 2011). It is also known that the environment also can play a huge role in how humans learn and by that extension improvise. For example, Nadler, Rabi, and Minda (2010) state: “By connecting theories of multiple-system category learning and positive affect, our research suggests that positive affect enhances performance when category learning benefits from cognitive flexibility” (p. 1775). Humans also have the ability to learn about who they are.

### **Identity Development and Improv**

Student development work focuses on the identity development of college students. Who students are, where they are from, and who they are aspiring to be... all play a part in their college experience. Once more, a student's participation in an improv comedy troupe brings strong connections to creativity on many levels. College improv teams also have the ability to use creativity in constructing scenes, make music, and exploring characters that never existed. Participating in creative exercises has implications for the role it would play in the identity development of individuals.

Participating in improv comedy and the creative applications associated with the practice suggest that it would compliment student development well. Singer (1999), in

Gottfried Leibniz *Nouveaux Essais*, said, "consciousness itself may lead to the active production of a specific image of oneself, a kind of 'identity'" (p. 15). Those who are involved in creative performance generate characters through a crisis, adversity, and hardship (Glaveanu & Tanggaard, 2014). Furthermore, within a study conducted by Sramova and Fichnova (2008), they demonstrated that "'disciplined imagination' do influence the state of achieved identity, which is manifested by a higher non-conformity and higher creativity of adolescents with formed identity" (p. 366). The concepts of play and improv comedy can be applied to the worlds we all live in.

According to Holland et al. (1998), people "develop more less conscious conceptions of themselves as actors in socially and culturally constructed worlds (p. 40). These cultural worlds are created all the time. One example might be the world of student affairs conference where identities and social rules are formed and replayed through various means. However, even with the potential promise, the connection between identity and creativity has not received the merit it might deserve (Glaveanu & Tanggaard, 2014). Within improvisation games, there is an opportunity to explore parts the participant's identity. There are even games where players explore aspects of an individual's life through unique circumstances. For example, during the game entitled "life story", a participant is interviewed, and the players re-play that person's life through various interconnected scenes (<http://improvencyclopedia.org>, n.d.).

While participants partake in the most unusual and humorous games, there is a strong case to be made that the benefits of improvisation extend far beyond the stage. Even though there is a lack of research and practice, creativity can be used for learning, teaching, transformation, and personal/professional fulfillment (Kleiman, 2008). With

these improv based games and activities, the intuition gained can be a practical tool for the participant and can follow the player through every other aspect of their life (Spolin, 1999). Involvement in activities outside the classroom could impact identity and success (Astin, 1999; Kuh, 1995), and this would infer the inclusion of improv comedy. If this is true, there are many unexplored areas of research, and that include how the identity and success of college students is affected by participating in improv comedy at college. In general, those who elect to participate in improvisational comedy troupes invest both physical and psychological energy within their team activities. During scenes, hundreds of characters are incorporated, and these characters are drawn from somewhere within (even if they are inspired by audience suggestions).

Improvisation can contribute to various areas of human development. It was first designed to help actors explore the identity of a character and themselves. There are opportunities to find truth in how people express who they are through improvisational activities. Spolin (1999) knew that beyond prejudice and systems of oppression, the truth about who someone was could be found in improv. Identity is created when individuals improvise elements of their identity through challenging and conflicting social worlds (Holland et al., 2001; Rudd, 2012). Throughout the scenes created in improvisational comedy, characters are created while relationships are also established (Lockford & Pelias, 2004), and there is always a conflict, problem, or tension within improv comedy scenes. With that same framework of thinking, the degree to which someone can involve themselves in improv would determine their level of development (Spolin, 1999).

Josselson (1996) suggests that: "identity is the ultimate act of creativity-it is what we make of ourselves" (p. 27). Within improv comedy, there are many opportunities to

connect the activities with your student's identity. While there are things we cannot change about our identity, there are definitive choices we can make about who we want to be. Involvement in various campus activities outside the classroom can impact the identity and success of college students (Astin, 1999). An individual's identity is enhanced by where they invest their time and resources. When participating in improvisational exercises, great improvisational play is accompanied by completely focusing on what you are doing and flowing through scenes. This type of focus or flow aids in the incorporation of self because all of you is moving towards that goal (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). While creativity can aid in identity development, there are not many 'creative' practical tools to guide individuals towards finding themselves. However, there are many promising practices between student development and improvisational comedy.

### **Student Development Identity Theories**

Over the last 100 years, academia has incorporated the formalization of student development as one of the tools to improve student success. Student development is the process in which a student grows, progresses, or increases in their developmental capabilities throughout college (Rodgers, 1990). Student affairs professionals create opportunities “to proactively identify and address student needs...that encourage positive growth in students” (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 5). The work of student development integrates several theories such as psychosocial development, typologies, cognitive-structural, career development, identity, faith, moral, and learning style theories (Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002; Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Calhoun (1996) said, “Experiences in various in-class and out-of-class settings, both on and off the

campus, contribute to learning and personal development” (p. 2). In this section, the focus will include primarily identity development.

Eric Erickson and Arthur Chickering are pioneers in identity and student development theoretical frameworks. They created theories that still guide the work of student affairs professionals today. These researchers have guided curriculum, policy, and informed practice across the realm of higher education. Erickson's (1968) developmental crises include trusts vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame/doubt, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, identity vs identity confusion, intimacy vs isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, and integrity vs. despair. Chickering published his original work in 1969 and Chickering and Reisser (1993) updated and republished their theory including seven vectors of student development. Those vectors include: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy towards interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. Student engagement offices use these theories to guide their practice. For example, orientation, student activities, and residence life are some student affairs offices that might easily integrate (Erickson's and Chickering & Reisser's) theories into practice. An example might include, student activities putting on a safe date night and drawing on Chickering and Reisser's 'developing mature interpersonal relationships'. Residence life might utilize the 'managing emotions' vector to inform policies for roommate conflict. Furthermore, the office of judicial affairs might look to Erickson's integrity vs. despair to develop a student during a judicial case.

Erickson and Chickering and Reisser's views on crisis and development were also aligned. Erickson (1968) said, "each stage becomes a crisis because incipient growth and

awareness in a new part function go together with a shift in instinctual energy and yet also cause a specific vulnerability in that part" (p. 95). Chickering and Reisser (1993) suggested that one "could conceptualize identity development primary as resolving crises" (p. 181). While I would agree that the theory could move an individual from one area of development to another through crisis, I would argue that there might be other sources that help one's development that do not include crisis. For example, within improvisation, participants can take on different perspectives even if they have not fully developed them. An individual has many layers to who they are and often their emotional state, mindset, or mood can play a part in who they are, even if they are not aware of them (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). These researchers identified that the establishing identity stage was an opportunity to define themselves along with building self-confidence in who they are. Those layers of their identity can be explored through many different perspectives as improvisers take on many different characters throughout an improvisational performance.

Erickson suggested "that each item of the vital personality to be discussed is systematically related to all others, and they all depend on the proper development in the proper sequence each item" (p. 93). I agree that there are connections to be made between the various stages, however, as one develops their identity, there needs to be room for fluidity and flexibility within a theatrical framework. For example, within some theories, development is gradual and builds on each other (Marcia, 1996), but does not need to be sequential and follow specific procedures. As the connections are made between identity development and improvisational comedy is explored, more flexible models would be encouraged because human beings are complex and the more they grow, the more

complex their story becomes.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) also said, "Forming an identity involves reexamining belief systems about larger reality, about our place in the universe, the meaning of life and death, and our purpose for being here" (p. 207). There are not many places or environments where individuals are given permission to explore their purpose, systems of power, or the meaning of life safely. It is during improvisational scenes that anything can happen and other players support it. An improviser can take on a different perspective about their own core beliefs, they can be transformed, time travel, suspend time, and can literally and figuratively question everything. These silly games are a doorway to undiscovered worlds and also give participants a space to challenge, explore, and own who they really are.

Higher education's demographics are moving beyond the dominant white male persona and with that change will bring many opportunities to explore those various identities within new ways. Seham's (1997, 2001) body of work demonstrates that the Second City culture fosters adverse environments for those who have an identity other than a white male. There are, however, opportunities for every demographic to participate at the collegiate improv level. Improvisation is a craft that values different identities and is significantly enhanced when diversity is increased. I would argue the more diverse your team is, the more powerful and dynamic your story could be. There are also many opportunities and platforms that could incorporate various identity theories. For example, improvisation could be used to explore gender or race.

I created a short list of the supportive racial, ethnic, and gender theories, and they include primarily racial and gender theories. For example, Phinney's (1989) stages of



ethnic identity entail the exploration of one's ethnicity. Hall, Freedle, and Cross's (1972) theory includes the stages of black identity development. Ruiz (1990) developed a model of Latino Identity development. Kim (1981, 2001) identified five sequential stages for Asian American identity development from a sample of studying Japanese women. Helms (1993) created the white identity development model. Finally, I would also include Josselson's (1996) pivotal research on women's identity development. While these are a just a few of the important racial and gender identity models, these models influence student affairs practice and could be incorporated into practice with improvisation. Throughout this subsection, I will expound on the theory and include examples of how improv games and exercises could inform the application of the particular theory. However, with the lack of literature and research, some examples used are theoretical and used as a bridge to connect to the theories.

### **Ethnic Identity**

Phinney's (1989) stages of ethnic identity include the diffuse, foreclosed, moratorium and achieved stages. The diffuse stage includes the individual having no comprehension of their ethnicity. The foreclosed stage includes slight exploration of one's ethnicity and one's outlook on their ethnicity may either be optimistic or negative. The moratorium stage includes some proof that is supplemented by misunderstanding about the understanding of one's ethnicity. During the achieved stage, there is evidence of exploration that encompasses a great understanding of one's ethnicity.

Improv comedy is about transformation and being transformed by one another (Spolin, 1999; Johnstone, 1999). Whether you are following Spolin's or Johnstone philosophy on improv, they are both about the narrative of the story. A narrative is easily

constructed using longform improv games where the participants stay with the same characters throughout the scenes. For example, you could include an open scene where everyone must stay with their same character for the entire story. Within improvisational longform, the characters must develop for the story to progress. After the longform exercise is completed, a professor or staff advisor could ask reflective questions about the characters and then create a bridge to Phinney's (1989) ethnic identity theory.

### **Black Identity**

Hall, Freedle, and Cross's (1972) theory of black identity development includes the pre-encounter, encounter, and immersion stage. The pre-encounter stage includes the individual thinking that the world is hostile to black. Additionally, the individual's attitude and habits are directed by white perspective. The encounter stage is where the individual includes "some experience manages to slip by or even shatter the person's current feelings about himself and his interpretation of the condition of the Negro" (p. 5). The final immersion stage involves the individual connecting everything of significance to blackness.

As explored in an earlier section, there is an ethos of improvisers making connections between everything around them and beyond (Aylesworth, 2008; Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994). This applies to most of the racial theories, but there is a strong case to be made in the final Hall, Freedle, and Cross's (1972) immersion stage. For example, if a person is in the final immersion stage where to experience a seminal life moment, they could construct connections of significance to their blackness. Just as connections help players to develop pattern and continuity (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994), those connections can help individuals create connections to their identity. With

the skills developed in improvisational comedy, they can be easily applied to the final immersion stage.

### **Latino Identity**

Ruiz (1990) developed the model of Latino Identity development which includes five stages comprised of casual, cognitive, consequence, working through, and successful resolution. The casual stage infers that there is something wrong with their identity, and their identity should be sidelined or ignored. The cognitive stage typically includes the painful acceptance of three stages of association. That acceptance infers that (a) an individual's ethnicity is included in poverty, (b) one must escape to the white society, and (c) being white or assimilation is the only the only way one can succeed. The consequence stage includes the shameful rejection of their Chicano/Latino heritage due to embarrassment by what it signifies. The working through stage includes the distress of their inability to cope with their ethnic identity conflict and then moving on to the acknowledgment that they cannot live a fictitious identity, but retrieve their rejected identity fragments. The successful resolution stage includes the individual accepting their culture as a part of their identity. The individual also begins to own the positive and beautiful aspects of their culture.

Within improvisational comedy, several games explore emotional context with characters and in the games. Using emotions and exploring those emotions are what make characters interesting (Salinsky & Frances-White, 2008). With the painful acceptance of the stages of identity in Latino identity development, a game that utilizes emotions would be applicable. For example, the game "emotional quadrants" have been assigned emotions based on what section a character is on stage (<http://improvincyclopedia.org>,

n.d.). After the game is completed, the advisor could draw connections to how one manages their emotions off stage and in particular, an individual's own Latino Identity Development.

### **Asian Identity**

Kim (1981, 2001) identified five sequential stages for Asian American identity development from a sample of studying Japanese women. The stages include ethnic awareness, white identification, awakening to social-political consciousness, redirection to Asian American consciousness, and their incorporation stage. During the ethnic awareness stages begins in early childhood where they perceive being Japanese as positive or natural. The white identification stage begins when the children identify that they are different from white counterparts. Typically they identify with similarities or differences. The third stage of awakening to social-political consciousness includes the individual identifying that they are a minority and moves beyond the white ideals they may have been held. The redirection to Asian American consciousness stage includes individuals validating and demonstrating a commitment to Asian American heritage along with possible anger felt toward White culture. The incorporation stage includes individuals being comfortable and secure with their identity along with other racial identities.

With dramatic changes occurring in Kim's (1981, 2001) theory, it would make sense to include an improv game that also includes a game with a lot of changes. In the game "backwards scene" or "forward/reverse", players are to start a scene, but also be forced to move a scene forward or backward depending on the directives from a fellow player (Salinsky & Frances-White, 2008). This exercise allows characters to explore

decisions throughout a scene multiple times or multiple ways along with uncovering various layers of emotions, decisions made, and connections made that were not obvious when the story began. This exercise can be applied to Kim's model, as there are many significant changes that occur in the theory and the exercise.

### **White Identity**

Helms' (1993) white identity development model includes a 2-phase and 6-stage model. The first phase is entitled the abandonment of racism and includes contact, disintegration, and reintegration. The second phase entitled defining a nonracist white society includes pseudo-independence, immersion/emersion, and autonomy. The contact stage can depend on a person's upbringing, but ultimately the individual has either a "naive curiosity or timidity and trepidation about Blacks and a superficial and inconsistent awareness of being White" (p. 55). The disintegration stage includes awareness and acknowledgment of what it means to be white but also is associated with moral dilemmas with their race. During the reintegration stage, the person owns their whiteness as a top the racial hierarchy and believes that their privileges are deserved. The Pseudo-Independent stage the individual "intellectualization in which the person attempts to submerge the tumultuous feelings about Whiteness that were aroused in previous stages" (p. 61) and search for new ways to own their whiteness.

The immersion/emersion stage "requires the person replace White and Black myths and stereotypes with accurate information about what it means and has meant to be White" (p. 62). The individual will also start to become more an ally and aiding other White individuals in their racial journey. The final autonomy stage does not suggest that growth is complete, but there is a new awareness of their whiteness. Furthermore, the

individual believes race no longer a hazard and wants to learn about other cultural codes. Additionally, the autonomy stage is accompanied by the discovery of intersections of other oppression that exists and how that might be tied to their racial identity.

One exercise that could be applied to white identity development is the concept of status. Status is about taking control of the scene and also about dominance (Johnstone, 1999). If a player has high status, they are typically taking control of a scene and the scene revolves around them. The characters with lower status typically follow the lead of the high-status character. As this relates to whiteness or white privilege, this concept can be readily applied to whiteness as a reflection of privilege in scenes and privilege in society. For example, those who are white might automatically assume high status in every aspect of life. This application would be executed through reflective discussions or a privilege walk exercise.

### **Gender Identity**

According to Josselson's (1996) pivotal research on the identity development of women, there are four stages that include guardians, pathmakers, searchers, and drifters. The guardian stage includes those who have committed to life path, but without the individual truly making the decisions for themselves. For example, their parents may have crafted their life for them. On the other hand, the pathmaker stage includes those who "experienced a period of exploration or crisis and then made identity commitments on their own terms" (Josselson, 1996, p. 35). While the searcher stage includes the individual still trying to figure things out and can include hardship during their search. The individual searcher also has decisions to make but has not committed. Finally, the drifter stage is "without commitments and not struggling to make them, either feeling lost

or following impulses of the moment” (Josselson, 1996, p. 36).

Within improvisational games, players take suggestions from the audience to drive their scenes, problems, locations, and characters. Whatever the suggestion might be for the scene, the characters’ attributes and story are often derived from within the individual. In some cases, the players will even use stereotypes as a crutch to inform character choices. For example, if the suggestion from the audience were to include “dinosaur and woman”, the particular scene might include the players acting as pterodactyls who are portraying more negative stereotypical aspects of womanhood while navigating through the game. Within improvisation, there is often a culture that no mistakes are ever made in improvised choices. However, there is often little discussion or exploration of why certain decisions were made. In the particular game and scene with the pterodactyls, depending on the actions or language of the players, Josselson’s (1996) theory of identity development could be used a framework to explore their character choices about womanhood.

### **Summary**

There are many potential applications to apply improv comedy to identity work. However, just as creativity and intelligence are not the same things (Jensen, 1998), student development and improv comedy are also different. One difference would be the actual application of the craft. Improv comedy is done in specific venues for the purpose of making those participants and audience members laugh (Salinsky & Frances-White, 2008), while student development work is utilized in the college administrators, practitioners, and theorists to understand how students grow, learn, and develop (Calhoun, 1996). Another key difference includes where the practice takes place.

Improvisational comedy occurs on a stage, but these scenes are all imaginary and student development is dealing directly with students' lives and can inform policy and practice.

While there are some differences that exist between student development and improvisational comedy, there are also strong similarities between the two.

There are practical applications of the exercises, games, and philosophies within improv comedy. There are also strong similarities between the theoretical frameworks. Within both improv comedy and student development there are similarities between crisis, relationships, and development. For example, within both student development and improv comedy, a crisis is where growth happens (Chickering & Rieser, 1993; Erickson, 1968; Spolin 1999). When a crisis occurs, this is an opportunity to both support our students and help them grow. Another similarity between the two is associated with the social experience. Relationships are also a significant part of the collegiate experience. In both improv comedy and student development, there is the development of social relationships (Kuh, 2004; Lockford & Pelias, 2004; Rudd, 2012). While improv troupes develop the character's identity and student affairs develops the identity of college students, both topics are developing the identity of individuals (Astin, 1999; Glaveanu & Tanggaard, 2014; Josselson, 1996; Singer, 1999). These parallels in the theoretical framework offer faculty and staff several opportunities to engage in creative student development practices.

From the literature review, it is evident that there is a rich history of improvisational comedy and that history has led to the creation of several improv comedy troupes on college campuses. There has also been research that demonstrates the benefits that improvisational comedy can have on cognition, creativity, learning, and



development, however, there is a significant lack of research in certain areas. One area includes the gap of literature exploring the connections between college students who participate in improvisational comedy and the effect that has on their identity, social skills, and academic skills. In the following chapter, a description of the methodology for data collection and analysis will be provided.

CHAPTER III  
METHODOLOGY

**Introduction**

This exploratory qualitative study has the potential to impact both student affairs practitioners and faculty by providing them tools for engagement in student learning and development. After years of performing, conducting interviews, and researching various elements of improvisational comedy, I began to question what impact improv comedy was having on college students' identities, their social experience, and how improv might impact their learning. To date, little research has been conducted to examine the impact of improv comedy troupe participation on college students' development and learning. The current study attempts to help fill this gap by exploring college student participation in improv. Specifically, the study considers the following core and sub research questions:

RQ1. How do college students make meaning of their experience within an improv comedy troupe in relation to academic, social skill, and identity development?

RQ2. What potential does improv comedy have for influencing student growth and development on college campuses?<sup>1</sup>

These questions will build upon previous research and provide a greater understanding on the impact of improv and its potential for enhancing student growth and

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<sup>1</sup>Within exploratory qualitative research, depending on results, the questions may change.

development. Next, I will note what theoretical constructs and paradigms will be used along with describing my positionality. This section will also include lessons learned from a pilot study. I will include the research methodology, the sampling strategies, the research settings, and data collection procedures. After the data collection procedures are explored, the data analysis procedures will be reviewed. In the final subsection, I will include a brief discussion of ethics, trustworthiness, and the implications for the field of higher education.

### **Research Paradigm**

Qualitative research is about the human experience, human interactions, social issues, and cultural phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The reason why this study lends itself so strongly to qualitative research is that improvisational comedy is about people, relationships, and overcoming challenges. Qualitative research is also about finding the meaning behind events and situations (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). By using a qualitative method, the researcher can uncover the meaning by what is happening on stage with these college student improvisers. This method will produce results that will be meaningful in describing the effects that improvisation is having on the students.

This research is conducted within a constructivist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm suggests that “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). The main principle of constructivism’s core is that investigation must be witnessed from the direct involvement of the individuals being

researched (Mack, 2010). The role of the researcher is to comprehend, describe, and decipher the constructed universe of each of the participants (Cohen, 2007).

While some argue that the first formalized constructivist theoretician was Socrates (Brooks & Brooks, 1999), a new movement was ignited in the 1950s to better understand learning. According to Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (1999), “the complexity of understanding humans and their environments became increasingly apparent, and a new field emerged-cognitive science” (p. 8). In the 1960s, Piaget used genetic epistemology as a way to explore constructivism by describing how individuals derive meaning of their universe (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). Other theorists added their own interpretation to constructivism. For example, every individual comes to understand the world by incorporating fresh experiences into what they already know to make sense of the world (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Greene, 2005).

Constructivism is also connected to learning, understanding, creativity, adaptation, and defining our identity because of the intersections between those areas. For example, human learning is vitally a social process for the construction of knowledge (Hargreaves, 2007). Additionally, constructivism is not something that is a step-by-step process or arranged in a straight line of understanding because of its complexity (Glaserfeld, 2005). It is rather ironic that a constructivist approach is used, because, throughout improv scenes, construction is used to find the meaning. When those who are actively engaged in learning use their imagination and sense of wonder to look beyond what is possible, there may be opportunities for the construction of new universes (Greene, 2005), like those created in improv comedy games.

An anticipated challenge from linear based education model is how a constructivist approach might be applied to the arts. According to Greene (2005), “Exploring constructivism through the examination of various of encounters with the several arts, the writer presumes a certain experience of creativity as new perspectives open for people willing to participate in paintings, dances, musical performances, novels, poems, and the like” (p. 112). The researcher will have to be creative, diligent, and search for meaning in new areas like college improv comedy troupes. The research also must be collaborative with the participants throughout the research study. This type of constructivist learning should not be done in isolation. Individuals learn most when they are with others (Cobb, 2005; Glasersfeld, 2005; Hargreaves, 2007). Furthermore, the creative process happens within a social context as it is played out through various methods (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

### **Positionality**

It is important to own one’s biases and be aware of ethical concerns (Hatch, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Vogt, Gardner, Haefele, & Vogt, 2014). As someone who has experienced improvisational comedy as a spectator, a performer, and as an instructor of the topic, I have insider’s knowledge and will be using an emic approach or pinpointing participant’s perspectives views as a starting point (Lett, 1990). Being aware of positionality is especially important for those who have insider’s knowledge so they do not manipulate participants (Merriam et al, 2001). My background and experience brings both benefits and potential drawbacks. I was able to identify the various challenges, terminology, games, and practices; however, I had to be careful to enter each interview and observation as if I knew nothing. As a part of the study includes exploring identity, it

is important to share more about my identity.

My identity can influence the lenses of how interpret meaning. For example, I am a first generation college, white, American, Christian, heterosexual male, who is in the middle socioeconomic status. These elements of my identity can play a role in my subjective lenses. Furthermore, they may influence my ability to develop rapport and trust with participants who have different backgrounds than my own. My personal values, identity, and feelings can all play in a role in how I interpret the data. I also have over 10 years of improv experience. I have performed on stage, taught classes, and presented workshops on this topic. I know the rules, customs, and the culture related to improv teams, and this has the potential to impact how I interpret the various cultures, rules, and customs of improv teams. It will be imperative to review each experience as though it were my first time. To keep track of my subjectivity, memos were used to monitor my emotions while collecting data and to reflect upon the ways my various identities may be influencing how participants are responding to me and how I am interpreting the data. In the following section, I will describe the pilot study.

### **Pilot Study**

Before I embarked on the dissertation, I conducted a pilot study mirroring the current study. The purpose of the study was to explore how improv comedy affected the improvisers identity development. I interviewed two participants (one interview spanned 23 minutes and the other 22 minutes), observed a 30-minute performance, and conducted a 35-minute focus group with 8 team members (after their performance) with a Midwestern improv team that both practiced and performed once a week. I recorded the interviews and kept memos throughout the evening. I chose the group based on

convenience and the participants by convenience sampling (Vogt et al., 2014). The questions within the individual interviews primarily focused on how improv affected their identity development. The focus group interview questions were based on their performance and identity development.

The Midwestern improv team had received formal and informal training from Second City and Improv Olympic. The interview questions included asking about their improv story, how improv had impacted their life off the stage, how improv helped them learn, how improv changed the way they see themselves and others, and how improv helped them develop any specific skills. After conducting the interviews, transcribing, and coding the transcripts, the process proved to be beneficial in preparing for the dissertation study.

The data that were collected were helpful and showed promise for how improv comedy impacted the participants by indicating a strong connection between improv and the way participants viewed themselves. For example, after reviewing the data, some of the players had caught the “improv bug” and they admitted that it had changed their lives. Improv helped them be more comfortable with accepting themselves. Improv comedy also helped them be more intuitive and experienced “less trials to learn something new”. Being a part of a team also helped them learn to listen, adapt, accept, find empathy, and find common ground with others. During the performance, I noted a scene where characters portrayed attributes different than the identity that they held relating to gender. During the group interview, there was a great discussion on how different genders were portrayed between men and women.

By conducting a preliminary pilot study, I learned that when it came to the identity questions, most of the participants did not think about identity (i.e., race, gender, creed, color, sexual orientation, national origin, socio-economic status, religion, and disability) in the same context that I thought they would. For example, I thought they would have made connections between the characters they created and parts of who they were. However, throughout the interview, it was evident that participation in improv comedy had an impact on their identity by how they viewed and accepted themselves, even though they were not focusing on race or gender. The experience also gave them more confidence in their professional identities. After reflecting on this experience, I realized that I would need to discard any assumptions that were had and experience each interview as if it were the first time.

I made three other practical changes to the proposal after conducting the pilot study. The first adjustment included documenting the improv performances with a video camera. The dialogue and actions used when they were performing were too complex to capture with memos and note taking. I realized that I needed to record their performances to accurately capture what was happening on stage. The second change I made to my study was revising the interview questions. The questions asked in the interviews were not exhaustive enough to draw out the deeper meaning of their involvement in improv comedy, and I revised them to align with the research questions.

The other revelation included sharing the data with the participants afterward. I did not have any initial follow-up questions for the participants after the interviews, but after I shared the transcripts with the individual interviews, they shared that they learned a lot about themselves throughout the study. They indicated that they had never thought



how improv affected their identity and made them think deeper about intersections improv had within their lives. After concluding the pilot study, I decided that it would be appropriate to share the data and ask clarifying questions to the participants following the individual interviews and group interviews. This process would aid in building trustworthiness (Glesne, 2011) and member checking to improve the accuracy of the study (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). It is possible that some of the participants would not have thought about the connections that improv had on their life, and, in true constructivist approach, both the participants and I would be discovering meaning together.

### **Research Context**

The process included a minimum of three sites, four to six individual interviews at each site, one observation of a performance per site, one group interview per site, and follow-up interviews with participants. I also incorporated a data accounting log (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) that included detailed information about data collection in a visual representation. The data accounting log for my study is included in Appendix H.

The research setting included the college campus where the collegiate improv team performs. Three different teams were selected and three different campuses along with the various performance venues. The campuses included Midwestern University, Midwestern State University, and Saint City University. These institutions were chosen because they included improv comedy troupes that had established improv comedy troupes. The interviews were all conducted in various student centers and the theatre. The observations took place both in the student center, theater, and the classroom. The follow-up conversations occurred through e-mail and facebook messenger.

For determining which three improv teams are selected, a purposeful sample (Vogt et al., 2014) was selected to determine the different sites. The sample included a very high research activity, a high research activity, and a state university. The team's advisor or coach was contacted through the Facebook site or their university e-mail address. After determining who were the advisors and/or presidents and what their names were, I contacted them by sending a message and shared with them details about the study (see Appendix D), along with sharing how permission would be obtained (Hatch, 2002). I used the recruitment script that included all the information above when I contacted the advisor or president. I then used a snowball sampling strategy to connect with the participants. The snowball sampling strategy is used when the researcher asks informants to identify other participants for the study. This approach is helpful when gaining access to and identifying smaller numbers of participants (Vogt et al., 2014). The snowball strategies were the most practical because the advisor or president identified participants for the study.

To determine the eligibility to participate, the study required the teams to have been in existence for at least a year, have at least one practice bi-weekly, perform regularly, and receive some training/coaching/advisement. This was all confirmed with the various advisors or presidents. After approval by the Illinois State University Institutional Review Board, I contacted the various improv comedy teams. After the sites had been confirmed and the participants had been confirmed, the research began.

### **Observations**

Marshall and Rossman (1989) describe observation as "the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study" (p. 79). By using

observing and video recording, I not only was able to use my five senses to record the experience, but also had the ability to review the performances multiple times to search for new data.

I observed each team's live performance and, for each observation, I obtained consent by using the video consent form in Appendix F. These performances lasted anywhere from 45 minutes to 2 hours. I video and audio recorded these performances and transcribed the data after by watching the video and listening to the audio recordings. The data were then coded and themes generated. An observation data log was also created to review the scenes and note how the improvisers portrayed relationships, characters, and gender, racial, stereotype expressions. By video-taping the performances and recording the dialogue of the performers, a thicker description of the data was able to be provided along with making connections between the individual and group interviews. Additionally, by observing the performances, I was able to share my data with the performers to draw on key questions for identity development and social and academic skill development.

## **Interviews**

This section will include the two types of interviews.

**Individual interviews.** It is important to note that before consent forms were signed (Appendix E), the relationships between the researcher and participants were cultivated by being open, kind, honest, and ethical. Relationships are important to the research study as the participants are constructing new information alongside me with the study (Hatch, 2002). Within each improv team, I conduct one-on-one interviews with four participants from each team. The first set of interviews ranged from 30-60 minutes.

Individual interviews provided an opportunity for in depth probing questions that helped to establish more validity (Vogt et al., 2014). The interviews included asking broad, open-ended questions (Appendix A) with substantive questions that offered a more specific direction for the research (Hatch, 2002). The interview protocol included an informal interview approach that allowed for flexibility to explore topics that arose. There were also follow-up conversations to conduct member checking (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). For an example of the interview protocol, see Appendix B.

**Group interviews.** Qualitative interviews should include a flexible structure when interviewing individuals and groups (Hatch, 2002; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). This group interview included open-ended questions, was audio recorded, and transcribed (Glesne, 2011). The group interviews lasted 40-60 minutes. The group interviews immediately followed the performance, so their experience was fresh in their mind. While there is a group interview protocol in Appendix C, it should be noted that additional interview questions were generated after seeing their performance and conducting the individual interviews. Group interviews help researchers to focus and are conducive to social experiences (Vogt et al., 2014). These interviews had a specific focus pertaining to improv comedy and were connected to social development.

### **Data Analysis**

In accordance with Strauss and Corbin (1998), data analysis included reviewing the data, disentangling the data, organizing the data, and then reconstructing the data to create an alternate understanding of the occurrences. The data analysis process highlighted by Strauss and Corbin (1998) included open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This section will describe that process in greater detail.

**Phase 1**

With all of the interviews, observations, and group interviews, the data were transcribed and data coded. The coding included using NVivo software that helped to create themes and connections throughout data analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The coding software also confirmed that the concepts stayed truthful to the research participants and provided a structured approach to easily search for themes by visually arranging and rearranging the data. While every piece of data did not require coding, the process of open coding or first cycle coding began to summarize the larger sections of the data into smaller components (Miles, Huberman, & Pena, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding is defined as the initial stage of qualitative research that typically includes a line by line coding that helps generate concepts and categories (Khandkar, n.d.).

**Phase 2**

After all the open coding process occurred and themes started to form, pattern coding or axial coding was used to aid in the emergence of themes among categories (Miles, Huberman, & Pena, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial coding begins the “process of reassembling data that were fractured during open coding. In axial coding, categories are related to their subcategories to form more precise and complete explanations about phenomena” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). The various categories were compared for similarities and differences.

**Phase 3**

The next stage included selective coding which aided in building a theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) or guide. Selective coding was used to form a preliminary hypothesis.

Selective coding is the course of selecting a singular category as a principal classification and then connecting all other categories to that specific classification (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

#### **Phase 4**

Following coding phases, I constructed tables, causal chains, and analytic memos as a way to analyze the data. These tables, casual chains, and memos were compared and contrasted. I used active terms to describe accurately what is happening. I also explored leads within the data and follow up with the participants to explore any unclear data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana).

#### **Phase 5**

The final step included determining how the themes and descriptions were to be represented. This step included using visuals, models, and selecting specific examples from the data. I also included the development of a guide. This step also included a final interpretation of the data and a review of what had been learned throughout the process.

### **Trustworthiness**

With qualitative research it is pivotal to create trustworthiness, as qualitative research is highly subjective. Additionally, researchers must not allow their own attachments to “preclude the open, exploratory learner’s attitude that is necessary for good data collection and analysis” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 14). Glesne (2011) indicates that validity is “an issue that should be thought about during research design as well as in the midst of data collection” (p. 37) and offers suggestions for verification. In this section I expound on four categories: prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer review and debriefing, and negative case analysis.

### **Prolonged Engagement and Persistent Observations**

With this strategy, Glesne (2011) suggests that the researcher must spend enough time in the field to learn the cultural codes, develop relationships and trust with participants, and ensure the researcher feels comfortable with data gathered. As the process unfolded, I kept a data accounting log, which demonstrated the number of hours taken to conduct the varying interviews. The accounting log is included in Appendix G and included 12 interviews, 3 observations, memos, data accounting, and group interviews (if the average interview is 60 minutes, the average performance is 2 hours, average memos taking 60 minutes, the average follow-up is 30 minutes, and the average group interview is 60 minutes). This length of time does not include any of the time spent transcribing, analyzing, coding, or interpreting the data.

### **Triangulation**

Glesne (2011) suggests that more than one method be used to collect data, various sources, multiple investigators, and/or different perspectives in theories. After the process was completed, I interviewed 12 participants, observed and video recorded 3 different performances, which included 11 different teams performing with around a total of 50 different improvisers, conducted 3 group interviews at 3 different locations, and had follow-up conversations with participants. I also kept notes and reflections throughout the process. Additionally, I used the observer checklist as a form of data collection.

### **Peer Review and Debriefing**

One of the strategies mentioned by Glesne (2011) is the process of including an external person to aid in peer review and debriefing. My peers (chair and methodologist) evaluated my research and included thoughtful discussions. I sent weekly updates to my

chair and methodologist along with setting up biweekly meetings to review the data collection and analysis.

### **Negative Case Analysis**

Glesne (2011) also suggests that the researcher must include negative case analysis. As data arises that does not align with the theories, that does not mean that the theory is defunct; rather, it means the data should be reported and (if needed) the theory could be refined or altered. However, not all data will fit the theory.

### **Ethics**

With this study, there was a risk of harm to the participants because, whenever exploring identity, social skills, and learning, there may be some emotional risks. Before the research began, I obtained consent and let the participants be aware of the risks and the steps I would take to minimize them (Hatch, 2002). Pseudonyms were also used for the participants, the team names, and the universities. I also secured the data on my personal, password-protected computer, and while there was still a risk that the data could be lost, this was highly unlikely. With both of these risks, I was sensitive to the emotional health of the participants, but did not notice any signs of distress. I also kept all my recordings and data away from public access. As the study concluded, I kept the data and the participants' identities secure by storing the data inside a locked cabinet in my home office. As a small token of gratitude, participants were offered coffee, water, and/or soda for the one-on-one interviews. For the group interviews, I provided participants with pizza for their time. After the study was complete, I also offered the teams a 2-hour workshop on improv comedy. This was to be within a year of the final interview and was a way to say thank you for the participants being vulnerable and sharing their time.



### **Implications/Significance/Contributions**

While there have been studies on improvisational comedy and how it can affect various fields, the research is nonexistent on the effects of participation in improv comedy on student development. Magerko et al. (2009) also indicates that improvisational comedy has been relatively understudied from a scientific cognitive perspective. However, as indicated earlier, creativity has definitive connections to improv and does influence cognitive development. Within improv studies, the primary method of research has been a qualitative approach that is comprised of both observations and interviews (Baumer & Magerko, 2009). In addition, some researchers have elected to utilize literature review approaches of improvisational comedy (Charles, 2003; Duffy, 2011). There have also been studies using combined mixed-method experiments to track the brain patterns by jazz improvisers (Limb & Braun, 2008). However, no published studies have connected student development theories, identity, and academic skill development to participation in improv comedy troupes in the collegiate context.

With the need for a stronger literature base, the hope was to build a practical theory or guide for educators. With these guides, they have the potential to contribute to increasing enrollment, fill the gap in skills required for the world or work, and contribute to higher graduation rates. There are many applications and potential connections between those who participate in improvisational comedy. For some students, it might help them be more comfortable in social situations. For others, it might help them be more comfortable speaking up and learning in the class. Improv can impact one's creativity and ability to make connections to coursework. There is also the strong possibility that improv can play a role in their identity development.

## Summary

As mentioned in Chapter I, there is a gap between the demands from employers and graduating students. There are also many documented benefits that come with being involved in organizations on campus; however, there are no documented connections between improv comedy and student development and learning. Chapter II included a review of the history of improv, the guidelines, and the connections to learning, identity, and creativity.

Chapter III included a review of the research questions and the constructivist paradigm and the grounded theory process identified. The next section included a review of my positionality, including aspects of my identity and additional information on my background in improv comedy. I also recognized the lessons learned from the pilot study that was conducted. The research method, setting, sampling strategies, and data analysis were also reviewed. Finally, the ethics, trustworthiness, threats, and implications for this study were examined.

There are so many potential benefits waiting to be uncovered for students who participate in these exercises. There is a need for graduating college students who have the ability to adapt, be creative, work in teams, and problem solving. Students also require new strategies to engage in student learning. The demands to learn quicker, better, and more efficiently are more prevalent than ever because of the need for strong college graduates and the increasing competition for limited resources. The research could demonstrate the benefits improvisational comedy can have on a college student's identity, how they learn and/or socialize. Furthermore, it is possible to pull these strategies and apply them to student development and/or teaching strategies.

## CHAPTER IV

### COLLEGE IMPROV TEAMS AND PARTICIPANT PROFILES

This study utilized a qualitative grounded theory research approach in serving to understand the central research questions which include: exploring how college students make meaning of their experience within an improv comedy troupe in relation to academic, social skill, and identity development and the potential that improv comedy has for influencing student growth and development on college campuses. Improv comedy teams are present on most college campuses, and there are practical applications for how these practices may be used to engage students in learning and development. The teams that were selected for the research were chosen because they were previously established improv troupes on college campuses that had experience with performing. After securing the various research sites, the researcher conducted individual interviews, group interviews, and observations of the performances.

The study included interviews with three different improv teams and the individuals from each team, at three different institutions. In total, 12 individual interviews, 3 focus group interviews, and observations of 3 performances were conducted. Throughout the interviews and observations, field notes, and memos were written. These memos included initial codes, my understanding of individuals and groups, and pertinent notes about my observations and important revelations. The memos helped further the descriptions of the campus, the groups, the individuals, and the performances. After the interviews and observations had been completed, the interviews

were transcribed and coded. The 65 codes were then grouped and themes revealed. The themes that were most prominent were analyzed, tied back to the original research questions, and a negative case analysis was conducted. The negative case analysis reviewed the data, noting information that did not align with the majority of cases.

This chapter is important in not only providing readers with a better understanding of the research context, but it also provides them with essential information and differences between the various individual participants and groups and how they function. This chapter begins with a summary of the three different institutions where the study was conducted and a description of each of the improv teams. Following this section is a description of the participants and their involvement in improv comedy.

### **Improv Teams and Participants' Profiles**

After comparing the improv teams, it is important to note that they each had unique structures. For example, the size, makeup, and organizational structure of the teams were all very different from each other. While there was an initial expectation that most of the participants would include White males, there was broader racial and gender diversity among the participants than initially expected. For example, the individual participant interviewees included eight White students, two African American students, one Asian American student, and one Latino student. The sample included seven men and five women. Students involved with the individual interviews came from a diverse set of majors that included: communication, advertising, biology, computer engineering, performance and writing, and film/digital studies. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 22 and included a mix of second, third, and fourth-year students. There was also a spectrum of improv experience and training amongst the participants. The students'

experience level with improv comedy ranged from 1.5 years to 10+ years.

There were a total of 12 individual interviews and three group interviews conducted and three performances that were observed. The group interviews included both a mixture of the 12 individual interviewees and select members from the different teams. There were a total of 88 performers between the three performances and a total of 19 different participants within the three group interviews. Within the 8-person Arrows group interview, there were four of the individual participants and four new member perspectives. The four new participants included two White males and two females. Within the 5-person Kryptonian group interview, there was one of the individual interviewees and four new group perspectives. This interview included four male and one female perspective. There were three White students, one African-American participant, and one Latino male perspectives. The 6-person Jokers group interview included three of the individual interviewees and three new participant perspectives. The new individuals included two male students and one female. Of the new participants in the Jokers interview, there were two perspectives from White members and one Asian student. Now that there is an understanding of the demographics of the individual and group interviewees, a description of the institutions' and improv teams will be provided.

### **Institutions**

The following subsection will include brief accounts of the campuses. The reports will include the location, size, mission, the number of degrees offered, demographics, and what makes the college distinctive. This description will also include a review of the major community spaces to paint of picture of where the students congregate.

## **Gotham University**

The campus is located in the heart of downtown in a large Midwestern city. Gotham University offers liberal arts degrees. The university is distinct because of its specialized degrees in the arts and media. The campus also has partnerships with the surrounding neighborhoods, the city, and community organizations. The faculty is comprised of working professionals, and the curriculum is enhanced by co-curricular experiences that integrate opportunities within the city, media outlets, and arts-based organizations. The Gotham campus serves around 10,000 students and offers over 60 undergraduate degrees and 15 graduate degrees. The campus includes about one-third students of color (including African-American, Latino/a, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, and multiracial). The campus houses approximately 2,500 students within the residence halls.

The city is very dense with high-rise buildings, bad traffic, and expensive parking. The main campus houses several different buildings, and several businesses are interwoven between the campus buildings. Several mainstream restaurant chains surround the various campus buildings. While there is a main entrance for those interested in coming to the college, the entryway to the classrooms has to be entered through an elevator, which is guarded by security personnel and requires students to present identification.

The Jokers utilize their primary student center space for meetings and rehearsals. Gotham's main student center space is small, modern, and included TVs, computers, various lockers, and several vending machines. There is seating for around 50-75 students with an assortment of different seating options within the student center space. The tile

on the floor is checkered white and black. Various gray brick pillars are located throughout the space as well as some windowless walls. There are also advertisements for various events and activities taking place on campus and throughout the city. Throughout the day, a few students came into the space but all were being quiet. Even the students who were sitting together were wearing headphones. The performance later in the day was held in a different academic building about a block away from the student center. The performance space was a small black-box style theater with lights, sound, and a little café (which was closed) connected to the lobby. The theater was narrow, dark, and had low ceilings. The stage was about a foot off the ground, which made it easy for the performers to engage with the audience. The space had seating for around 60-75 people and also had two tech booths.

### **Quill University**

This campus is in a large Midwestern city and holds a faith-based connection to its educational mission. Quill University's distinction is tied to its emphasis on social justice and service to others. The campus also includes satellite campuses downtown, in Europe, and Asia. The university serves over 15,000 students and also includes 12 professional schools that offer undergraduate, graduate, doctoral, and graduate-level certificate programs. Each year, they admit around 2,000 students, and the average entering first year GPA is over 3.5. The campus is comprised of 40% students of color. There is a 2-year residency requirement for first and second-year students. The campus is in a very urban environment, but the school is modern, with a mix of new buildings, high structures and visible connections to their faith. For example, there are chapels, statues, and artwork linking to their faith tradition. Students also have access to major public

transportation along with their own shuttle bus, which can connect students quickly to downtown. The campus was also getting ready for the holidays, and there were decorations that honored their faith tradition.

Quill University is also committed to its values, and that was demonstrated through various services, programs, and offices offered within their student center. For example, even the toilets were ecologically friendly, because the institution holds a commitment to being good stewards of the environment. The campus included more non-traditional aged students. The campus also appeared to be mostly White students, however, there was a broad range of diversity noted in the website that included Asian, African Americans, and Latino/Latina students. There were even several groups of Muslim students who were meeting, praying, and enjoying their breaks between classes. The students chose to conduct the interviews in the new campus student center. The new campus student center was large and very open. It included student development offices, a connecting hallway to the recreation center, a movie theater, meeting rooms, offices, a food court, coffee shop, and a mini-mart. There were several soft seating options like couches and comfy chairs on every floor. The interviews took place in the hallway between the meeting rooms and offices. The halls were quiet and the large windows allowed you to watch students and faculty walking to their various destinations. The campus was big enough to house multiple improv teams and the Arrows were included among those different groups.

The Arrows perform in Spartan Hall Auditorium. Spartan Hall is an academic building that holds a 150-seat auditorium, which was eventually filled with around a hundred students for the performance. The performance space had multiple brown



chalkboards with various messages about the holidays, and there was a projector and YouTube videos playing before the show. The auditorium had high ceilings and the performers had to project their voices so everyone in the room could hear them. The stage area was flat with a large desk used for lectures in the middle of the performance space. There was an empty tech booth in the back of the space.

### **Star City University**

Star City University is in a rural Midwestern city that has a small-town feel. The university is known for its academics and is considered the state's flagship institution. The campus has over 1,000 student organizations, an extensive athletic program, and a large Greek Life system. The university serves over 40,000 students and has over 15 colleges offering undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degrees. Each year, the first year class includes around 8,000 students. The campus has a combination of 55% students of color and international students. Of the grouping, there are a total of 10,000 international students. There are 23 residence halls for the 8,550 undergraduate students. The school is large, and the buildings are expansive. The grounds also include numerous pieces of artwork. There are one-way streets along with numerous signs for football parking. As I drove into campus, there appeared to be more shops and chain restaurants designed for college students (Noodles and Chipotle) along with a mix of local businesses. There was little auto traffic, but a calm, steady pace of foot traffic as all the students were headed to their various destinations.

A major hub for public transportation was located outside of the student center. Approximately three buses were picking up students and moving around to the various destinations. As I was walking through the city and onto the campus, I noticed a broader

range of racial diversity compared to other campuses. There were also groups of students wearing hijabs throughout the campus. There were groups of Asian, Indian, African America, and Latino/a students spread throughout the campus. The interviews took place in the student center as well. The student center entrance had massive white pillars and three sets of double doors. There was a broad age range of students and faculty represented in the student center throughout the day. The student center included a large reception area and the theater café, which is where the improv teams performed. The student center has over five floors and includes: food courts, a hotel, meeting rooms, and the Café Theater. The individual interviews were conducted in a quiet hallway between meeting rooms where soft cushy seating furniture allowed for conversation and studying. Within the café, the students all seemed to be very focused on their studies with their laptops open while sipping on Starbucks coffee.

The performance space was a multi-purpose space that included a coffee shop, soft seating, tables and chairs, and the stage. Inside the theater café were white closeable shutters and the 14-inch tall stage also had a curved edge that extended into the audience. The space had two large white speakers on the left and two large white speakers on the right side of the stage. The space also included a basic lighting truss with a few special lights that illuminated the entire stage. A piano was pushed to the back of the stage, a stool, and advertisement on the back of the piano for the university. There were also banners on parallel sides of the stage that showed pictures of the theater. Finally, there was a table with technical equipment, which ran the lights and sound for the show.

## **Improv Teams**

The following sections will include a description of the college improv teams, their structure, and how often they perform/practice. Additionally, there will be a brief review of the performances, warm-ups, and their performance spaces.

### **The Arrows**

The Arrows have existed since the early 2000s and consist of eight team members. They have auditions once a year and approximately 30 students audition. Amazingly, they only accept a maximum of two students each year and sometimes do not accept anyone. The acceptance of the players is determined by the team. The Arrows team is primarily made up of White undergraduate students. There are five men and three women on the team. They practice every Wednesday for 2 hours, and have a coach that has gone through formal improv training. The team performs every 2 weeks on campus and occasionally at off-campus venues. The Arrows also have a student leader or “president” that guides the group. The Arrows occasionally do special shows for philanthropic purposes and have been hired for special occasions like fraternity recruitment events. The team members also socialize with each other outside of improv activities and several members are good friends with each other.

Before the performance, the team arrived an hour before the showtime. During that time, they connected with each other, played music, and warmed up by playing games. About 30 minutes before the show, the team transitioned to behind the stage area to play various improv warm-up games. Warm-up games typically include simple games that help the players to connect with each other and get out of their heads. Their structure echoed most traditional improv formats where the team performs as one collective unit

and selects a form to present to the audience. As discussed earlier, shortform improv games are typically 2-10 minutes and include rules, while longform improv is similar to a one-act play with a particular structure. While the team performed both longform and shortform games to warm up before the performance, they chose to do a Bruise for the performance. The structure of a Bruise is a longform approach that includes asking for one suggestion from the audience, which was “underground law school.” The performance included five different stories that were all loosely connected to that one suggestion.

After the performance, the team allowed me to observe the performance debrief before the group interview. The coach led a discussion about the performance and gave the players notes about what went well and what could be improved. While the coach gave critical feedback to each member, there appeared to be a sense of care and dialogue throughout the review of the show. The participants were engaged with his comments and appeared to give him their respect by not being on their cell phones and making direct eye contact with him.

### **The Jokers**

The Jokers improv group started in 2012 and currently consists of 40-50 team members. There is no audition process, but if one is to perform in a show, they have to attend at least two practices. The improv participants are mostly White, except for a small number of students of color. The team is also fairly split between 27 male performers and 22 female artists. The team has an open meeting every Friday where they meet to practice, and any student is welcome to practice with them. During the club meetings, they focus on specific improv techniques like editing, saying “yes and”, or other tactics

which they try to implement in their performances. Editing is how players transition from scene to scene and the “yes, and” principle is using agreement and heightening offers or suggestions that are given to a player. The team also encourages the creation of new groups and for those groups to perform throughout the city at other venues off campus. As self-reported, most of those involved in the Jokers are performance, film, or production majors, but everyone is welcomed to the team with no audition process. Six-team leaders are voted on at the end of each year and the six-team leaders are the ones that guide the entire team and their development.

During my visit with the Jokers, I was able to observe both a practice and performance. At the beginning of improv club meeting, the Jokers student team leaders take attendance to determine who is playing that evening and then they distribute all the participants into newly formed groups. Each of the six leaders of the Jokers takes one team which consists of 6-10 team members that have all never played together. These team leaders act as captains that help keep the team on track. Each of the team leaders run warm-ups in their group, discuss a team name, and assist in determining which specific type of form they will use and then practice it within their subgroups. This process takes about an hour and then all six teams are brought back together. As a group, they all participate in an activity where they are applying the “yes, and” principle. Then the various teams demonstrate their different forms for the entire group. After each 8-10-minute performance, select team leaders give feedback to the general group. The Jokers leadership team then provides more information about the performance for that evening and then they all head their separate ways.

The Jokers show included two hosts, and those hosts introduced the six teams which were created during the earlier practice. After being introduced, the six teams asked for suggestions and each team had a different style of longform or shortform games. Some teams performed shortform games; some had longform approaches, while other teams involved a combination of both shortform and longform. The audience included mostly college students except for a parent who was attendance. Each team had about 10-15 minutes and, once their time was finished, the lights went black which signaled for the hosts to come back on stage to introduce the next group. After all six teams concluded the performance, they discussed where they should go to socialize afterward, and did not discuss or review the show as a group.

### **The Kryptonians**

This improv group has existed since 2008 and includes approximately 30 members and 4 different teams. During the audition process, they accept around 10 people who will work as a team for the next 4 years. The team consists of a variety of first, second, third, and fourth-year students. Certain team members may either graduate or move on the following year. The team includes a much broader range of racial diversity with about 35% of their team being students of color. There is also a ratio of gender of about 60% female and 40% male. The team is comprised of primarily undergraduate students but consists of four different teams within a larger group. The separate teams practice every Wednesday and perform once a month, but they typically schedule the performance 1-2 weeks out. More senior members of the group also coach the various teams and receive guidance from a formal organization called "A Single Neuron." This group provides guidance, a structure, and coaches for several improv

teams at different universities throughout the country. The Kryptonians improv team are a longform group that includes four different teams: blue, red, green, and yellow. Each team has a unique style and will work together for 4 years, and then the team disbands.

An hour before the show, the student center technical student staff conducted sound checks on stage, and a few members of Kryptonians were hanging around near the stage. Other students who were not there for the show were sitting and studying as the coffee shop continued to serve beverages. When members arrived, they began socializing until all the members of their team arrived and then their coach called them to warm up. The blue, red, green, and yellow teams came in that order, and all did warm-ups backstage. Each team had around 15-20 minutes for their performance. The various teams came out and did various longform scenes and the entire performance lasted about an hour and a half. After the show, the teams connected with each other before they headed out to socialize.

Throughout this section, description of the three college improv teams, their structure, and how often they perform/practice was discussed. This section also included a brief review of the performances and their warm-ups. In the following section, descriptions will be provided for the 12 individual interviewees.

### **Participant Descriptions**

This section includes descriptions of the 12 individual interviewees. Each individual face-to-face interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and included 12 different respondents. Within the interview questions, I asked the participants to self-identify their gender, major, and extracurricular involvement. The participants who were students of color self-identified throughout the interview by naming their race through

various answers. The interviewees included seven males and five females with an age range of 19-22 years old. The respondents consisted of eight White students, two African Americans students, an Asian American student, and a Latino/a student. Most participants were introduced to improv comedy through watching “Who’s Line Is It Anyway?”, “Saturday Night Live”, or reading books by famous recent comedians like Tina Fey and Amy Poehler. All of the interviewees had at least one year of improv comedy experience, had received or were currently receiving some coaching, and performed regularly. The following descriptions include the participants’ age, race, major, extracurricular involvement, their history with improv comedy, and what their specific story teaches us about involvement in improv comedy. Some of the details were slightly altered to provide anonymity for their university and the participant. Table 1 contains the details of the participant demographics.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

Name	Team Name	Years doing Improv	Major	Class Standing	Gender	Race	Age
Felicity	Jokers	8	Performance/Biology	4 <sup>th</sup>	Female	White	22
Sharon	Jokers	4	Performance/Writing	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Female	White	19
Felix	Jokers	6+	Performance/Writing	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Male	White	20
Naomi	Jokers	4	Performance/Writing	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Female	White	21
Laurel	Kryptonians	2.5	Communications	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Female	Asian	21
Wesley	Kryptonians	1.5	Computer Engineering	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Male	African American	21
Dwayne	Kryptonians	7+	Communications	4 <sup>th</sup>	Male	African American	21
Ralph	Kryptonians	2.5	Psychology	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Male	Latino	20
Rodney	Arrows	10+	Advertising	4 <sup>th</sup>	Male	White	21
Clark	Arrows	2	Biology	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Female	White	19
Vince	Arrows	4.5	Film/Digital Studies	4 <sup>th</sup>	Male	White	21
Lester	Arrows	1.5	Film/Digital Studies	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Male	White	19



**Clark**

Clark is a 19-year-old White female who is a biology major from the West Coast. When I first met Clark, she seemed a bit unsure about the interview and tired from the night before. She was wearing casual clothes, was around 5' 2", had brunette hair up in a messy bun ponytail, and wore glasses. Clark has been doing improv for 2 years and wanted to be in a city surrounded by a strong comedy presence. She has taken classes from formal improv training organizations and is on the campus rugby team. Clark auditioned for the Arrows and made it during her first year. Her involvement in improv comedy on campus has meant so much to her throughout the past few years because of the personal connections she has made with the team. The Arrows have served as both a family and community. Clark has mild depression, but shared that being a part of her improv team helps her manage those feelings. Clark has also had issues transitioning to campus and considered leaving the institution. She said she would not have returned after her first year if it were not for her involvement with the improv group. This person's story teaches us that participation in a college improv comedy troupe may help retain students and serve as a support structure for them.

**Dwayne**

Dwayne is a 21-year-old senior African American student majoring in communications. When I first met Dwayne, he seemed excited to be meeting about improv and ready to tell his story. He was wearing casual clothes, was around 6 feet tall dressed in jeans and button down shirt, had a short haircut, was clean-shaven, and was wearing an Apple watch. He has been doing improv since high school and got his start through an organization that connected students with their passions. Dwayne auditioned

for the Kryptonians and made it during his first year. Dwayne's only other extra-curricular activity on campus is his involvement with several different improv teams on campus including musical, shortform, and longform improv. He has also coached a team for a while and is the leader of his improv group. Dwayne is known on campus for being the central improv figurehead. Dwayne's story teaches us that participation in an improv comedy troupe can develop leaders, but also develop practical skills like managing up to 50 people, designing events, and even basic business skills. For example, Dwayne has experimenting with marketing strategies and generated a profit for his group by charging admission fees for select improv comedy performances.

### **Felicity**

Originally from the Southeast, Felicity is 22-year-old White female majoring in performance and minoring in biology. While meeting with Felicity, she seemed to have caring personality, was friendly, and easy to talk to. She was wearing casual clothes, was around 5' 8", had long brunette hair, and was wearing a green button up shirt over her green undershirt. She learned about improv comedy from "Who's Line Is It Anyway?" and started doing improv comedy in high school. Felicity had overcome some personal issues dealing with believing in herself. She has been performing improv for about 8 years and also transferred to Gotham University from a community college. Felicity started attending the Jokers meetings during her first year on campus. As it pertains to extra-curricular activities, she is only involved in improv on campus, but enjoys writing and doing crafts at home. She is also a member of the improv leadership team which provides guidance to the Jokers. Felicity shared that being a part of an improv team gave her a place where she was able to let go; everyone was kind, non-judgmental and wanted

you to succeed. This participant's story provides us with an example of how participation in a college improv comedy troupe can help someone to adapt and deal with life's struggles.

### **Felix**

Hailing from the Southern United States, Felix is a 20-Year-old White male who is also a junior performance and writing major. When I first met with Felix, he was excited to share his experiences with improv comedy and was easy to talk with. He was wearing brown pants and a long sleeved shirt. He is around 5' 8" and had brown hair, and bags under his eyes from lack of sleep. For Felix, improv comedy started as a hobby and then grew into a professional calling. He has been performing improv comedy since high school. Felix went to the Joker improv club meeting during his first year on campus and has been there ever since. Improv comedy is his only extracurricular activity, except for occasionally writing for an on-campus TV series. Felix also serves as a member and is the campus leader of the improv team. Felix was accepted into a prestigious research-intensive university, but decided to pursue a degree that could connect to his involvement in improv comedy. He shared that this is what he wanted to do in his life because he wanted to be happy. He also shared that he could not be happier with his decision to pursue improv because he loves what he is doing and loves his educational opportunities on campus. Felix's story teaches us that involvement in a college improv troupe can help someone to following their passions.

### **Laurel**

Laurel is a 21-year-old Jewish Asian American and is majoring in communications. When I first met Laurel, she was a few minutes late because she had to

get her Jamba Juice and was really hungry. She initially appeared to be hesitant about the interview, but eventually opened up. She was wearing casual clothes, was around 5' 3", had dark hair up in a side ponytail. After graduating, she plans on moving to New York to pursue a career in comedy. She is in her third year and has been performing improv comedy for 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> years. Laurel describes herself as an intro-extravert meaning she enjoys being around people, but also appreciates occasionally being alone. Laurel auditioned for the Kryptonians and was selected during her first year on campus. Laurel is also involved in an activist group and participates in alternative spring break. She is involved with several different improv teams on campus and also does stand-up comedy both on and off campus. Doing improv helped her find her voice and understand who she was as a person. This person's story provides an example of how participation in improv comedy can help someone find their voice between the many intersections of their identity.

### **Lester**

Lester is a 19-year-old White male who is a film and digital media studies major and marketing minor but is open to exploring other degree options. When I first met Lester, he seemed confident in himself and his answers. He was easy to talk to and was very expressive in his answers. He was around 5' 6", had an average build, and dark hair. Lester is from a small town in the Rocky Mountain region and was nervous about moving to a larger city, even though he specifically moved to the area to explore comedy. Lester auditioned for the Arrows when he first arrived on campus and made the team. Lester is a second-year student and has been doing improv comedy for only a year and a half. While he was involved in a few other clubs, he eventually singled in on just the improv team because he did not want his grades to suffer. Lester joined the improv team because he

thought it might be a good way to meet others who enjoyed being funny. Lester had a difficult time connecting to the campus community and shared that he was not sure if he would have made it all 4 years if he had not joined the improv team. Lester also holds an on-campus job in the information technology department. Lester's story shows us that being a part of an improv comedy team can be a cathartic release because he found a place to let go of stress in a positive way. His story also demonstrates how the skills from improv comedy can be applied to on-campus jobs.

### **Naomi**

Naomi is a 21-year-old White woman who is majoring in performance and writing. She is from the Midwest and had been performing since 2012. When I met Naomi, she was confident and talked very quickly. She seemed driven and knew where she was going in life. She stood about 5' 8", had blonde hair, was thin, and was wearing black jeans and a striped shirt. When she was 16 years old, she went to a Second City show and knew that she wanted to follow a similar path. Since participating in improv, she has developed a stronger sense of care for others and does not stress about conflict with others. Naomi had done theater, read Tina Fey's book entitled *Bossypants*, and knew that she wanted to pursue a career in comedy. Before moving to her current location, she moved to a small town to go to community college and then transferred to Gotham University. Naomi started attending the Jokers improv club meetings during her first year on campus. Improv comedy is her only extracurricular activity on campus, and she is also a part of the leadership team. Naomi also has an off-campus job as a tour guide and interacts with individuals from around the world through her position. This individual's story teaches us that participation in improv comedy can help a person to be more

confident, more empathetic, have less anxiety, and how to handle conflict with others. For example, when she meets someone new, she tries to learn about their entire story.

### **Ralph**

Ralph is a male Latino junior psychology major who is 20 years old. As I learned more about Ralph, he seemed very calm, quiet, and reflective. He was wearing casual clothes, was around 5' 5", had dark hair, and smiled often. He has been doing improv comedy on campus for two and half years. He is a coach of a new improv team on campus. Improv comedy is his only extracurricular activity. Ralph was invited to participate in improv by a significant other and auditioned for another campus improv team called the Dragons. After gaining a better understanding and appreciation of improv, during his second year, he auditioned for the Kryptonians and was excited that he made it on the team. He shared that he used to be closed off and would not try new things, but now he says yes to everything and encourages others to join him in improv comedy. Ralph has remained a part of a few different improv teams on campus. Ralph also works as a program advisor in the residence halls and puts on events that connect to the co-curricular experience. Ralph's story provides us with an example of how participation in improv comedy can enhance a person's social skills, their ability to connect with others and widen their perspective as well as emotional competence.

### **Rodney**

Rodney is a 21-year-old White male who is an advertising major. When I first met Rodney, he was easy to speak with, confident, was very expressive, and loved improv comedy. He was wearing jeans, was around 6', had shorter brown hair, had a larger build, and wore glasses. Rodney started doing improv at theater camp at a young age, and when

he moved to the area, he enrolled in an improv course and joined an improv team his second year on campus. Rodney was team oriented and cared about his fellow players almost as if they were his family. He also took improv courses on the West Coast as well. He even was involved in a writing internship at DreamWorks. Rodney auditioned for the Arrows and did not make it the first time, but auditioned again and made the team during his sophomore year. Improv comedy is the only extracurricular activity that he is involved with on campus. Rodney watched a lot of “Who’s Line Is It Anyway?” growing up and thought he wanted to be an actor, but once he started doing improv, he said he had a special feeling and wanted to continue performing. Rodney’s story demonstrates how being a part of an improv team can help a person develop close relationships with others.

### **Sharon**

Sharon is a 19-year-old White female who is a performance and writing major. When I first met Sharon, she seemed reserved, smart, and had not done much reflection on how improv comedy was impacting her life off stage, but knew that she loved improv. She was wearing casual clothes, was around 5’ 4”, had brunette hair in an up-do and was dressed in red and black checkered designer clothing. She is from the Pacific Northwest and has been doing improv for 4 years, starting in high school. After graduating from Gotham University, she wants to write for a TV show or work at a major improv organization. Sharon also transferred from a 4-year university and self-reported that since enrolling during her first year, she has earned a 4.0-grade point average. She also spent time coaching her high school improv troupe and taking classes at the Groundlings in Los Angeles. Sharon joined the Jokers during her first year on campus. Improv comedy is her only extracurricular activity on campus. Improv helped her to meet all her friends,

enhanced her creative processes, and aided in finding her calling. She proclaims that improv comedy is also fun for her. Sharon's story shows us that participation in improv comedy helps develop your creative skills and can become a career aspiration.

### **Vince**

Vince is a 21-year-old White male who is a film and digital media studies major. As I spoke with Vince, he seemed very tired, had bags under his eyes, was pale, but seemed to have thought a lot about improv. He was wearing gray jeans, a t-shirt, and was around 5' 8", with messy short brown hair. He is a senior and has been doing improv comedy for 4<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> years. While improv comedy is a primary passion, Vince is also involved in Amnesty International, writing poetry, and acting in student films. Like most other improvisers, he started getting into improv by watching "Who's Line Is It Anyway?" and "Saturday Night Live." Since Vince started doing improv, he discovered that become more interested in other individuals, cared more for them, and was more empathetic. He auditioned for the Arrows team during his first year on campus and made the team. He came to the city to do be close to the improv scene and took a class at a formal improv training organization. Vince auditioned during his first year on campus and has been involved in the improv troupe ever since. This story provides us with an example of how improv comedy can help you be more flexible and compassionate of others.

### **Wesley**

Wesley is a 19-year-old African American male, who is majoring in computer engineering. When I first met Wesley, he seemed unsure of the interview process, but was excited to talk about his experience with improv comedy. He was wearing casual clothes, was around 5' 11", short black hair, and a big smile. He has been doing improv



for less than 2 years. He is involved in the Shakespeare registered student organization, a social gaming club, and the National Society of Black Engineers. During high school, he was involved in music, dance, and theater. Wesley is in his second year at Star City University and discovered the various improv comedy troupes available during the club fair. Initially he was interested in the musical improv troupe on campus because he auditioned for a few different teams and did not make it. He almost gave up, but he ended up making the Kryptonians and feels a sense of belonging. Wesley feels supported when he has personal challenges and believes that the team will always be there for him. Wesley's story teaches us how participating in a college improv comedy troupe can help a person to use skills from other disciplines like musical theatre and incorporate them into a college improv comedy troupe.

### **Summary**

The experiences, perspectives, and information shared by the interviewees in this study help to make meaning of the guiding questions for the study. To better understand how improv comedy might be used to influence identity, social, and academic skill development, there must be an understanding of the organizations and the individuals who elect to participate in improv comedy. The diversity of participants and the organizations (including their experiences, background in improv, gender, race, and geographic background) discussed in this chapter serves as an introduction to how improv can be used to engage students in identity, social, and academic skill development. The following chapter presents discoveries and analysis of data collected in this study.

## CHAPTER V

### FINDINGS

This study explored the experiences of college students who participated in improv comedy and how they made meaning of their involvement within their college improv comedy troupe as it related to academic, social, and identity development. Within this study, the major questions under discussion included exploring how college students make sense of their experience within an improv comedy troupe in relation to identity, academic and social skill development, along with understanding the potential that improv comedy has for influencing student growth and development on college campuses. Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory was utilized as an analytic framework to interpret the findings.

The process included selecting college improv teams from three different universities and conducting a total of 12 individual interviews and 3 group interviews, as well as observing a total of 3 improv performances, one per group. After the interviews and observations had been completed, the data analysis included transcribing and coding the data using open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The open coding stage produced 65 different codes with the axial coding stage (Miles, Huberman, & Pena, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) involving the organization of the 65 codes into various categories. This was followed by creating analytic memos that connected the codes, categories, and themes to the major questions. Finally, the methodology included

categorizing those themes into specific groups and selecting concrete examples that reflected the themes from the data.

This chapter includes an overview of the participant observations and the major findings and how they relate to academic skills, social skills, and identity development of the participants. Four major themes emerged related to academic skills: dropping knowledge, out of thin air, building bridges to new worlds, and creating from scratch. Dropping knowledge is obtaining knowledge from one subject area and applying that knowledge to another setting. In the out of thin air subtheme comes the ability to think, generate ideas, and problem-solve quickly without any preparation. The building bridges to new worlds theme is defined as connecting two unrelated topics, subjects, or themes together. Finally, the creating from scratch subtheme is the ability to be creative using various tactics, experimentation, and writing. Table 2 will provide a definition of each academic subtheme. Each of these subthemes will be discussed in the section on academic skills.

In the social skills section, the major subthemes included: teamwork makes the dream work, a way with words, and hand in hand. In this study, the teamwork makes the dream work subtheme refers to development of the skills and abilities associated with community building, relationships, and support. Throughout this paper, the way with words subtheme concerns strategies and competencies associated with communication. The hand-in-hand subtheme explores how the participants make meaningful connections with their teammates, friends, and strangers, along with being able to read one another thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Each of these subthemes will be discussed in the section on social skills. Table 3 will provide a definition of the various social subthemes.

Finally, the identity development and exploration theme include fearlessly true to self, widening your gaze, and way of life. The fearlessly true to self theme explores how improv comedy affects participants and the positive view they hold of themselves. Within this study, the widening your gaze subtheme reviews how improv comedy aids participants and their ability to gain new perspectives and develop empathy for others. In this dissertation, the way of life theme explores how participants understand and portray various cultures. Table 4 will provide the reader with a definition of the various identity subthemes. Throughout this chapter, there will be an overview of the 12 individual interviewees. Additionally, direct quotes were pulled from the interviews along with video examples from the performances to demonstrate the significance of each theme. The section on identity development and exploration will include a discussion of each of these subthemes.

### **Participant Observations**

After speaking with the 12 individuals over a span of a few days at various campuses, patterns emerged that were noteworthy because several participants identified them. Throughout this section, there will be a review of the observations that were documented through memos and notes during the individual interviews. Albeit a non-exhaustive description of the participants of the 12 students, the review will serve as an introduction to the chapter and bridge a connection to the overall questions. The description will also include patterns uncovered between the participants that include extracurricular involvement, the majors they selected, and how they spent their time within the various improv comedy troupes.

Most of the students were not involved in other extracurricular activities outside of the college improv troupe. Those who were involved or held a leadership position on their improv team utilized skills developed through improv, to make that experience more meaningful. For example, the improv leadership had to schedule practices and shows, create a format for events, market, and organize the teams that perform. Of the 12 participants, 8 of the interviewees reported not being involved in additional extracurricular activities, while 4 of them were involved a few additional extracurricular activities. Also, 3 of the respondents shared that they had a job, and 2 of those jobs were on-campus positions. After reviewing data from the interviews, there did not appear to be any substantial differences between the participants who were involved in other extracurricular activities or held jobs. However, the performers did indicate that they were able to use improv skills within their on-campus experiences. For example, Lester utilized problem-solving skills to help solve technical and customer service issues.

After discussing the students' majors and degree aspirations, 5 out of the 12 participants planned to pursue a career specifically in improv comedy or performance after they graduated. The other 7 participants had career aspirations in other professional fields such as engineering, communications, biology, and advertising. Several of the participants also mentioned that they wished to be in a profession where they could utilize their creative skills. For example, Rodney shared that he would like to be a writer on a television show at some point in his career. Amongst these participants, there were no differences between those with professional performance aspirations and those with more traditional career ambitions. For instance, Ralph's social skills were profoundly impacted just as much as Naomi's even though they were in different majors. They both

reported feeling more confident in social situations after participating in improv comedy.

Some of the participants held leadership positions or coached their improv teams while others were just members of the troupe. As one might expect, those students who were leaders and coaches typically were in their third or fourth year of college. Dwayne indicated that being a part of an improve group helped him grow as a leader, coach, and co-producer. Five of the participants had received additional training from a formal improv comedy organization while others had only been involved with on-campus teams. Some of the interviewees had been involved in multiple improv troupes, while some were just involved with one group. Additionally, the longer the students were involved with improv comedy, the more groups the participants joined. It also seemed that more members of the Jokers, were involved with multiple groups because the structure of that particular team encourages it. For example, during the group interview, the Jokers indicated that they design their practices and performances for players to perform with new teams every time.

All 12 of the participants shared that improv comedy meant something to them and helped them out in various ways outside of just performing on stage. This was evident by the multiple examples shared by the participants. For example, Rodney shared that improv comedy “has become like, a huge part of my life now” while Clark said “being a part of the team has been so special to me.” For Laurel, it helped her find her voice while Wesley had found an enjoyable escape where he was “doing something constructive.” Furthermore, Felicity felt that improv helped her “grow as a performer and as a person” as Felix noted improv helped with his overall academic skills, especially in writing and presenting. There were, in fact, multiple examples of how improv comedy

impacted academic skills. Throughout the subsequent section, the academic theme and subthemes will be reviewed.

### **Theme 1: Academic Skills**

Colleges and universities serve many functions, and one of those central purposes is to confer degrees upon the students that have met the established academic requirements. Instructors provide knowledge and expect that students will learn from their experiences in class while meeting those academic requirements. However, the boundaries of learning extend well beyond the classroom. Extracurricular activities influence a college student's experience on a college campus (Astin, 1984, Krause & Coates, 2008, Kuh, 1995). All 12 interviewees revealed that their involvement in improv comedy has had a positive influence on how they learn and develop academic skills in the classroom. For example, Sharon said that within her dinosaurs and evolution class, she now asks "a lot of questions in class and whenever something doesn't make sense instead of just waiting."

As aforementioned, based on student interviews, improv comedy may have the potential to improve participants' cognition, mental ordering, and improvisation (Drinko, 2012) and intuition, cognitive, and emotional abilities (Lockford & Pelias, 2004). In particular, participants expressed how participation in improv comedy influenced their academic skill development. First, the improvisers provided examples of how their involvement in improv had affected their dropping knowledge skills. The improvisers would learn information from one subject area and be able to incorporate that information into a new scene. Participants also described ways in which improv comedy impacted their ability to respond quickly to challenges. For example, when

approaching unfamiliar situations, the students could respond more efficiently and confidently. Next, the participants revealed how improv comedy helped them create connections and building bridges to new worlds. For instance, these students could rapidly create bridge concepts from unrelated fields together. Finally, the interviewees discussed ways in which improv-influenced their creativity. Table 2 defines the academic subthemes.

Table 2

*Academic Subthemes*

Academic Skills	Definitions
Dropping Knowledge	The aptitude to learn new information, retain that information, and apply that information to new situations.
Out of thin air	The ability to act quickly upon scenarios, suggestions, or generate solutions to problems.
Building bridges to new worlds	The capacity to tie two seemingly unrelated concepts together.
Creating from scratch	Using improv to create new worlds, characters, forms, games, poems, songs music, and other works that can lead to many uncharted creations.

**Subtheme 1: Dropping Knowledge**

The dropping knowledge theme was coined by the participants and is defined as the ability to learn new information, retain it, and apply that information to new situations. While learning is a critical component of higher education, the ability to retain information and apply that knowledge other situations is also essential. This ability can be demonstrated when taking a test or a quiz, but it is also valuable if



knowledge can be readily applied in other situations (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1956; Anderson, Krathwohl, & Bloom, 2001). How students make meaning of new information is also connected to the construction of knowledge (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Greene, 2005; Hargreaves, 2007). This is, of course, connected to the memory and one's ability to actively engage and listen in the classroom. For example, it might be expected that students learn about the concept of ethics in a general education course and be able to apply those principles to their business classes. For students to demonstrate knowledge, they must attend class, be actively engaged and listen to the professor, learn and retain the principles discussed, and then apply that knowledge to various scenarios. Throughout this subsection, I will discuss how students shared that improv comedy has influenced their ability to drop knowledge, increase their memory/retention, and enhance their active listening skills.

Nearly all of the participants shared that after participating in improv comedy, they developed a thirst for knowledge. Improv is using what one knows and applying it to new situations (Crossan & Sorrenti, 1997). Therefore, the more knowledge one obtains, the better one can improvise because they can bring more practical knowledge into a scene, character, or game. Dropping knowledge can contribute to the development of a student's academic skill set because the more a student learns in a course, the more that knowledge can be applied to both academic and professional settings. Most of the participants shared that they felt like a sponge or an organism that absorbed knowledge and hoped to use this knowledge at some point in a later improvised scene.

Accompanying this sponge-like-thirst for knowledge was not only a strong sense of wonder and curiosity but also a strong desire to learn about a large variety of topics. Some of the examples shared by the participants within the interviews included a desire to learn more topics such as chemistry, farming, and culture. As the interviewees learned about various subject matters, they wanted to move beyond competence. The participants did not want to just list facts but connect their new knowledge to whatever the situation called for. Whether they were participating in an open-heart surgery scene or a building a house, they wanted to be able to have general knowledge about those topics. Participants described how this might be used both in performances and other contexts. For instance, a participant could learn about a topic in one class and the potentially apply it directly to an improv scene in a performance.

Learning and gaining new knowledge is a critical part of higher education. Several participants described learning new information or soaking it up like a sponge was as part of the process of becoming a stronger improviser. During the Kryptonians group interview, one of the members shared that being a sponge was “just having a thirst for knowledge. Some of the best improvisers are people who are well-versed in just so many different things, and they can just drop that knowledge at the drop of the hat.” Vincent shared that he felt that “flexibility, flexibility is a big thing...like you take a hit, and instead of breaking you bend. And then you snap back into place, and you’re fine. You become a sponge, and a sponge of information too.” Taking on this sponge-like approach stays with most improvisers when they walk off stage. The concept of absorbing and dropping knowledge is something that can be used throughout a player’s daily life, not just when they are performing on stage. If a player gains the practical skill

and habit for transferable learning, they can stay current on new courses, policies, procedures, protocols, and current events, which will be helpful for staying adaptable in the workplace and the classroom.

Felix claims that improvisers must regularly be “absorbing ... so you know you’re constantly listening, and you’re constantly taking in what’s going on stage around you, and you’ve got to lock that away and remember it, and you’ve got to take it and apply it” to other situations. There were a few different examples that demonstrated the participants’ ability to drop knowledge during the performance by different teams throughout the Jokers performance. For example, within the following scene, the two performers were acting as bartenders (Stewart, 2016a). The performer in the green sweater and glasses was using her knowledge of glass blowing and winemaking to integrate into the scene by first blowing glass and then making wine. That performer drew upon that knowledge and knew that to create glass; one would need both sand and fire along with physical movements to form both the glass and wine. They appeared to be spinning a rod to form the wineglass and stomping on grapes to make wine.

Another example of dropping knowledge included a player using what he once learned about metamorphosis and frogs and relating those concepts to puberty to articulate his point about change. The scene included a married couple co-teaching a class about puberty (Stewart, 2016b). As the husband drew on his knowledge of metamorphosis, he connected it to puberty. He paralleled the stages of a tadpole turning into a frog and compared that to a young girl growing into a woman.

The *dropping knowledge* concept can also be applied to a participant's personal life. During the group interview of the Kryptonians, a member shared that improvisers

should not only be “hyper aware but recognizing when something is like distinct, or when someone has a definitive trait...like after doing improv for a little bit you start to notice that little bit more and internalize it.” Ralph echoed these thoughts in his individual interview when talking about retaining knowledge:

You have to be aware of your body and who you are and be very reassured and all those aspects and I think, how, at least how I’ve been told to tackle improv is to go out, and seek as much knowledge as you can. Because we can only play off what we know, and if we only know little, our sets won’t go well, so I think, like, being able to immerse yourself in a lot of knowledge that you don’t necessarily know a lot about, is something that improv teaches you do. I had a teacher once who said, even if you don’t like what plays on the radio, at least, know what those songs are, because in improv scenes where you’ll be given a suggestion of that kind like pop cultural it’s very good to have that in your back pocket. That way you can engage your audience a little more.

This excerpt shows that for Ralph, he needed to learn as much as he could from various knowledge sources and improv comedy trained him to do that. Lester also offered some critical insight on how an improviser should learn beyond the basics:

I think through improv, when somebody brings you something you don’t understand, you have to find a way to quickly absorb all of the information that you can while seeming like you’re knowing what you’re talking about. And I think that’s an interesting way of, I suppose having like a little symbiosis of other cultures. Yeah. And I can tell you personally, a homework assignment of mine very recently, away from the team was to learn everything I possibly could about Bar and Bat Mitzvah, and, not Jewish myself but I knew like very basic things, and I brought it up in a scene once. And when you know only the base things about a bar mitzvah or something, it can come off very quickly as offensive because, oh all I really know is about the chair lifting, and I know about the Torah reading and that’s it, and you do some sort of large than life recreation of that, and it just comes across as stereotypical and stupid... but, I did way too much research probably on the history of Bar Mitzvah and Mat Mitzvahs and what they mean and what they mean culturally, and now I could tell you way more than the average guy about those two things and I think that’s just a cool cultural connection to people of the Jewish faith even though I have no real connection to them.

The quote from Lester demonstrates that because of improv comedy, he wanted to have a “real” understanding of a particular culture so that he could be more authentic in

applying his knowledge to a scene. While improvisers do not plan out their scenes in advance, having a wide knowledge base can be beneficial in crafting thoughtful scene work on the spot. Lester was participating in an initial stage of dropping knowledge by learning new information in hopes of being able to apply it in a future scene. He sought all the knowledge he could on Bat and Bar Mitzvahs to educate himself. This quote also demonstrates a tie to identity development and exploration, which will be discussed later in the chapter. What is remarkable is that when these improvisers learn new information in preparation for a possible scene, that information can also be applied to their daily lives, work, and the classroom.

When it comes to gaining new knowledge, these improvisers did not just attempt to learn information from one particular area. They were open to not only gaining the knowledge needed for certain tasks but much more open to learning about the world beyond them. As discussed earlier in Chapter II, students who are in charge of their self-regulated learning will be more actively engaged in the learning experience (Zumbrunn, Tadlock, & Roberts, 2011). These improvisers started to develop their self-regulated learning approach which was applied to their role as an improviser and their role as a student. Vince discussed when he is forming a thesis or “like researching things I’ll be like ‘oh why does that happen’ . . . – it peaks curiosity too . . . I think curiosity is actually a really, really, really, big thing in improv.” Naomi shared that she did not know much about chemistry, but found herself in a scene where one of the players knew a lot about chemistry, and she was left with aspirations to learn more about the subject. This desire to learn more about chemistry appeared to be both on a personal level and for potential use in a future scene.

Other interviewees were also left with a desire to learn new information about new unfamiliar topics. On stage and in the classroom, Sharon says that when she is trying to determine what is happening in a scene, she is “eager to learn and like hungry to like know what, things, so I guess that’s how it would connect, like in class it would make you really wanna understand, like I just really wanna understand it.” Sharon shared that improv comedy not only helped her have better relationships with her professors but also gave her confidence to ask and answer questions in class. Rodney echoed this longing for curiosity and shared:

That’s one thing about improv too when you keep doing it, because you need to keep coming up with ideas. You have to look around and find them, find inspiration for them, so it really kind of opens you up to the world, looking around and really paying attention to what’s going on around you, because you need new sources of information for your material and I think that that is something that could be very valuable to student development. Just teaching people to kind of, you know, appreciate what’s around them, keep looking around them, keep trying new things, and really paying attention to detail.

This passage displays, for Rodney, improv comedy stays with participants off stage and changes the way they take in new information. Those who participated in improv noticed a shift in their desire for learning. The improvisers wanted to learn about new topics by researching those topics when they discovered something new.

According to the participants, having a wide knowledge base will also help them be better performers. This broad knowledge is not limited to textbooks but also includes involvement in various hobbies. During the group interview, a member of the Jokers suggested that knowledge should not be isolated to one particular area of their life:

Everything you say is derived from your information and your observation from the world and it’s going be pulling from those stories that you read or experiences that you have had, and quotes that you have heard, and I think it’s really important for comedy to live life too and bring their point of view into an improv

scene and whatever hobbies that they have. I really like mythology so, every now and then I will bring in a mythological being or creature into an improv scene, because that is what feels strong in terms of my knowledge.

Furthermore, the interesting notion of becoming a sponge for knowledge is that these participants wanted to strive for competence, credibility, or excellence. A pre-requisite for success in higher education is the ability to go beyond basic understanding and participate in a higher level of critical thinking. Additionally, most institutions suggest that a simple regurgitation of facts is not enough, but there is an expectation to analyze, synthesize, and apply information to new situations (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1956; Anderson, Krathwohl, & Bloom, 2001). While speaking with Rodney about learning, he shared that he strives to expand his various knowledge base in order to use that knowledge in future scenes. For example, he wanted to become more knowledgeable about worldly topics and shared he would be, “just reading an article, if I come across something that I think might make, it might even just be a word ... like that sticks out to me, so I can, you know, really kind of delve into it.” Lester has even conducted research on Goth and Neo Punk culture and says that improvisers should be the “smartest we could possibly be about any sort of subject because when you’re performing improv, you can do about a million or two different things on stage—you can do anything.”

Although having the knowledge is not enough for some of the improvisers, there is a desire to add one’s individual perspective on concepts as well. Felicity recognized that since doing improv, her experience in the classroom has changed. Felicity says:

you gotta listen and pay attention in order to get the grade, but you also want to put your own perspective and input into the work. Not just, you know, copy and paste what you find on Wikipedia. You wanna give what you’ve learned and what you think to everything.

This quotation shows that for Felicity, because of improv comedy, she feels simply getting a grade is not enough; she wants to be able to demonstrate her ability to think for herself.

Naomi affirmed the dropping knowledge concept and how it can be applied to learning in the classroom. Naomi was reflecting on a scene involving the Jokers performance and said: “you could tell they were in that class and knew exactly what those kids were talking about... because that person took from somewhere else, took from their knowledge base, it was really interesting.” The scene included the players integrating knowledge from a classroom by portraying actors and directors who were filming a movie scene. The director started discussing concepts that he had learned from an acting class and incorporated them into the scene, which can be viewed in this video clip (Stewart, 2016c). Felix also agrees with Naomi and offers a deeper explanation of really having an understanding of facts, ideas, or theories:

the best scenes I've seen in improv is when you get somebody up on stage who is really intelligent about whatever's happening, and they know a lot about it because suddenly you've got a whole new life to the scene and like credibility. You know if you have a scene about French architecture in the 1500s, and that's what your scene is about. If you've got two people who know nothing about French architecture in the 1500s, you can still do the scene, and it will be fine, and it'll still probably be really funny, but if you get somebody up there who does know a little bit about that, even just like a little bit, you can really milk that tiny little bit of information for a lot of an improv scene. So it's something that I think, I actively try to do, and I'm sure other improvisers try to do too. Just kind of learn as much about anything, like if there's anything I find interesting I try and like research about it a little bit just because then that's something else that I can take and have in my back pocket to use in improv.

In this excerpt, Felix explains how the improv comedy performance can be enhanced if one has a deeper knowledge of an idea, but can also provide you with a new level of believability if you can apply even a little information to the various scenes.



Dropping knowledge can also be connected to the classroom and other professional settings. Improv comedy is a tool that can foster enhanced learning habits. Felix believes there is value in engaging in other activities outside of improv so one can bring more to the scenes. For example, participation in a class, hobby, club, organization, or on-campus job could further develop scene work. During the Kryptonians group interview, a member shared that when characters bring in true knowledge, this is “the universe they’re in where they know these things, and this is something a person might break out on the fly, and it’s so cool to see people pull out their unique knowledge sets and put it into things.” Felix offered a wonderful practical example:

I was on a set earlier this week for my acting class, and I had to do some film stuff in coordination with one of the directing classes in the film school, in the film department, and I was just on set like waiting and watching. And I’ve done a little film stuff, and it’s kind of interested me as a hobby and so it’s something that I always try and like pay attention to and people were talking and so I was just kind of like listening to some other people like doing some of the crew doing some work and they like mentioned a phrase that I didn’t know before, and I was like oh, oh that’s what you call it when this. And so then for me I just kind of immediately thought about like when I would use that when I was working on something like oh when would I okay cool, so it’s something, it’s something that, I can’t tell you what that phrase is now, but I know that if I need it in the future like whenever it comes up, I like, it’ll be there, and I’ll have that.

In the passage provided by Felix, it shows that improv comedy can also have real-world applications that move beyond the stage and classroom and can be applied in different venues. Dwayne also believes that improv can be used to apply to academic situations.

He suggested that:

If you can embody that character, you can remember a lot of things based on being that character so, teaching history, through improv would be a really cool thing to try, study like, Abraham Lincoln you know, do all the research on Abraham Lincoln and then do scenes of Abraham Lincoln you know, do scenes with Abraham Lincoln speaking to... someone else, or put two historical figures together and use the knowledge that you gained on that person to improvise a

scene as that person, because if you know it, it's easier to talk about it, and that way... versus a formal presentation that you just remember for a day and then forget later.

This example shared by Dwayne infers that dropping knowledge will also help one to understand and remember more than concepts, facts, and figures, but to learn about how people lived.

By participating in improv comedy, these students developed an interest in learning a broad range of topics and concepts that may be applied to improv scenes at a later point in time. Along with learning new information, they are also able to apply that to various scenes. The participants developed a curiosity for the world, and that curiosity does not discriminate against any disciplines. Dropping knowledge also has implications for how students learn in the classroom. To drop knowledge, a participant needs to be able to pick up key details, remember particular facts, and then be able to apply them in potential scenes. If this can be applied to an improv comedy scene, there is potential for those same skills to be applied to the classroom. For instance, if a student learns a piece of information, they can go from theory to practical application.

As inferred, a critical component to dropping knowledge includes the ability to remember key details from stories, scenes, players, audience members, and general knowledge. Most of the participants spoke about the importance of details to add more depth to conflicts, stories, and characters in different improv scenes. This retention skill applies to dropping knowledge and developing academic skills because college students must be able to identify key details in order gain a better understanding of problems, issues, and to gain context. If college students can recall details, they will be able to gain more context and contribute to solving problems. As discussed in Chapter II, while

participating in improv comedy, various forms of memory can be utilized in performances. For example, episodic, declarative, immediate, and working forms of memory are all different ways of remembering key details. Episodic memory includes recovering broad and pertinent information while declarative memory includes pulling material that is obtainable by the mind, immediate memory and working memory include holding on to information for seconds to minutes at a time (Purves et al., 2011; Skinner & Fernandes, 2008). Improvisers use a blend of different memories while performing. After speaking with the twelve interviewees, this dropping knowledge subtheme was identified because they had much to share about identifying and recalling details.

A member of the Arrows suggested that, by doing improv, you “pick up on little details very quickly and latch on to little pieces of conversation that you can refer back to later.” Rodney also echoed that sentiment and shared that improv teaches “people to kind of, you know, appreciate what’s around them, keep looking around them, keep trying new things, and really paying attention to detail.” I observed that during the performances, whether the players were in the scene or off stage, they were all watching and listening to what was happening and supported, added to, or edited a scene. Lester also contributed by saying that when it comes to dropping knowledge, the “details that can make the character come to life and can make you do a lot more with it, and be a lot funnier, and when it comes to that, it’s just broad knowledge.” In most of the scenes, the improvisers were creating unique characters with specific quirks, accents, and characteristics that brought them to life. Those characters were inspired by, suggestions, other performers, what was needed in a particular scene, or pulled from stock characters.

Improvisers can learn how to pick up key details by participating in the games and exercises. Wesley says that when it comes to learning, he has improved greatly since joining the improv team and that he feels, “like improv is actually really helpful with that. I’m better at picking up on details, much better. Very much so. I used to be a guy who very like heard something but didn’t really register it.” Picking up on details can also be applied to exploring various topics and is a process for improvisers. For example, there are games like *Genres* or *Backwards, Forwards* that involve recalling key details from previous scenes. In those games, the performers are required to replay scenes through various formats and reiterate key phrases while portraying their scene in a new way. These memorization skills could be helpful to coursework, jobs, planning events, or learning other new skills. Felix says:

a lot of time in improv you hear something, and then you not only have to remember that and stay committed to what’s going on but you also in the back of your mind, think about all the connections that you can make with that. And I think that’s something that just, really across all boards really helps. And I’ve known people, and it’s the same kind of thing, that, would struggle in school and then started improv and stuff and found it a lot easier to do things.

In the selection shared by Felix, it was evident that improv comedy was not only helping him pick up on the main details useful for improv performance but also connecting those specific details to larger concepts in their academic life. For example, within improv games, players must remember details to add to the believability of a scene whereas, in academia, students must recall details to add to their credibility in the classroom.

Recalling details can be useful in both shortform and longform improv games. An example of this was demonstrated in the Arrows scene involving two characters that were in an underground prison. Vince was reflecting on that scene and shared what “improv

contributes to is just a great attention to detail. And it was displayed here like in Timothy's and I's scenes... we had a little, morse code machine and it had a little thing over here." In this scene, the two players were confined to an underground cave and only had the use of a morse code machine to communicate with the outside world. The two players knew exactly where the machine was along with the wires that needed to be tapped, and both used it in the same way throughout the scene because they were observing each other's movements. By remembering key details and utilizing their working memory, participants can also identify patterns and create unique scenes. A member of the Jokers shared that:

I think people analyze scenes and try to pick up really big details that guide a big laugh, and they will try to bring that back in the end to give a callback, or they will pick up on patterns that are funny, and that's what creates a game scene. Let's say someone's coming and making a funny sound or something specific; someone else will come with that parallel and then just use that to play with that game, so reading those patterns is definitely big for comedy majors and improvisers.

In this quotation, for this member, it was evident that the player knows that you must not only be able to identify main details about what is happening in an improv scene but also be able to pick up the details of what the audience is finding it to be humorous. These key details include remembering where invisible props are placed, their size, and how they are used. The participants must remember verbal details like names, facts, or figures. Participants must also remember details from earlier scenes and suggestions.

One practical application to picking up key details can be applied to an individual's memory. Participating in improv could be used to improve memorization skills. When it comes to learning and remembering details in scenes, most of the players had something to add to this topic. Wesley said one must remember "details, to be able to

plan out something, to be able to relay ideas, to be able to pick up on ideas and then take them and create something together... that would be a huge benefit for learning.” Laurel also shared that improv comedy has helped her:

to think faster on my feet so if I am on a quiz or a test, it helps me, I think it helps a lot with memory too, because with some games, you’re remembering things that your teammate said 20 minutes ago and you have to bring that back, so it’s definitely helped focus in on memory skills and stuff like that.

This passage shows that for Laurel, improv comedy will augment one’s memory because of the specific games and exercises that are being played. She is affirming that her immediate and working memory skills are being used during improv games and then later applied to other situations like taking a test in the classroom.

The participants also shared examples of how they increased their memory and applied it to the “real world.” Sharon said that “Yeah it totally is, my memory has gotten so much better. I used to forget my phone and keys and homework and everything in high school all the time, but now it’s like, my mind is like way more organized.” Sharon also said that she believes “you could do games to help people remember their material and stuff like that, there are plenty of games that are like memory games that are improv games....” During the longform approach (called the Bruise), I observed that the Arrows had multiple vignettes and referred to them later in their performance. With some scenes, this was 10-35 minutes after the initial scene had occurred. In this video clip, you can see that two players went on stage and had a short line of dialogue and then later returned as the same characters in a different scene about 20 minutes later (Stewart, 2016d). Both players remembered which players and which teammates they were with, their position on stage, and their character. The Arrows suggested that:

you just have to listen to everything, remember everything, kind of stay in-tune with all the different conversations, all the different scenes, and it will help outside of improv. Somebody must have mentioned it earlier, memory, you kind of pick up on little details very quickly and latch on to little pieces of conversation that you can refer back to later. Yeah...if you're working on a group project and somebody has an idea, it might help you roll with it just by listening to them, or it might help you, kind of contribute more to that...

Most the participants reported that they noticed their memory and retention of information had improved after participating in improv comedy. Having a stronger memory did not only impact their level of play but helped with their personal and academic journey. For instance, various players highlighted that they were able to better recall information which resulted in better test scores. Another participant spoke about the how she felt more organized and efficient because she was able to remember where her personal belongings were all located. Interviewees shared that they were also able to remember key details about day-to-day tasks. Several members also shared that the games and exercises improved their memory for quizzes and tests. The ability to remember key details has a strong connection to one's ability to listen.

Active listening is a critical skill to engaging and learning in higher education. With the numerous distractions diverting student's attention, there must be a way to improve the practice of listening. As discussed by Holmes and Qureshi (2006), listening is a critical component to improv comedy because you will not be able to fully "yes, and" a response. For example, if someone is offering a suggestion and you are not listening to them, that would be another way of denying their suggestion because you are not accepting their agreement or fully adding to it. All of the interviewees in individual and group interviews mentioned the importance of listening. Listening is essential to the success of all improv scenes because you will not be able to fully engage

and respond to fellow players and if you are not able to fully respond, the scene will be cut short. A member of the Arrows shared their perspective on listening after reflecting upon their performance that evening. They said a “really really important piece to improv is just listening, to everybody all the time. You always have to be paying attention, even if you’re not on stage and on the sidelines you have to be listening.” A member of the Kryptonians agrees and suggests that one of the most critical guidelines to “improv is listening and, like, it’s, when you’re improvising it’s so crucial that you’re listening to everything that everyone’s putting out and kind of like trying to extrapolate on it and process it in your brain.... It’s very distinctive.”

As it pertains to academic skills, the improvisers also believed that listening skills gained through involvement in improv would help in the classroom. Felicity shared that one must “listen and pay attention and give your own input on something which brings it back to...the classroom, you gotta listen and pay attention in order to get the grade, but you also want to put your own perspective.” When discussing her participation in improv comedy it became apparent that Laurel used improv comedy as a way to improve her listening skills:

learning probably was a lot easier before improv because I kind of went in and wouldn’t over think it too much. Like I would just go to class, and would put the info, write it down, and now I’m a bit more, an active listener, so, that means, I will, have the urge to comment back because you know, in improv you like, you’re allowed to do that more. It’s an open space; it’s an open space to just be, talkative and to share your thoughts and feelings. Sometimes it’s really hard to like control that impulse of like okay, I need to say something back, I need to say something back...

Laurel’s experience with improv comedy suggests that she was more engaged in the classroom by actively listening and feeling more responsible for participating in



discussions. Lester, on the other hand, believes that listening is a necessary skill for academic survival. He suggests that within a collegiate context, you are involved in:

large groups, mostly lectures, listening, comprehension, studying on your own, I think improv definitely lends itself to that switch, and it definitely helped me make it a lot, because we, you, in a lot of lectures or courses where it's a lot of your own work, you can't always raise your hand and say "hey I need personal help on this. Could you explain this to me really quick." You have to do your best to listen and understand the first time and pull out key ideas. And that's really all that improv is in the end, is just listening and making sure you know exactly what's going on with your environment so you can create more things inside of it.

This quotation demonstrates that, for Lester, improv comedy trains you to be hyper-aware of your surroundings and open to new information that is around you. By doing this, you can fully contribute to whatever is needed in a scene or the different areas of a person's life.

The participants also reported that when one does not listen, it could have a detrimental impact on improv scenes and other learning opportunities. There was an example of this in the following clip where an improviser was not listening to their fellow players (Stewart, 2016e). In the scene, the characters were established as Kip and Karen. Later in the scene, another player entered and mistakenly changed their names to Patrick and Patricia. The performer who was playing Kip creatively called out the other player who was not listening and made the mistake of calling a player by the wrong name. Felix says, "when I'm on stage, and I don't listen to people it doesn't work, you might make that connection like oh, when I'm working on a group project, and I don't listen to people ...it doesn't work." Naomi is now more aware of how her peers do not listen and believes that improv comedy could help her develop better listening skills. Discussing her experience in the classroom, Naomi suggests that:

listening to, in group discussions so I know another thing that happens a lot in a lot of my gen ed classes, we don't hear anything. If we're having a group discussion, one person is yelling and the rest of us are backing off because that one person's not, doesn't care about what anyone else has to say because they want to be right kind of thing. And I think if, if we had an improv workshop that was about yes-and-ing and paying attention to the people around you and, gathering perspectives or like gathering information from listening I think, that hopefully that would translate to the real life. I think, I have a lot of, or a lot of us have, oh what if I did that in real life? How would that affect me if I did that in real life? Because in improv they don't tell you, ok use this in your real world, you just learn it, and you're just slowly like oh, it's a lot of personal epiphanies I feel like with improv, so yeah, I think that's a way that uses it.

The excerpt shows that improv comedy can be helpful in developing listening skills both in the classroom and in the "real world." For example, Naomi suggested that by participating in improv, you listen better to your peers during group work or discussions, inside or outside the classroom.

Most of the participants shared that playing improv games were directly tied to their active listening skills. The participants shared that the skill of listening could not only help them build upon their improv comedy playability but could enhance their ability to learn in the classroom. However, players must not only be able to listen well, but be able to think quickly, generate new ideas, and solve problems quickly. The subtheme dropping knowledge demonstrated how participants learned new knowledge that applied to other disciplines while picking up key details and actively listening. In the following section, there will be a review of how improv comedy influences a participant's ability to think on the spot, produce new ideas, and solve problems.

### **Subtheme 2: Out of Thin Air**

There is a need for college graduates who can think quickly, solve complex problems, and create numerous answers to problems (Wagner, 2008). Additionally, those

who can adapt to the complex and interconnected world will be ready for multiple careers (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Those who can generate multiple answers or ideas will also be valued in the marketplace (American Marketing Association, 2010). Being able to think and act quickly is a common topic discussed among the improv participants. Out of thin air or thinking on the spot theme is defined as the ability to act quickly upon scenarios or suggestions. Participants were also able to generate multiple creative ideas for stories, challenges, issues, or problems while exploring how improvisers solve problems within scenarios in new and unique ways.

Several of the participants and teams spoke about the ability to think quickly and adapt while also sharing their insights on how improv could be used to develop further these abilities. Rodney said that improv has, “definitely made me quicker, I, definitely, you know, I’m able to keep up with everybody.” Sharon agreed and revealed that “it helps me think quicker, like if I’ve been rehearsing improv a lot, my mind is like a bit sharpened, feels like I’m like working out my brain when I play a lot of improv games and thinking games.” As I observed the various teams play both longform and shortform games, I noticed there was no time for the participants to take breaks to think through their scenes, characters, or ideas; they had to all act quickly. Even if there appeared to be a moment when someone was struggling or paused to think, the scene was altered or edited immediately by the other players on a team. The scenes moved quickly which required the players to act and react quickly.

While there are connections to dropping knowledge, participations acknowledged a different set of skills that including thinking quickly. Clark indicated that participating in improv even helped her in some of her classes. For example, Clark

shared that “it helps me to think faster on my feet so if I am on a quiz or a test, it helps me.” Wesley also discussed how thinking quickly was not limited to just public speaking, but could also be applied to singing improvised songs. Improvising a song requires a participant to not only react quickly, but quickly follow formulate patterns to create melodies out of thin air. When observing the team warm-ups and performances, there appeared to be a natural progression of going from simple exercises to more complex games. The more warm-ups the players did, the quicker their responses were and more energy the players appeared to have while playing the games. Felix also spoke about how improv affected his brain and stated that “I think you just learn to quickly analyze things and think quicker and it just, it’s just kind of a different wiring for your brain, once you train it for improv you get it firing on all pistons.” Dwayne, on the other hand, offered his interpretation of these concepts:

one of the big things about improv is the distinction between inspiration and invention. It’s easy, we’ve, you’ve seen improv shows before I would assume, that’s why this research study is happening, but, it, you, when you’re in an improv show, and you see someone just be like and then a giant dinosaur just came out of nowhere.... Like, that is an invention. Like you didn’t really take yourself and put him into it you just threw something into there because you thought it was funny. An inspiration is more; this is what this made me feel, this is the types of things that I’ve been through, this is maybe how it will come out in the scene.

It appeared that throughout the three performances, there were more inspirations than inventions. There were not too many characters that entered a scene that did not seem like they were not supposed to be there. Every character played a role and served a purpose throughout the scenes. In general, the scenes appeared to connect well. For these participants, I might suggest that the players rely more on their feelings when playing the games and developing scenes. The players offered what they felt would support the

different scenes instead of throwing in inventions. For example, during the Kryptonians performance, there were general references to animals and different team members would come in and explain their interactions with animals because they felt that would be best for the scene.

Very rarely in life do things go exactly according to plan. Students can study everything that they were supposed to for a test and then be completely thrown off by a trick question or unexpected material. Several members of the Arrows also spoke about the dangers of pre-planning improv scenes. They indicated that it could totally throw someone off if they are expecting another player to say something and they do not. Planning gets in the way of the player's ability to think openly and freely with their team. Improvisers not only need to be able to think on the spot but also adapt to challenges. As examined earlier, Aylesworth (2008) discussed that improvisers must be able to respond quickly without stopping to think about it. Rodney says that "if somebody comes out in a scene with you and gives you a complete like, a complete something out of left field, something completely ridiculous, you have to react to that so quickly."

It appears that players are capable of learning this ability to think on the spot, even if it is uncomfortable or is associated with anxiety initially. Naomi shared that there is no reason to have fear, and she is now "more able to go with the flow. I feel like I have less anxiety than I used to, because I, I just learned that you're not going to die, like this will not be the end of you." For Vince, being a part of improv had changed him and made him more flexible to go with the flow. Felicity indicated that improvisers must make:

things up as you go, and, I think that's a life lesson that a lot of people need to learn, because, I especially out of high school from you know adults telling me you know you need to have a plan, you need to do this and that and, in life, you,

can have a plan, you can have goals that's great but, things are gonna happen and you gotta roll with the punches...

It appears that throughout many improv scenes, the players not only had to think quickly but also be able to adapt to the scenario to support their other players. A member of the Arrows offered their perspective on adaptation:

Yeah and the ability to like, to adapt to different situations, let's say, when you go out on stage, and you have no idea what anyone is going to say, or however they're going to like add onto what, like in your head you have an idea or like of what they could might say next and they could totally not say that and you have to be able to change that, and change your own idea to fit what they have to say, and you know to adapt and that's something that you carry on in your personal life you know, shit happens and you gotta stay on your feet and adapt, you know adapt or die.

While observing the performances, it was evident that some players were better at adapting than others. For example, when a participant's actions did not flow with the scene, some players did not do as well as others in adapting to a scene, and there were confused looks, silence, or the scene was cut. Other players were much better at being able to adapt to those changes. For example, during the Joker's red team performance, the players shared that they had originally planned to follow a longform structure where they stayed in just one fictional location. However, the structure changed, and the longform structure suddenly included more fictional locations. The team changed location of scenes between the theater, projector room, ticket booth, and the lobby. All the players adapted and made it seem like it was supposed to be that way and did not have any impact on their performance.

Both Wagner (2008) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) discussed the pressing need for graduates to be able to adapt. For instance, students could be enrolled in a course where they are learning a specific type of technology or software only to enter

the workforce and realize that software is now obsolete, and they will have to adapt to remain marketable. The interviewees shared that the more one participates in improv comedy, the more it helps you to be quicker and adapt to changes. While these changes could include quick transitions from scene to scene, this also includes facing adversity. These practices can help participants to grow personally and as an improviser. Lester offers a more sink-or-swim mentality and suggests that improv comedy helps one to “move from idea to idea and helps you do that a lot quicker because you have to do that on stage every week, and if you’re not, then you suck, and nobody laughs at that, and that’s horrible.” As indicated earlier, thinking quickly can also be applied to coursework. The participants inferred that adaptability could be improved with practice. For example, there are improv games that further develop one’s ability to think and respond quickly. Felix offers some illuminating suggestions:

there are some games we have that are like really helpful with helping you think less and just kind of take something and expound upon it, and so then, they really kind of flex that muscle of taking something and making it bigger. Which is something that’s really helpful for me, writing papers, I find a lot of times like I’ll be writing a paper about something and I’ll just have a little bit of something like of a prompt to go off of for the paper and it’s a lot easier for me to take that and see like all the different ways I can talk about it and kind of pick and choose what I want to do, rather than I feel like some people sit down to write a paper, and they’re like, I have no idea where to start, and so it’s a really good way to kind of just get the ball rolling and stuff. And then like we have like certain games that are more about listening specifically, and we have games that are more about making big and bold decisions, and so they help in those ways.

The passage shows that for Felix, improv comedy can train your mind to be quicker at mental tasks by participating in a variety of games and exercises. Thinking on the spot can also contribute to one’s ability to create unique solutions for a wide range of problems at efficient speeds.

With societal problems becoming infinitely more complex, the graduates of tomorrow will need to generate new solutions to respond to these challenges. Within improv comedy, participants must continue to create numerous unique and novel ideas to engage their fellow players and audiences. While this can be connected to creativity, this could also be described as thinking outside the box. Felix suggests that improv comedy can help one with “critically thinking and quickly thinking, it really makes you think about things in a different way than you normally would, and it kind of expands that box, you know people are always like oh think outside the box.” According to Rodney, he believes that when it comes to improv comedy, he must be “able to think on my feet and come up with solid ideas, and being able to come up with threads I can pull, ideas I can follow too that might lead to something better.” As discussed earlier, the participants do not pre-plan, but present ideas on stage to see where they go. Creating numerous ideas can create new patterns, but other ideas may not produce any fruit.

For some, not knowing all the details can be accompanied by fear. However, while fear and anxiety seem to be a part of the process, the players indicate that one must abandon those doubts. Wesley suggests that improvisers must “be able to come up with ideas, on the fly and not be afraid to run with them.” Dwayne also believes that improv has given him the tools to think outside the box:

It’s given me validation to say that I can think outside the box, I have this tool belt at my disposal that can help me, you know, navigate and think creatively and think, you know, in, so like there’s the box, thinking outside the box, and then there’s thinking where the box is placed, and that’s how far out I think that improv has helped me expand my mind and thinking.

Thinking outside the box will be a critical skill as human and financial resources diminish. There are also practical applications for the classroom and professional world.



For example, professors could use these exercises to incorporate into their pedagogy. A professor could assign students different theories to learn about and then craft scenarios where the students had to generate as many solutions as possible while incorporating the theoretical constructs. Student affairs professionals could use these skills for team building. While discussing his participation outside the classroom, it was evident that improv helped Rodney in his internship:

when I was at my internship in LA, I was in a writers room, for DreamWorks TV and they were writing new episodes for their YouTube series about King Julian from Madagascar, and we just had to draw up ideas, just ideas, ideas, ideas, stuff that hadn't been done before on that channel. I, yeah. The paid writers had, you know, 20 ideas, but I just had a full word document of just random stuff, that could have been developed or some of it you could have just easily thrown away but, there were little nuggets of really good stuff in there.

Rodney was able to apply the skills he learned in improv to his professional internship.

This skill of thinking of new ideas can be applied to any discipline. For example, medical personnel might need to come up with numerous creative ideas when responding to health issues, when the typical treatment is not working. When the Gulf of Mexico oil spill occurred in April 2010, scientists had to brainstorm how to plug up an oil spill that was releasing 5,000 barrels a day into the open ocean. Developing these ideas is helpful in real life scenarios, but improvisers must also be able to connect these strategies to problem-solving.

One of the primary objectives of any improv scene is to solve a problem. While the problems associated with improv comedy might be hilarious or highly unlikely, similar principles are used to solve real-world problems. For instance, when resolving real world issues: the problem is defined, relationships and context matter, and a solution is presented to an audience. The skills used to engage in these exercises can also be

applied to academic skill sets. Many professors expect students to solve problems or resolve case studies. In our interview, Lester said improv comedy is “a big help educationally like you’re looking into because it really encourages free thinking and finding solutions to problems. One of the bigger things in improv is that each scene should have conflict.” Rodney echoes Lester’s sentiments and suggests that improv comedy trains one to offer “a different point of view, and it really allows, really helps you think about things from a different perspective, and kind of zone in on ideas and generating ideas and solutions to problems.” Improv helps participants to creatively solve the most absurd and far-fetched problems. For example, while observing the Kryptonians improv performance, in one scene, there was a dead body, theatergoers, and a murderer all in a locked theater and the team had to use problem-solving skills to solve the murder. Although the problems encountered in improvisational comedy are generally unlikely, improvisers are practicing real-world problem-solving skills.

Improv comedy can also be helpful in addressing uncomfortable real-world issues. For example, when discussing family or financial matters, skills she learned from improv comedy helped Laurel. She says “you know life is improvised because you could have a set thing you want to do but you know, it's not always going to be a straight shot, there’s going to be things that come in.” Dwayne mentions that improv:

...helps with problem solving, a lot because a lot of school is problem-solving. How can we get a solution out of what we have, right? And that’s basically what improv is too. It’s, how do we get a set, how do you get a scene out of the people that you have and the suggestion that you’re given? So it definitely helps you figure out the workaround, figure out how to, so I have A, how can I get to B, and like what processes and ways can I get there?...helps you with the, helps you be an open-minded thinker...

Improv comedy has helped Dwayne to accomplish goals, tackle problems, and achieve

tasks, through a variety of measures and mediums. Dwayne illustrates that improv can help individuals problem solve using creative measures.

With improv comedy as in life, it appears that when solving problems, there is rarely just one solution, but numerous solutions and numerous pathways to get those solutions. Lester also provides some examples of how this can be practically applied in an on-campus job or through extracurricular involvement:

It also helps solve problems. We do a lot of troubleshooting there with computers, or with equipment, or kids have to do a project, and they need to know what they wanna check out for it, what camera, what microphone, stuff like that, and I think it's helpful to, I guess be able to problem-solve and think outside the box on how to, what's the best way to get these things done. And I think these skills could definitely transfer over to things, extracurriculars like sports or things like that, where you always really have to be thinking quickly or on your feet and recognize the next problem and be two steps ahead of it to solve the solution.

As mentioned by Lester, he used skills to creatively problem solve with his job and could easily apply the skills he learned from improv comedy. Throughout most improv comedy scenes, unique problems are solved with efficiency. This skill can be applied to a participant's personal life and academic journey. The out of thin air academic skill allows participants to efficiently and effectively think on the spot as well as quickly problem solve. Players also need to be able to quickly connect concepts together in many scenes, games, and exercises. The next section will explore how improv comedy influences one's ability to create new connections between various topics.

### **Subtheme 3: Building Bridges to New Worlds**

An important academic skill is the ability to tie two seemingly unrelated concepts together. As previously mentioned, Treffinger and Isaksen (2005) understood that creative thinking was about making and expressing meaningful new connections between

various concepts. When asking difficult questions facing our world, one must be able to create connections. For example, if one looks closely at a rise in number of mosquitos in a particular geographic area, they have to figure why this is occurring. College graduates must be able to articulate logical connections between seemingly unreasoned concepts and be able to solve these challenges together.

While speaking with the Arrows, various participants emphasized that the audience must be able to connect with the performers. One member said, “We can come up here and tell things that don’t exist, but people are just going to be like, ‘well that doesn’t really make any sense’.” A member of the Kryptonians echoed those same sentiments and indicated that improvisers need to “connect ideas when they seem to have potential, like if someone’s looking at that, and then you know I just sort of connect it anyway, ... really helps with expanding thinking, expanding, and then also flushing out ideas.” Connections can be made between people and concepts. Vince mentioned that when he performs, building connections could have an enormous impact on the performance. He shared that:

improv allows for, almost like a pathway, to it, it like creates a shortcut to the idea that you’re trying to get to, because you’re thinking about so many things when you’re on stage that it kind of builds those bridges to kind of cut to the chase really quickly...

Improv can help students to link concepts together and make new information relevant.

Felix also illustrated how this happens within improv:

Improv kind of just takes that and like, to the next level of thinking when you’re making connections. There’s a lot of improv, a lot of stuff we do that kind of centers around the idea of associations and one of the big like training tools for improv is like free word association which is where you hear one word, and you say the first thing that it makes you think of, and that just kind of reinforces the building connections thing that we do on stage all the time. And then like

through that, you just kind of notice patterns more and you like see the way that things work in the world, like you can't make those connections faster.

Felix's perspective demonstrates that improvisers can connect ideas together even with little information. This was modeled during the performance when performers would ask for a suggestion, and that would spark characters, conflict, and new stories. For example, the Arrows asked for a suggestion and received "Underground law school" as a suggestion which resulted in many new stories, characters, and scenes. One story sparked a scene where the individuals were in an underground prison while another included scenes in a middle school classroom.

The participants also discussed the ability to create themes throughout different improv scenes. Several improv games call for themes, but there also times where the team discovers themes on their own. The form that the Arrows used was called a Bruise, which included creating connections to the suggestion and then finding a theme between them which included "Underground law school". A member of the Jokers was reflecting upon his experience and shared that a "big theme of like why we are talking about this or we are making some global connection to it all, and it helps it interact as humans." Another member of the Jokers shared that:

I know in a lot of other improv shows that it happens a lot, but theme is something that you deal with a lot. A lot of times you will watch scene or whatever you are doing to generate content and actively trying to pick up themes that are in there and be thinking bigger picture from it, and I think that still happens from scene to scene, maybe not as much as some like Improv Olympic or working on a Harold where it calls for that but I think it is still something that we do, we do try, there are improvisers that still try to pay attention to those large ideas and concepts that they can either extrapolate or pull from.

For this member of the Jokers, participating in improv comedy has helped them to recognize a pattern from scenes that they are watching or a part of. By identifying

patterns, this can help a participant create more interesting stories and call back on information that was shared much earlier in scenes.

The skill of connecting ideas also happens as a team. It is not just one person who is connecting all the ideas together. This process happens as a group and includes the players making connections to suggestions, relationships, ideas, knowledge and many other topics from one situation (or scene) to another. This involves players inviting their fellow players into the scenes. Wesley shared that since doing improv, he is much better at group work. Wesley said, “I’m better at like trying to put them into the situation in a way that’s both comfortable to them and we can get some information out of them so we can come to a final conclusion.” Naomi offered her perspective on learning:

Knowledge is, collaborative. And improv is collaborative. So, if you can put those things together, you learn better. You don’t learn in a bubble, you learn from experiences. You learn from, I mean, research is putting people in a certain situation or something like that too, understand how they interact with that, and that’s a collaborative effort. You need that participant in order to get that research done. Right, so, improv is more of a collaborative and fruitful experience the way that knowledge is, so those two work hand in hand...I believe.

Being able to generate themes, identify patterns, and tie concepts together can be achieved both individually and as a group. These skills can also help illuminate the reason something is occurring during a scene and have practical applications for the real world.

The out of thin air subtheme revealed how participants could quickly generate ideas and develop solutions to problems. Being able to problem solve and generate new ideas is closely connected to creative skills. As anticipated, several students revealed that participating in improv comedy influences their ability to be creative. The next section will review how improv comedy impacts participant’s creativity, their ability to

experiment, and writing skills.

#### **Subtheme 4: Creating from Scratch**

There are many applications and opportunities for creativity within higher education as creativity and improvisation are intertwined. Limb and Bruan (2008) confirmed the connection between improv and creativity. Within improv comedy, one can create new worlds, characters, forms, games, poems, songs, music, and other works that can lead to many unplanned creations. Improvisation gives individuals the opportunity to challenge the status quo and reinvent the wheel. Involvement in improv comedy provides opportunities for teams to discover new concepts together. Performing improv provides participants with an opportunity to experiment. Furthermore, improv helps individuals become better writers. Throughout this section, there will be a review of how improv comedy influences the creative process, experimentation, and writing.

Performing improv can have many positive effects on a participant's creativity, and the participants had much to share about their experience on stage and a part of a troupe. Dwayne shared that improv has "made me more confident in saying that I am a creative mind. It's given me validation to say that I can think outside the box, I have this tool belt at my disposal that can help me." Rodney also shared that improv keeps him sharp and is "definitely an outlet, and it helps me stay creative, when I don't do improv for a long time, I can feel myself kind of getting a little bit mentally slower ... just because, like it has that creative spark." Most of the exercises, activities, and games create opportunities for the participants to be creative. Laurel had a very similar experience and indicated that it does not take much preparation to be creative; anyone can just jump right in. Laurel also shared that "it's a way for me to get all like my

creativity and artistry stuff out without having to like, get materials for it because it's like it's just, a good, outlet for that.” Participants also do not require preparation or materials to be creative.

It is an escape for some participants. Wesley shared that performing is “this nice place where I can focus on improv and nothing else and just be okay with life and just kind of, enjoy myself, but still feel like I’m doing something constructive.” Dwayne offered a practical example of how improv comedy helped him be creative with a marketing campaign for his advertising class using zombies and roller skates:

...for Halloween, to have like a Dead Skate thing because it was lining up with a Walking Dead season finale and like all these types of things were going on, and once we had that idea, it was, alright how can we implement all of the media vehicles together, how can we put all of this? And it went so far out that we actually had, we had people, so they had skates that they weren’t using, they weren’t broken or anything they just weren’t using them, so, we laced up skates, dressed as zombies and skated around the quad just being these walking dead/skating dead kind of people. And I don’t think without improv that would have been something that I would have thought of. I would have been like do want to run a print ad? We have print ad’s for you, you can make a radio spot. I don’t know how else to do that, you know? Definitely going from 0 to 100 real quick.

This excerpt shows Dwayne using creative connections, idea generation, and overall creative skills while working on a marketing project for his coursework.

Being creative is not confined to just creating products. As previously discussed in chapter two, there are connections between improv and using one’s imagination, even though Naomi believes that you are creating “real” things. This is similar to Holland’s (2001) *Figured Worlds*. For example, the worlds and universes that are created on stage appear to have their own rules and realities conditional only to that particular stage at that specific moment in time. Naomi suggests that you can:



...create a whole world on stage that doesn't exist and has never existed before and I always thought that was so fascinating, like all the stuff that I had learned when I was acting and learning how to act when I went on stage I could still do those things and use them but make my own story and whatever is done with my brain at that time, now, its just, its just a lot of things.

This piece shared by Naomi demonstrates the opportunity that improv can have on creating new worlds, paradigms, and constructs.

This approach of creativity by discovery is fun for both the audience and the participants. The participants all generalized that this creative discovery performance is done together and is a pure form of play. While speaking with Laurel, she felt a sense of pride after doing improv and shared that improv will “just help people feel creative and feel like they made something that is good. You know? Cuz there's that immediate reward...I did something good for once in my life.” Felix offered his perspective:

I really just, really love improv. I've been acting for a while, and improv has always been a part of that, and something that I love doing, and it's playing - in its really most pure form, its playing pretend, and you get a good group of people together than can play together and you'll just have some of the most fun that you'll ever have on stage...

The selections shared by Laurel and Felix reveal a sense of accomplishment and joy that comes with creating while playing improv comedy games and performing on stage.

The creative play draws people together and invites discovery. You can be a talented and creative individual, but something special happens for the participants' when they create together. Lester shared that sometimes one might even start with something less than sublime, but there can still be a positive outcome. He shared that your team can “help you change it and transform it on stage into something that everyone can be proud of, yourself included, and, I think that feels really good.” The Jokers also feel a shared sense of responsibility for creating. One member indicated that

when it comes to discovery, “if there are four people on stage, you each have 25% of the responsibility of figuring out what is, and if it’s two people, it’s 50%.” Naomi was reflecting upon their practice earlier in the day and mentioned that one can also be drawn into others who were creating:

Sheena and Daisy were doing a scene, and Sheena said, oh look a little tiny book, and Daisy said oh, it’s a scroll and they started unrolling the scroll and it got really long until they were like feet apart from each other and that was a cool discovery, because they found that together and they found that little thing that they were doing and it was really cool to watch them find out how long it was. No one planned that; it was just this really cool thing, stuff like that is so cool to me.

Felix also echoed their comments and sentiments on creativity and shared:

probably the difference between in day to day from the bond that it forms is because, in improv, you are creating like it is pure creation, you take nothing, or you take something very small, and you turn it into something bigger. You know, you take a word and do a 20 minute set off of it, and when you’ve created those characters and those stories and the characters all have emotions and like backgrounds and stuff and you’ve created that kind of world together with people, there’s something really cool about looking around and being like we did this together because I trusted you and because you trusted me and because we put everything else aside, and we could come together and just create, is really unique and its something that doesn’t happen a lot in a lot of different areas.

The passages shared by the participants demonstrate the power of creating something with other individuals while doing improv comedy. Between the shared examples, there was a sense of ownership in creation, but also, that individuals could achieve more when they were creating together.

There was also a strong belief among the participants that if you say no or do not listen, then you are losing out on opportunities to create and discover. This can easily happen in the world of academia if professionals or staff members shut down ideas or opportunities to explore new areas. If someone denies or says no to an idea, it will likely

never come into existence, or it might be a shadow of what could have been possible. Naomi also shares that she can see how this could impact her personal life (especially denying real world opportunities) and suggests she “never would have discovered it anything we are saying, and were like it gets kind of weird and meta and it really changes the way you think in that way, life becomes about discovering when you do improv.” Improv comedy can encourage those to experiment, and that could be of great value to higher education because experimentation is utilized inside and outside the classroom.

While creativity may be something that is difficult to apply in the academic classroom, experimentation is widely accepted. Experimenting in improv comedy is also something that is required for success. Laurel shared that when she discovered improv, she “never even knew this world existed of like, just like, making up hilarious scenes on the spot, and just like exploring it as an art too, like, having the ability to do that.” Improv is an art form where the performance can never be duplicated. Rodney also stated, “that it's just such an interesting experience, you'll see, like you'll see something new every time.” Within improv scenes, there is minimal structure, but players intentionally do not plan and will have to experiment and test out new approaches while in the midst of performance.

Felix indicated that there is a “level of unknown just inherently in improv, because so much of the joy and fun of it comes from creating out of nothing and not being sure where it's going and building it in the moment.” I observed that the players do warm-up exercises to engage the creative process. However, Dwayne believes the creative process really starts when the players interact with the audience. Dwayne shared

what he loves “when you get a suggestion at the top of the show, it's your interpretation of the suggestion, your teammates interpretation of the suggestion, and where those two lie is what you show in your performance.” Throughout the performances, there were often times where the suggestions that were offered went in directions that were unexpected. For example, within the Kryptonians show the players asked for suggestions of holiday songs and they spawned scenes that were seemingly unconnected, albeit inspired by the suggestion. Great improvisers can make the connections visible for any general audience member to see. For example, a suggestion was “Baby, its Cold Outside” and a player made an informed connection to issues associated with sexual assault.

Within experimentation, failure is expected, and it is also a part of improv comedy. Failure is also encouraged and appreciated by the participants. In the following passage, Felix shares more about the power of experimenting with a new beginning:

...the other thing, like with improv is that it's okay to fail. Kind of with improv there is no way to actually fail because even like your failures are going to get turned into something great if you have a really supportive team. So, it kind of really helps like on the day to day if you know that you can try something and fail and still be ok and bounce back from that. it kind of helps with that a lot because you know, with improv, if you do a set and you get done with it, and you're like oh man that was awful its okay, its gone. Oh well, that was a bad set. It's okay I'll come back, and I'll do a better one tomorrow. You kind of get a clean slate every time which is really nice.

In this selection, Felix revealed that failure and encountering barriers is part of the process, and improv comedy affords a *tabula rasa* in every performance. For example, a player could perform one night and play horribly, stumble over their words, and receive no laughs compared to the next night where the participant could have the audience roaring with laughter.

College students experiment both inside and outside the classroom. Improv comedy is a safe space where students can experiment with many different concepts, identity, forms, and characters. It is a space where it is safe to fail because so much can be learned from the process and some participants acknowledged learning from failures. The improvisers revealed that their experiences within their college improv comedy troupe could also impact their writing skills.

There is no question that every student will need to know more than just the fundamentals of writing to be successful in higher education and the world of work. The ability to write well will be a top priority, especially with the new waves of social media, e-mail, and other non-traditional forms of communication. While not evident at first, writing is something that can be cultivated through improv comedy. As stated earlier, improv comedy had been used to develop the literacy of high school students by using an improv framework to teach about Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Welsh, 2014). While discussing how improv comedy influences academic skills, several of the participants indicated that it would help make them better writers.

Sharon shared that creating connections help in her writing. She suggested that, "Maybe just like making creative connections to things? For like writing, I feel like I can bust out an essay pretty quick." Improv helped Sharon to improve upon her writing skills by efficiently writing and connecting concepts together. A member of Kryptonians shared that after doing improv, their writing has changed for the better. The member shared that "now I just kind of latch onto something and I just kind of like write about it, blankly for maybe like a page or two and then I'll start to think like oh, maybe I got something here." It appears that since joining their improv team, the participants feel more comfortable

exploring ideas and writing more efficiently. Rodney found improv especially helpful with getting him started on writing prompts:

papers, like, getting a writing assignment, if I look at the prompt, I can just think on my feet right away. It's made like that first moment whenever I get an assignment of how am I going to approach this, just made that so much easier. That initial, like, what steps am I going to take to get this result or what am I going to say or what's the end goal of this project. It's made it so much easier to arrive at that so much quicker.

In Rodney's example, it was evident that before doing improv, the writing process was not as successful and took too much time, but after participating in improv, their writing has become a much more efficient and effective process. Vince, on the other hand, feels that improv comedy has changed the way he is an actual student:

I used to not be a great student, I used to not really understand assignments all that well. I used to not really, I'm still not a very good reader but I can write really well now, like, I can turn my brain on and just pound out a few sentences and then turn my brain off for a little bit and then turn it back on and pound out a few more sentences, and it's really really easy. And talking to teachers has been a lot easier.

Vince recognized that because of his participation in improv comedy, he now can connect with his professors and has the ability to tap into his cognitive and writing skills. Felix also believes that participation in a college improv comedy team can develop his writing skills and affirms that there are games that even help support his writing:

Lot of times like I'll be writing a paper about something, and I'll just have a little bit of something like of a prompt to go off of for the paper and it's a lot easier for me to take that and see like all the different ways I can talk about it and kind of pick and choose what I want to do. Rather than I feel like some people sit down to write a paper, and they're like, I have no idea where to start, and so it's a really good way to kind of just get the ball rolling and stuff. And then like we have like certain games that are more about listening specifically, and we have games that are more about making big and bold decisions, and so they help in those ways.

In this selection, Felix paralleled writing to improv scenes where you get a suggestion, and you just have to go with the flow and start the process. It made the process of getting

started easier.

A few students who participated in the various improv comedy troupes affirmed that the games, exercises, and overall improv comedy experience impacted their ability to become a better writer and the writing process was easier for them. Building on the aforementioned academic skills, improv comedy helped to give them a starting point and more endurance; as well as the ability to comprehend their writing assignments more successfully.

### **Summary of Theme**

Improv comedy has an impact on the development of academic skills that will enhance the collegiate experience. Within academic skills, four key themes emerged: dropping knowledge, out of thin air, building bridges to new worlds, and creating from scratch. Throughout this section, those four themes will be briefly reviewed. It was revealed in this section that college student improvisers could learn and apply knowledge to new situations, retain and recall information, and improve their active listening skills. This connects to Bloom's taxonomy literature on the transferability of knowledge from one domain to another (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1956; Anderson, Krathwohl, & Bloom, 2001). This could include transferring behaviors, specific information, or abilities from area to another for improved results. The participants explained how improv comedy influenced their ability to drop knowledge. For example, Felix said that when you obtain new knowledge and "you've got to lock that away and remember it, and you've got to take it and apply it" to new situations.

Participants also discussed how improv comedy impacted their ability to remember key details. For instance, Wesley said his learning has advanced since

participating in improv. He is “better at picking up on details, much better. Very much so. I used to be a guy who very like heard something but didn’t really register.” The literature shows that improvisation is using what one already knows and applying it to new settings (Crossan & Sorrenti, 1997), and memory allows for humans to draw on their past experience to direct choices and actions (Shohamy & Wagner, 2008).

Interviewees also discussed how improv comedy enhanced their active listening skills. Lester shared that he was able “to listen and understand the first time and pull out key ideas. And that’s really all that improv is in the end, is just listening and making sure you know exactly what’s going on with your environment.” The literature demonstrates that listening is a critical component to improv comedy (Holmes & Qureshi, 2006), but there does not appear to be any literature demonstrating how improv comedy enhances colleges students active listening skills.

Involvement in improv comedy also helps students develop skills to think on the spot, generate ideas, and problem-solve quickly without any preparation. The interviewees discussed how they were able to think quickly without preparation as if the ideas came out of thin air. As aforementioned, improv comedy and creativity has affected participants’ cognition, mental ordering, and improvisation skills (Drinko, 2012) and intuition, cognitive, and emotional abilities (Lockford & Pelias, 2004). Participants reported an increase in their ability to think quickly as a result of participation in improv comedy. For example, both Rodney and Sharon said that participation in improv comedy helped them to think quickly and they were generally sharper.



College improv comedy teams develop students' ability to generate multiple ideas, solutions, or develop problem-solving abilities. This skill is demonstrated within improv comedy when participants develop numerous solutions, ideas, lists, and suggestions. This is connected to divergent thinking which is the ability to come up with multiple solutions for a problem (Foos & Boone, 2008). For instance, Dwayne said that participation developed his ability to think outside the box and "improv has helped me expand my mind and thinking." Participation in an improv troupe can also enhance one's problem-solving abilities. Involvement in theater arts programs can improve student's critical thinking, problem-solving, and reasoning skills (Kindelan, 2010) and improv may also improve some of those same skills. For instance, idea generation is connected to problem solving, however it is not just about an exhaustive list of solutions, but how improv impacts the way an individual solves a problem. As discussed by Bowden & Jung-Beeman (2007), the problem solver must abandon the traditional strategies to create new original methods to solve a problem because the traditional methods are becoming obsolete.

Being a part of a college improv college team can also help college students create connections or build bridges to new worlds. As earlier cited, Treffinger and Isaksen (2005) understood that creative thinking was about making and expressing meaningful new connections between various concepts. This ability to create connections was also evident within the study. Within improv comedy, participants must connect to unrelated concepts to map out a believable story. For example, Vince said that improv comedy helps create connections and "builds those bridges to kind of cut to the chase really quickly."

As members of an improv troupe, participants also discussed the impact that improv comedy had on their ability to be creative, experiment, and write. In particular, improv comedy develops the capability for creativity or being creating from scratch. While Limb and Bruan (2008) established the relationship between improv and creativity while they studied jazz musicians creating new melodies. This study suggests that there are many practical applications to foster the creativity of college students. For example, Laurel discussed how improvisational comedy is a path to be a creative artist without any required supplies like paintbrushes, software, and the wi-fi.

Involvement in improv comedy also helps participants to experiment. Within the pilot study, those participants also disclosed that their involvement in improv comedy also helped them to experience a smaller margin of error when trying new things. Within improv comedy, participants try new approaches and failure is acceptable. Felix affirmed this and indicated that failure was a part of the process and even encouraged growth as an improviser. Improv comedy can help participants develop writing skills. As discussed in Chapter II, improv comedy was used to improve the literacy of secondary students (Welsh, 2014). Participation in college improv comedy can also positively impact the participants' writing ability. It was revealed during the Kryptonians interview that their writing speed has increased and that their ability to understand context was broader since they started doing improv comedy.

Throughout this section, there were several examples of how improv comedy helped students develop academic skills: dropping knowledge, out of thin air, building bridges to new worlds, and creating from scratch are all skill sets from improv training that can be used in higher education. However, a critical lens must be applied to

demonstrate trustworthiness, and a negative case analysis will be reviewed in the following section.

### **Negative Case Analysis**

To build trustworthiness, a negative case analysis was applied to the examples highlighted above. After the coding analysis had been completed, the text was reviewed for any data that contradicted the supporting evidence. None of the examples provided by the participants contradicted that improv could help develop an individual's ability to gain knowledge in one context and apply it to another. There were also no examples of students who claimed that improv had not helped them think on the spot or create connections. Furthermore, there were no participants that declared improv detracted from development of their creative skills. However, there were some minimal examples of students who offered some conflicting statements. For example, Wesley shared that "As far as improv related to my schoolwork specifically, it hasn't helped me necessarily with doing engineering, no." However, he then shared that improv had helped him in his group work and in courses for general education requirements. Clark also shared that she did not "know necessarily if it's helped me be a better calculus student but, [laughs] but, yeah I'm sure, I'm sure it carries over. Definitely." However, she then offered no additional examples.

While Clark immediately shared that she did not know, it was clear that some of the participants had never thought critically about how improv impacted their specific academic experiences, and she adjusted her statement by the end of her sentence. Since doing improv comedy, Naomi has found it difficult to engage in academic courses where there were not opportunities to have an open discussion. There could be several reasons

for this, but one positive argument for this awakening could be that improv trains participants to be active learners in education, and when they cannot engage fully in learning, it can be more difficult. However, a few participants shared that when participating in classes where they have not been able to engage fully, improv has helped them be better listeners.

The following section will review how improv comedy influences social skills.

### **Theme 2: Social Skills**

One of the most critical components of any improv comedy scene is the relationship between the characters and how it is presented to the audience. While the identity of the characters is critical, the location can be central, and the conflict paramount...what is really interesting about watching improv comedy is the relationships that develop between the players. It was revealed through the interviews that improv comedy can train the participants on how to develop relationships between people both on and off stage. Eleven of the 12 interviewees indicated that improv comedy had a positive influence on their social skills. As discussed in Chapter two, improvisers develop social skills and it is by learning to be honest with the created characters that they achieve those goals (Bynane, 2008). This is especially critical for college students, as this is a time in their life when they get to develop their social skills, build lasting friendships, create community, enhance their communication skills, learn how to connect with each other, and trust one another (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Throughout this section, there will be a discussion of how specific social skills, including community, communication, connections, and trust, are enhanced by participating in improv comedy.

With the changing student demographics and the move towards building global citizenship on campus, there are benefits for those who can communicate with many different types of people. However, it is becoming harder to communicate with each other face-to-face with all the various technological barriers. A majority of the participants reported that improv comedy has helped build their social skills through various exercises, activities, and games. Vince indicated that while he was not the most social person, improv comedy made him more positive and reduced his social anxiety. He discussed that “you definitely get more involved, and a lot of people will know you. It definitely breaks, like it helps you branch out socially.”

Clark’s thoughts about social skills mimicked the attitudes of other members who also believe that doing improv can enhance one’s social skills. Clark shared that improv comedy “carries over a lot into our social lives and that we can, be in tune with our surroundings, our situations, look at our peers or our friends and kind of expect or, not expect, but be in tune with them.” Sharon also believes that improv comedy made her more confident in engaging with others socially. She indicated that “it’s helped my social skills, just making me more confident and like, yeah, it’s easy to make good interactions with people when you just like make them laugh and laugh with them.” Rodney also sees improv giving one the opportunity to learn about themselves, which in turn, helps them increase their social skills. He said that “I think the social element helps you learn a lot about yourself and about dealing with other people, which is obviously a huge part of a college experience or it should be, for everybody.” There are additional social benefits that apply directly to the classroom.

Many social applications come from participating in improv. Improv can even increase your social skills. Dwayne communicated, “improv itself does because it makes you value what everyone says to you. And people are like oh my god, I can talk to this person, they actually care, not knowing that I’m just “yes-and-ing” the entire time.”

Ralph indicated that he is even more confident when socializing with groups he does not know:

I think it's definitely made me a more sociable person. I used to like not want to go out. I used to not really go insert myself into social situations that I wasn't comfortable in, but now, I can. If someone says hey I'm going to go do this thing with a bunch of strangers you don't know do you want to come? I'll be like “that sounds amazing I totally want to do that.” I think it's made me just be open to saying “hi” to anybody, and just be open to new experiences that prior I would have said “no I'm going to stay in my room and watch TV.”

The piece above demonstrates how Ralph had changed socially since participating in improv comedy. By taking part in improv comedy, he was now more open to the world around him. The process of developing social skills through improv comedy happens over time and includes trial and error. When asked how improv comedy developed her social skills, Felicity pointed out:

It all goes back to learning social skills because I think, especially now with all the technology we have I see so many people, especially in my apartment building in the lounges you know just there on their phones or their computer and you know, it's nice to just talk with someone face-to-face and not through FaceTime or Skype or something. So its definitely a thing that I think I feel like it should be enforced for a lot of residence halls here. Like the first week of school they should have like a big group workshop of improv so you can get to know people in your hallway and communicate with them and just be social and not stick to your room all day.

In this section, Felicity affirmed that technology can hinder socialization and improv comedy has the potential to foster community. The impression that improv comedy helped with social skills was apparent in other areas beyond community building.

Lester found that improv helped him with his on-campus job where he has to talk to around 200-300 people a day. One of the members of the Kryptonians shared that it can even help with specific disciplines:

I'm a biology major so it's kind of like a really solo field and I'm kind of a loner, so I'm like I'll just whatever. But its really brought me out of my shell, so I'm like talking to my lab partners and I'm a lot more personable, and one of the rules in improv is like don't step back. So whenever there's like a big project, or like you know someone needs to do this in the lab, I'm like, okay! Fine, I'll do it. What's up? So I feel like it helps like stepping forward.

Social skills can be helpful when involved with the various communities that exist on a college campus and beyond. In the excerpt above, the member of the Kryptonians felt that participation in improv comedy had improved his social skill development in the classroom.

Involvement in improv comedy can also have an impact on other social skills at the university. As it relates to social skills, three key themes emerged: teamwork makes the dream work, a way with words, and hand in hand. Table 3 defines the social subthemes.

Table 3

*Social Subthemes*

Social Skills	Definitions
Teamwork makes the dream work	Creating community, relationships, and supporting others.
A way with words	Communicating with a broad range of individuals through a variety of mediums and be able to navigate these different audiences appropriately.
Hand in hand	Developing social aptitude, including the capacity to connect with people and read individuals.

### **Subtheme 1: Teamwork Makes the Dream Work**

There are countless programs, services, and professionals at universities who help to foster community involvement. As previously mentioned, there are connections between longform improv comedy and community, social, and cultural development (Fortier, 2008). Several of the participants and groups also spoke about the value that came with a community of being on a team. While the structures of the teams were very distinct, they each valued socializing with one another outside of the practices and performances. The groups mentioned that they do movie nights, game nights, social outings, and see improv shows together as a team. Several members also reported that this was a place where they developed strong friendships with one another and that they are better friends because they participate in improv.

Part of creating a community environment is breaking down barriers. Throughout the interviews, there was a shared feeling that the participants were not good enough or funny enough to be on the team. Eventually, something changed and the members realized this was untrue, and they were, in fact, a part of the community. One of the members of the Jokers shared that there was an “emphasis on the team, they aren’t competing against each other; they are playing together. That’s something that we have instilled that’s unique.” While it may be unique for improv, this was a shared sentiment by most of the participants from the three groups. For example, Ralph shared that improv comedy has been an “amazing experience just because it, the, the community here is so positive and so welcoming and concerned with everybody, making sure everybody feels included and making sure everyone is building to their strengths and building with each other.” Dwayne echoed those sentiments and shared



that “it's more interacting with someone on stage and making the audience laugh based on your interaction, and that's fun to me, like the collaborative atmosphere and the just, joy, of performing on stage.”

The participants believed that community and team building skills could be transferable to campus life. Felicity wished that there was more community development on campus and improv comedy could be used to bring individuals together. Rodney agreed and shared that improv is “valuable as a team-building exercise, if you have a group, any group, it will help you just connect and come together and learn...help you appreciate the different ways that people think within your group.” Improv comedy builds strong communities with many different perspectives along with strong teams that can accomplish great feats. For Naomi, she was able to draw on a famous actor and make connections to how improv contributed to building a positive community:

There's a quote; Bill Murray has a quote, what was it... “Improv is the best teamwork since building the pyramids” or something like that, so it's like that kind of thing, we're all in this together, and it really helps you to like, bond. It's a group, like all the people that are on this e-board, we've done improv together like crazy and we're good good friends now, and we're good buddies and whenever we're discussing things we respect each others opinions and that kind of stuff, and that's all.

Naomi's perspective suggests that improv comedy can help people work through challenging tasks and also can help those teams work through differences, even if they have completely different opinions on topics.

Many of the participants also spoke on the value of making sure everyone was included. The Jokers were intentional in ensuring that everyone feels included. In fact, they structure their practices and performances around the idea that everyone will get to

play with everyone over the course of the academic year. A member of the Jokers shared that:

We wanted everyone to make sure going forward, that we wanted it to not be cliquy. We wanted the groups to be mixed up and not be with the same person every time which in the past happened a lot. I know, spring semester Susan and I, were like on a team every other show. So we definitely wanted people to be mixed up, so you get comfortable with everyone, not just with a certain group of people.

With a large number of participants, the Jokers' team structure required the participants to change teams every week, so there were no factions that were developed. However, with the Arrows and Kryptonian groups, while it was critical for everyone to be included, cliques did not appear to be a concern among members. It was also a priority for the groups to have strong relationships with the team members.

As indicated earlier, improv comedy scenes include both character and relationship development (Lockford & Pelias, 2004). These relationships used in improv comedy scenes move beyond siblings, friends, and family, but include complex relationships between people with real issues. Lester shared that in some cases, "You're just two people coming on stage, and you've already existed for 30 years, and people are just seeing you now, but as you invent that on the go." Vince agreed and said that you need to "be invested or to be interested in what your scene partner does, and everything that your scene partner does is the most wonderful thing, that you've ever seen or ever done, and when you're really invested in it." In addition to being interested and invested, the relationships are grounded in care for others. One of the members of the Arrows spoke on the value of loving their teammates, and once one supported their teammate in this way (i.e. opened up, vulnerable, support, get to know them), the more powerful

relationships they had with one another. They shared that “Love off-stage means love on-stage. That’s something that we’ve been told, like we, we’ve been told that it’s so evident that, we just like, truly enjoy, really revel in each other’s presence, which is really, a pretty awesome compliment.”

During the interview with the Arrows, one member indicated that once you have a relationship with someone, there is not an end goal, and “you don’t stop growing and learning about yourself and each other, it like it just continues on, and everybody just keeps getting closer and getting better and they keep finding new things they’re good at.”

Rodney shared that knowing your teammates will also help them play better:

...because it’s really great to have that kind of, relationship with somebody you know, you can learn from, you think you have something to offer them, and when you perform together, you can just, look them in the eye and know that they have your back and everything. It’s really amazing.

For Rodney, having a relationship with a fellow player meant they could connect with each other and play better than before. However, relationships come with many issues and require players to use their improv skills to address issues off stage. Dwayne shared that when having troubles in relationships he uses “yes, and” which helps:

If you yes-and it, you can get a little bit deeper to what they’re saying, and I think it helps. it’s helped me understand that not all people are terrible, that not all people have bad intent or anything like that, it’s just that no one ever lets them talk or hear what they have to say, and the more that you can yes-and and get to the root of what it is...

The passage above shows how Dwayne uses improv comedy skills to engage when he has had troubles with another individual. He is able to suspend judgment until he can get to the root of an issue and be sure that he has a full understanding so he can make an informed decision.

While members can learn to work through challenging issues and grow together, teams do evolve. Teams must naturally grow and change their structure. In some cases, some members graduate or simply cannot be on the team anymore. One of the members of the Arrows spoke about these changes:

The hardest part is not when you come into the team; it's building that extremely great relationship with someone, finding these fun gifts that you pull out of each other every time you're on stage. Like, I feel like with each person on this team there's something that we do together on stage, no matter what the character is, there's some kind of behavior that we have, and we know it plays very well together, and we know how to play well with that. The hardest time is losing someone at the end of the year and having to start over with a whole new cast of people, well, two new people, and do it again.

Part of being in a relationship is learning to move beyond yourself and support others. An example of the deep and complex relationship was illustrated in this scene where the two players from the Arrows were exploring their long and complex history. Their relationship included many unresolved issues about their true feelings, jealousy, missed opportunities, regret, and anger. This video clip shows the progression of their relationship (Stewart, 2016f). However, all of these relationships whether they are contentious or amicable, require support.

Nearly all the participants within the group and individual interviews identified that support was critical to community, scene work, and relationships developing in improv. Players need to feel supported to take greater risks. Likewise, in the classroom, students need to be supported to take on greater academic challenges. Ralph offered his opinion on support and indicated that "improv just means support and, being okay with not knowing, and knowing that you aren't alone in anything." Felicity indicated that there was an "open arms" approach compared to other communities she was involved with.

She shared that the “theater world and, you know, they, judge you on your look and, how you present yourself and like, what’s your training? And stuff like that and improv, it's just, come in, whether you’ve had experience or not, we’ll take ya.” Where as within improv comedy, everyone is accepted and given a chance to play with each other on an equal playing field.

For some, being on their college improv team was the most supportive environment that they had ever been in. Rodney bluntly shared that “We support the shit out of each other, everything we do. We’re really just able to connect and, you know, we all are so in tune with each other and the way that we think.” For several players, support seemed to be a requirement of being a part of the team. During the performances, I observed that if the players did not support each other, the scenes did not connect, the relationships were choppy, and the conflict never was addressed. Another member of the Arrows also stated that you must “support your partner if you want to make people laugh...that’ll bring you closer because it just kind of forces you to support them because otherwise you’re not going to be funny, and you’re going to be uncomfortable up there.” However, these participants strive to help each other in remarkable ways. Lester shared that “it's really a great support structure that makes you feel safe to do whatever you want to do, and try, and it makes you feel great about yourself...it makes you feel loved no matter what.”

Support can also be applied in different ways throughout improv. As discussed, for most, it is feeling safe to take on stage. For others, it means taking on different types of improv comedy. For example, improvised songs can be very uncomfortable for some players. Wesley offered a great example of an exercise that demonstrated support:

A game that's good for supporting, that we practice for supporting is called hot spot. What it is, is we all get in a circle, and someone will start singing. And the moment you get inspired you tap them out, and you sing a song. It can be a song that's related, it can be a song you just thought of, but it shows, but the thing that's important to look out for is while you're all standing on the outside looking at this person on the inside and when, if it feels like they're floundering or they kind of look like they want to get out, you help them relieve some of the stress and weight on them and then you come in, and you take over and then hopefully someone else will come back you up as well...I think it's a game to show how to support someone and how to recognize when someone might need help with something. I think because it's a game that promotes not being afraid to take leadership in something and throw your ideas out there because someone will be there to back you up. You know. That's the point of the game, it's not necessarily to be the guy in the middle, if anything it's to be the people on the outside and to make sure you keep supporting so that when someone needs help, you can come in and take it, which is very important, social skill.

The support that the team members give each other does not end with the boundaries of the stage. They also support each other in their personal lives. It is almost as if they become their own family. Rodney said that he feels his involvement on the team has "given me like a real support group, we're really a family at the end of the day, we're all brothers and sisters, and it's, it's really amazing how much we love each other on and off the stage." Some of the members also support each other's families too. Lester shared that they were happy to raise money for a fellow teammate's sister who had cancer and needed help to offset the costs of treatment through fundraising.

The support provided by the team also extended to personal challenges that individuals had been experiencing. Lester and Clark shared that they were confident they were not going to stay enrolled on their college campus all four years, but since they found the Arrows they knew they were going to be able to continue with their education at Quill University. A member of the Jokers also shared that they strived for a community type atmosphere, and if you do not work towards this feeling, team members can feel

disenfranchised. This year the Jokers have been “making sure we were really supportive and that were a really tight-knit community for everyone. We wanted to make sure everyone felt welcomed, and I think that is translated, and everyone has gotten closer.”

Between the groups, there are similarities between Sanford’s (1962, 1966) challenge and support, and the interactions that happen between the players. Some of the players also feel that they can be supported when they are personally struggling or frustrated. A member of the Arrows discussed how they practice challenging and supporting each other:

We will always have their back, always. Like we would never ever intentionally leave someone to drown on stage, but it's also on them to like, believe the process and jump in and dive in and go on these amazing journeys with us and do what they can, to kind of find their voice. Does that make sense? So, by not stopping, by not taking steps back, we don't hold their hands, but it's always from a place of love.

The selected passage above shared by a member of the Arrows shows that the team believes in one another and allows other members struggle, but never fails to discover new ideas, scenes, and characters. A member of the Kryptonians also agreed with never leaving a team member to struggle without any support. Within improv, this can be applied by using “yes, and.” This Kryptonian member shared:

The first rule of improv is yes, and so anytime anybody makes a choice, you agree with them and then add more, so it's easy to do stuff. So, after you've been doing that for a long time, somebody initiating a new scene, the first instinct is just to go with it. It's actually really hard to leave somebody out at this point, like if you see something that needs work, or I'll see someone alone on the stage clearly like looking around for a scene partner, it's just the first thing you do. You walk out and you try to help them create a fun scene.

This quotation shows that after a time if a player does not support another, something feels wrong. To “yes, and” another teammate is to support someone in a significantly

different way compared to other support groups. For example, when challenges or suggestions are offered in other groups, these ideas can be denied, challenged, or even simply affirmed. However, if you do “yes, and”, with your improv team, you get to build upon something together and with that building creates endless possibilities.

The *teamwork makes the dream work* subtheme discussed how participants involvement in improv impacted their ability to develop supportive communities. Being a part of the community and learning how to help one another can have a significant impact on one’s experience. Learning to communicate with those in your community is also vital to being in relationships with others. The next piece will explore how involvement in improv comedy influences communication skills.

### **Subtheme 2: A Way with Words**

As much as finding a community is critical to the success of college students, one must be able to communicate with a broad range of individuals through a variety of mediums and be able to navigate these different audiences appropriately. As shared earlier, many students are used to communicating in an online world. Too much time spent online might leave students with missed opportunities to fully develop their face-to-face communication skills, conversational skills, and public speaking skills. Throughout this subsection, I will review what the individuals and groups had reported about communication skills, conversations, and public speaking learned from participation in improv comedy.

Certain college classes may require students to transfer ideas from conception to reality. For this to happen, students must engage with their peers, professors, businesses, government officials, community members, and through networking



opportunities with other professionals. Improvisers must also quickly articulate ideas promptly and efficiently to numerous audiences. One example of how teams prepare to do this is the exercise “three-line scene.” Within this game, the players must define the relationship, location, and conflict within three lines of dialogue. Improv teams are also given direct feedback from an audience. If an audience is not laughing, an improv team has to adjust their content and communication strategies. Likewise, college students will also need to adjust their communication strategy to share ideas in the classroom.

As discussed earlier in great length, listening is a critical part of creating a great scene so you can pick up on details and add to the story. Active listening to others also pertains to communication skills as improvisers must learn to listen not just with their ears but their heart as well. Ralph shared that improv has taught him the “difference between hearing someone and listening to someone because often times as people we just hear what people are saying, but we don’t really take the time to digest that and empathize with that person.” Improvisers must be able to engage and understand what is going on so they can make informed decisions about how to respond. Naomi learned the value of actually listening and applying active listening within her personal life:

Listening is a huge thing I’ve always heard so much about listening, about how like, the analogy I’ve always heard is like, so if a sentence is an arm, a lot of the time humans will listen to about right here [*pointing to her elbow*]. So if like, your spouse or whoever comes home and says I was going to pick up the milk, and you stop listening right here, but there wasn’t any then you’ve missed the most important part of that sentence. So, after I learned that and after I’d thought about that and how we’d just tune each other out sometimes it was my mission to really listen to people...improv where you have to learn to listen to the entire thing because its information for you and that just kind of translated into real life for me personally.

Improv trains individuals to be present in the moment because they are actively listening. The excerpt above shows that for Naomi, improv comedy helps one listen to other people, but also not miss out on life's greatest moments, even when listening can be difficult for some people.

After you learn to listen to others, this can help you focus on the central theme of the issue. It can be difficult to determine what the real problem is, but it can also be challenging to articulate as well. Lester shared that improv comedy games and exercises help you improve communication skills by “finding exactly the meat of what you’re trying to say. Like, before improv you have a lot of small talk and you can talk about whatever you want, but really it helps you single in on subjects.” With many of these skills, they are working together in tandem. Wesley also believes that improv can significantly help with communication skills. For example, while reflecting upon longform, he indicated that longform gets you thinking about opportunities “and remember details and call back to things like that and I think it’s a very useful skill, and I think that many people should have that because that would just, that would help communication 10-fold.”

Improv can also instruct participants how to cultivate their communication skills. Felicity echoes those sentiments and shares that improv “teaches communication skills and it teaches being there for everyone, you know, realizing that you’re not alone in this, that you can, you know do something with everyone else in your department and collaborate.” Laurel has found improv comedy to help her with informal communication skills. She said that “luckily with improv I’m able to be like a little more casual, like from that, at least, I hope so, but, it’s definitely, hard to talk to people sometimes. But. You just

gotta do it because networking is everything.” Improv helps you get to the core issues of what you are trying to communicate because you do not have much time on stage and feel the need to be more direct. Naomi offered an example of how to be more direct:

I’ve learned recently with improv, if you ever say the words, if you’re doing longform improv I guess, if you ever say the words like we should blank, you should stop what you are doing. That is not what improv is about, that’s not what that scene should be about, it should be about the two people in the scene and so I realize that in life, that’s the same thing, as if you’re constantly looking for like something else to do. Like focus in on what you’re doing right there with this person that’s in front of you, so that was one lesson that I had to write down last night that I know means that, to improv now, means that to me for improv.

This passage demonstrates that for Naomi, improv comedy teaches you how to live in the moment and not just talk about what you are going to do or not feel like you have to do something a specific way.

As so much of improv focuses on the participants having thoughtful dialogue, it was refreshing to hear how the players articulated how they see that improv comedy was influencing their conversational skills. Felix shared that he was thankful and “glad that I have improv as a background because it just makes me like more comfortable talking to people without worrying what I’m going to say.” Not only does improv help reduce anxiety for many; it also can help individuals be an excellent conversationalist off stage with others. A member of the Jokers shared the impact that improv can have, and the more a person improvises “the better conversations they have because they know how to carry on a conversation because they are progressing it and they are pulling in ideas, they are thinking bigger.” A key aspect of improvisational comedy is adding to the conversation compared just responding.

Improv comedy can be helpful with speaking with those you are unfamiliar with, but can also deepen relationships with friends and family. Laurel indicated that it would help in having difficult conversations with her family. She said, "I'm a comedian and because I'm very open with talking about subjects that it has like given them an opening gateway to talk about issues like in our family that we haven't talked about." Rodney acknowledged that since engaging in improv comedy, he was able to have conversations with groups of people that he did not typically connect with:

One thing that I've always been proud of with myself socially is that I don't have to, you know, really connect with somebody in order to sit down and have a conversation with them and it to not be an empty waste of time, you know. You know, we don't have to be on the same, on the exact, you know, same page. We don't have to be similar people at all. I mean, there were a lot of guys at my high school that I didn't even necessarily like that much, but we just got along really well because I was able to talk to them. But, improv has really fed into that, like I said, I always have something to say, I always can keep the conversation moving, and, I can, I feel like I can talk about anything with anybody, if anybody wants to go as weird, or out there as possible, I can go to those lengths, or I can keep it intelligent and clean, hopefully.

This selection shows that improv can provide one with the skills to connect on many levels with many diverse individuals that are different even if you do not have anything in common.

Improv can also help in the classroom as well through group projects and public speaking. Participants work with groups to accomplish the goals of their improv team through structured approaches. Participants also need to speak clearly and directly to audiences of various sizes. Most of the participants also recognized that improv had a positive impact on their ability to work on group projects and increased their public speaking skills. For example, Felicity shared that there were opportunities within specific classes:

Communicating with your fellow classmates, a lot of, especially my biology classes we all go in and we kinda, you know a lot of people don't really talk to one another. We kind of just sit there and do our own work, so I think improv can really help break that and help you communicate with everyone especially if there's like a project, or you're in like a lab, because you gotta communicate with them in order to get your lab assignment done and yeah. A lot of, I think it teaches a lot of social, or it can teach a lot of social things, for classes like biology or even math classes and other academic type classes.

This quotation displays how improv comedy can train one to connect in a variety of settings, even if they have not been a strong communicator in the past. Improv also helps you draw others in, even if the setting is challenging. Wesley spoke of the value that improv comedy can have on classwork and communicating with your peers:

I remember my freshman year I was in this Psych 100 class that I absolutely hated, not because I didn't like the subject material but between you and me the teacher had no idea what she was doing, you know, we had these days where team exercises, I can't even remember what they were called but we would all work in a group on these questions, and we talked about psychology and which answer is the right answer and it always seemed like there was more than one right answer. Which is fine, but you know, discussing together and realizing where people are coming from when they say "I think it's this because this." It isn't something that I necessarily struggled with in the first place, but I'm a lot better at now. I'm better at saying "What do you think?" or actively making sure I include people... you know how when you're in high school, and you're in those group projects, and there's that one person who doesn't talk... and you're just like ugh, this person isn't pulling their weight... I'm better at like trying to put them into the situation in a way that's both comfortable to them and we can get some information out of them so we can come to a final conclusion...

Improv comedy gives participants the opportunity to communicate ideas, themes, relationships, conflicts, songs, and so many concepts through a variety of mediums. For example, I observed that each team had one or two members serve as host by welcoming the audience and closing out the show. The participants have to interact with the audience to get suggestions and be able to speak audibly enough for an entire auditorium to hear what the players are saying. There are also applications for professional settings. Clark

could see that improv comedy helps with her interview skills and “presentations and stuff, it's given me, not really shy but, helped to solidify the...you know being a good presenter and having a presence.” Improv also provides participants the opportunity to develop different personas that will be helpful for communication. Ralph spoke on how improv comedy gives you the ability to sharpen your “personable demeanor and being able to give like presentations or facilitate and lead groups and meetings because it does give you that kind of leadership skills you need to kind of take some of that on.”

There are also opportunities to move past anxiety or worry, by exemplifying confident personas. Naomi shared that even if you are nervous, you can embody a character that knows what they are doing and “pretend like you're confident, act like a character almost that knows what they're talking about, really helps with presentations.”

Dwayne, Felix, and Vince also all agree that improv comedy can help with public speaking in the classroom. A member of the Kryptonians contributed to illuminating how improv can further develop public speaking skills:

I'm a graphic design major and a lot of what we do is critiques. Like we will have our iteration of whatever we're working on at the time and everyone will talk about it and I noticed the people who, because there's, I do improv there so, I noticed that improv skills really help with presentations, because you can make things feel really loose and unpracticed but also really engaging because you know how to deal with an audience and give them certain things and keep it entertaining while, even if you have no idea what you're doing, you can be relatable because you play all these characters who are just humans all the time. And its' like yeah, I didn't really do anything but yeah how are you guys doing? Obviously not like that, I can't make stuff up on the spot.

This quotation shows that improv can go beyond just helping you think on the spot, but helps one communicate their thoughts, even if they are not fully formed yet. Rodney believes that improv comedy could easily double as a public speaking class and was

easily able to articulate its value. Rodney shared:

Improv helped me just, get more comfortable as a public speaker. Getting up in front of people every week, and really, just kind of gets you used to you know, really having presentations in my classes have gotten so much easier since I've ya know, really had my stride with this. Because it just, you know makes you so much more comfortable being in front of people and you know, even if you don't, even if you feel like you don't know exactly what to say, you'll be able to you know, kind of find a new train of thought, and kind of come up with something valid to say in that situation.

As illustrated above, involvement in an improv comedy troupe can influence how one feels more comfortable communicating with diverse audiences, peers, and groups.

The way with words subtheme reviewed how improv develops participant's social skills.

Part of this skill set is enhanced by one's capacity to connect with another person or group. The following section will review how improv comedy enhances a participant's ability to create meaningful connections with others.

### **Subtheme 3: Hand in Hand**

Another skill to further develop social aptitude includes the capacity to connect with people and read individuals non-verbal body language. While there are connections between communication and relationships skills, to "read" another person is to be perceptive about others feelings, understand body language, and anticipate where a person is going in a conversation. As previously discussed, improvisers must be able to completely be aware of their teammate while understanding their actions (Baumer & Magerko, 2009). This awareness includes being able to fully support and read their teammates' actions. The interviewees shared in several instances the value of connecting with others. Whether the participants had a relationship or did not have a relationship with individuals, a large number of the participants recognized the significance that

improv comedy had on their aptitude to connect with others. They also shared how improv comedy helped them read others. These skills are paramount in higher education, as students in any profession will need to be able to connect with individuals on different levels but also, be able to read others and gain a stronger context for situations.

The interviewees believed that improv helped them to make instant connections with individuals they do not know. Rodney believed that “so much about being in college is connecting with people and learning how to survive out on your own. And deal with people on your own, and you know, improv helps build those skills and that kind of thinking.” Improv develops your confidence to connect with many types of people in many situations. Sharon said that “it’s helped my social skills, just making me more confident and like, yeah, it’s easy to make good interactions with people when you just like make them laugh and laugh with them.”

It appears that for most of the improvisers, they could connect with almost anyone very quickly. Lester communicated that improv “just helps in a general sense, meeting new people and immediately having to find connections with them, it helps you to find those connections immediately.” Participation in improv comedy can also help relieve social tension. Felix shared that it was helpful “especially like getting to know people and breaking the ice and breaking the tension and because it is such a kind of community building activity, improvising I think it's really great for that kind of thing.” Improv comedy also helps those who are not naturally social or equipped with the basic social skills. Wesley was particularly helpful in providing a strategy by listening first:

I don't usually talk about my own interests until I like really know somebody, and then I won't stop or shut up about them. But I feel like, hopefully, people see me as someone who is caring, kind, like I said I try to show people my



character, and they can take it or leave it basically. If they like it, cool, we can hang out and talk more.

This can also be achieved by groups or individuals that you do not know, but it takes more than just active listening skills. Improv comedy helps you to read situations and understand the person you are with by both listening and observing. A member of the Arrows shared that this is:

being able to think on your feet as well as being able to connect with a group of people that you might have nothing in common with, besides, one shared interest, is so applicable to like, every aspect of life. Just to be able to go into any room, be able to kind of identify who's in there, be able to know their quirks, just kind of know kind of where their mindset is, just by body language and kind of by the way they talk to you and that sort of thing, is kind of absolutely applicable, to be able to read people, as well as just being quick and stuff like that.

There are opportunities to apply these skills in more formal settings. For example,

Rodney shared this could be applicable in group projects as well:

working on group projects, it's so so much easier because I know how to kind of, you know, take a moment, and connect with somebody, just like kind of see how they're thinking. Improv really does give you that skill, when you're on stage with somebody you have to really take a second, look into their eyes and, kind of see what direction they want to head in.

Rodney's account shows that improv can help someone read another person, the situation, and work towards the end goal, even if you do not know what that end goal might be. For those that participate in improv comedy, they can connect and play well with other improvisers, even if they have never met them. Felix also shared his experience with connecting to the larger improv community:

So much improv here around the city that and there's so many jams you can go to and opportunities you have to play with people who are complete strangers that you even get used to you know, connecting with these strangers and putting your trust into strangers and in the same way that you do with people that you've improvised with 100 times. You kind of just gotta find that place where you're, and it takes awhile, but people get there to where they can put that trust in

somebody who they've never met before and do some great improv with it. And then, by the time you're done with that set, you shake their hand, and you say "hey, I'm Felix. Who are you?"

Connecting with others also extends to those on your particular team. Clark appreciates how improv connected her with her teammates on a friendship level and shared that "just, simply, for us on the team, it's helped with the social aspect and it's given us those friends and connected us to each other." Connections between others also appear to transfer beyond the stage. Felix indicated that these connections also stick with you and "not only are you going to like take that like in your own life but also that group of people you've connected with, anybody that you improvise with I feel like you really form a special connection to." These special connections stay with the members and follow them off the stage into their personal lives as they develop more close interpersonal relationships with each other. There is also the value of working with teams over an extended time period. Naomi said, "the more I improvise with people, the more I enjoy them or understand them I feel like and the more I improvise with people I don't know, the more I understand me."

Each of the groups had a desire to connect with each other before they went on stage. I observed that all the team members did some warm-up activity before they went on stage and this is where they began to establish connections with each other. The Arrows offered a thorough description of this process:

So we'll go backstage at, today we played games like "Big Booty", "Bippity Bippity Bop", "Single Dad." We played, this new rhyme game that we learned. Basically the idea is that there's a few main goals to get a group mind, to get us all on the same page, to have us finish each others sentences to kind of get on the same wavelength, to build energy, you know. No matter what we have going on throughout the day, this is our moment to connect with each other throughout the day, so that anything we bring out here is uniform, and it's also just to have a good

time, you know. We're in the same mindset, we're getting hyped up, but also, we're happy, you know. We're practicing our skills, like rhyming, being on time, being quick with everything, everything that we've kind of practiced week by week.

Making connections with your team helps the players be in harmony with one another and put on a high caliber performance. If connections are not made, it can cause challenges, and this does happen from time to time. Felix shared that "when I'm on stage, and I don't listen to people it doesn't work, you might make that connection like oh, when I'm working on a group project, and I don't listen to people it doesn't work." There are times when several members of the team are not connecting, and it can have adverse effects on the performance. As discussed earlier, a Kryptonians member was reflecting on this disconnect and shared that he is aware that it is happening, and finds it difficult to leave a player on stage struggling by themselves. That example indicates that there is a realness and backstory to the relationships and characters that are created. When someone is struggling, fellow players want to help the person out.

There are many types of connections made between the players. Wesley shared that "whenever you come on with a character or person, the difference between a caricature and a character is that a character has depth." Wesley's comment would suggest that the connections made between players are on a deeper level than just mere words. This connects to dropping knowledge as the players do not want to portray characters through negative stereotypes.

During one of the performances, the performers were performing complex tasks seamlessly without ever preparing for that scene. For example, those complex tasks could include dancing, rhyming, limiting the number of words they have to speak with, or

speaking a brand new language altogether. Dwayne offered some insight on this phenomenon:

It's being able to detect what a set needs but also understand the people that you're operating with. Again, the collaborative atmosphere that I like so much, I know, I know Tommy on my team has this sense of humor, or, typically initiates a scene this way, right? And so, it's almost like you know what he's thinking before the audience does. You're like, that much further ahead than the audience, but there's no script, so there's just this weird, like, cognitive connect that's interesting.

The ability to connect with others could also be fostered by the ability to read one another. Several of the participants had shared that within improv scenes you needed to be able to read the body language of other players, watch their eyes, and connect with them on another level to play better. Naomi said that when it comes to social aptitude, you must be able “to pick up on what people are doing so like the body language that they're giving you, which is something that is huge in improv because you're picking up on how that person feels about you in the scene.” Ralph suggests that you have to be observant and constantly “monitoring and learning human behavior and learning our behavior and like, learning those little non-verbal cues of someone is something that I think helps.”

While some of the players describe a special connection made between each other, in some cases, it is just learning to pick up on basic body language skills. Felicity shared that you need to be physically looking at your other players and “make eye contact, to let your partner know in the scene that I'm talking to you, I'm trying to communicate with you because you never, you know, what to be looking around... it's like what are you doing?” Improv games and exercises can teach participants how to improve reading people. Vince affirms this and suggests:

Like how you, how you convey your emotions to people is really important, body language is really important. And body language can be taught in improv, like if I'm standing like cold-shouldering someone, it's like a very very clear indication of body language. And you kind of practice that during improv if you want to have a good scene.

The example provided by Vince shows that improv helps you to be more direct with your body language while constantly looking for your partner to read their body language.

This skill can be transferable to most settings and can even help read people, read situations, and identify key characteristics of people you have never met. A member of Arrows shared that after doing improv, improvisers will:

be able to go into any room, be able to kind of identify who's in there, be able to know their quirks, just kind of know kind of where their mindset is, just by body language and kind of by the way they talk to you and that sort of thing, is kind of absolutely applicable, to be able to read people, as well as just being quick and stuff like that.

The ability to communicate and understand others was also demonstrated in the performances by a few different teams who were dancing and singing together or moving in unison without pre-planning. The particular players were reading each other and coordinating their various actions. For example, during the Arrows performance, the following scene shows the players working on a class project that was assigned by the teacher (Stewart, 2016g). Three of the players announced that they were ready to present their class project, and their class project included a choreographed song and dance. However the participants had never prepared for that song and dance. In another scene portrayed by a Jokers Team, three players were participating in some sort of mediation class (Stewart, 2016h). The participants were coordinating spiritual body movements in perfect harmony without ever rehearsing. Each example shows the participants reading their fellow players and creating seamless and choreographed movements as one without

ever practicing.

The participants also shared that reading people required something more than just reading body language and listening to your fellow players. It required a high degree of skill in understanding others. Several interviewees stated that listening was all about understanding and appreciating another's story. If one were able to understand their story, this could help one be a better improviser. This also plays into how an improviser reads the audience. Rodney shared that after improvising for a while you will be able to gauge what is "funny and what isn't, or, what boundaries are okay to cross and which ones you should stay away from, but yeah, just seeing what makes people laugh, just seeing how different audiences react when you go to different places."

Some of the players spoke about the power of caring about your fellow players. This was evident in almost every conversation. The participants indicated that when it came to improv, the show never revolved around one person, but was about lifting each other up. Vince believes that you must really care about your scene partner. He shared that:

...to be curious in improv is to be invested or to be interested in what your scene partner does, and everything that your scene partner does is the most wonderful thing that you've ever seen or ever done. And when you're really invested in it, the audience is going to believe you, your partner is going to believe you, and most importantly, you're going to believe it and once you believe it, like, there's no stopping it. Like you're living that character, you're living that scene.

The practice of really caring about other individuals stays with you and can be applied other to individuals outside of the improv community. Naomi had shared that she was not able to only work with her teammates more effectively, but people in general:

I have been able to handle people so much better because I realize everyone is the way they are for a reason which I learned from improv because as you explore a character, you have to explore why they're walking the way they're walking, why they're talking the way they're talking the way they're talking to this person, why, what happened to them and justify it and so the same with improv in the real world to me.

In the quotation above, Naomi appears to be seeking to understand first and then be understood. By understanding the other person, it appears to make the scene more real for Naomi. Rodney also believes that you must not only strive for understanding but also be aware of what other people think:

You have to be very conscious of the way that people think, and when you take that outside of the context of performance, that skill is very helpful, because it just helps you learn how, you know. In a group project, your partner could come up with ideas, how do they think? What makes them tick? How are they going to respond to this kind of pressure, or this kind of scenario, and how do you balance yourself against that? And that's, you know, that's really, that's pretty incredible to me.

As discussed above, involvement in their college improv comedy troupe enhanced the participant's capacity to connect with another and read another person. Again, by understanding another person first, the participants can move beyond just responding, but connect with others. The hand in hand subtheme discussed how connecting with different individuals can provide social capital to a person's life, especially if the participants have social anxiety. College students spend a good amount time connecting with their peers, but also require opportunities to explore who they are as individuals.

### **Summary of Theme**

Improv comedy has an impact on the development of social skills that will enhance the collegiate experience and a student's life after. Within social skills, three key subthemes surfaced which include: teamwork makes the dream work, a way with

words, and hand in hand. Throughout this section, those three subthemes will be briefly reviewed. It was revealed that those who participated in improv comedy had improved their ability to build community, relationships with each other, and realized how to support one another on a deeper level. The participants explained how improv comedy influenced their ability to build community or how improv makes *teamwork makes the dream work*. As discussed in the literature, there are connections between longform improv comedy and how community could be formed between players and the audience (Fortier, 2008). Fortier's study affirmed how the community was developed between improvisers. Ralph acknowledged how his social life changed since he started doing improv comedy. He indicated that he spent less time watching TV and was now more comfortable interacting with people and even groups he did not know.

Involvement in an improv comedy team also enhanced participants' relationship building skills. Within improv comedy, there are hundreds of different types of relationships that are explored throughout the different scenes. As reviewed in the literature, improv comedy scenes include both characters and relationship development (Lockford & Pelias, 2004). As mentioned earlier in the group interview with the Arrows, a member explained the value of caring for their teammates and if you "truly enjoy, really revel in each other's presence," the team will perform better. Participating in improv comedy has also enhanced the interviewee's ability to support one another. Felicity indicated that compared to other groups she had been involved with, her involvement with her college improv team was a supportive non-judgmental community, that also challenged her in a positive way. As mentioned in the literature, this is similar to Sanford's (1962, 1966) challenge and support because these



communities foster an atmosphere of unity, trust, growth, and inclusion.

Improv comedy also improves participants' communication skills or their way with words. The participants seemed to be able to listen, respond, and add to the story by really engaging with another and using "yes, and." The literature shows that improv comedy can be used as a communication tool for resolving issues (Arterburn, 2012) such as using improvisation to resolve group dynamics in the business world. The participants in this study also discussed that improv could help communicate different messages through a variety of methods. Participation in improv also helps people learn to speak clearly and directly to others. For example, Lester shared that since doing improv, he was able to get to the heart of what he was trying to say more easily than before doing improv comedy.

The hand in hand subtheme explored how the participants make meaningful connections with their teammates, friends, and strangers, along with being able to read one another's non-verbal cues. It was previously established in the literature that improvisers must be able to be totally conscious of their teammates while understanding their actions (Baumer & Magerko, 2009). By participating in improv comedy, participants were able to improve their social connections with others. This process involved really understanding another person. For example, Rodney shared that "you have to be very conscious of the way that people think and when you take that outside of the context of performance," you can really develop strong social connections with others.

To conclude this section and to further demonstrate trustworthiness, a negative case analysis will be discussed below.

### **Negative Case Analysis**

Overall, it was evident from all the participants that improv comedy had a positive influence on their social skill development, how they created community, communicated with others, and built connections with others. One of the strongest arguments that could be used in a negative case analysis is that several of the participants wondered if they were good enough or had enough skills to be a part of this community. However, there were no examples of any point where anyone was ridiculed, and they all felt supported when they were new members of the team. No one ever mentioned being hazed or initiated onto the team. Additionally, the feeling of not being worthy of the team was a self-described temporary feeling that they eventually all abandoned. Another contradiction to building general social skills was Laurel's comment about closing yourself off to others. Laurel shared that in some cases "it does get kind of like, cliquey within the improv community." This does not mean that improvisers only build community with improvisers, but they are drawn to each other.

In the following section, the connection between involvement in improv comedy and identity development and exploration will be examined.

### **Theme 3: Identity Development and Exploration**

The college student experience directly impacts identity development (Astin, 1999). This journey is an ongoing process and starts before students arrive and will continue after they leave. Identity is also created when individuals improvise elements of their identity such as their gender, race, or individuality through challenging and conflicting social worlds (Holland et al., 2001; Rudd, 2012). As the participants shared their experiences, several examples demonstrated the impact that improv comedy had on

their identity development. Improv comedy helped 10 of the 12 participants to understand themselves better, develop and create characters that they portrayed, and helped students find their voice. Participating in improv comedy also helped students develop the confidence to believe in themselves as well as better be able to express themselves. Improv comedy also shaped how students gained other perspectives about ideas, values, and viewpoints and developed empathy. Finally, improv comedy helped participants develop increased cultural competence meaning they were able to learn about different cultural traditions, values, and customs. Throughout this section, the major subthemes will be explored.

It is also important to recognize that while there were a few examples where students explicitly stated that that improv comedy helped them to develop racial/gender identity, the most salient identity that students felt was enhanced more closely identified with Figured Worlds definition which includes individuals considering who they are in the various worlds they live in. For example, Holland et al. (2001) said that people “develop more or less conscious conceptions of themselves as actors in socially and culturally constructed worlds” (p. 40). It was evident through all of the discussion with the participants that creating characters was a part of improv comedy.

As the participants shared more about their experience with character development within improv comedy, there were several examples of how improv comedy affected their personal identity both on and off stage. Naomi shared that the more she did improv “with people, the more I enjoy them or understand them I feel like and the more I improvise with people I don’t know; the more I understand me.”

Felix shared that “a lot of who I am as a person, like my personality comes from my exposure to improv, like it kind of did this thing where you’re allowed to do whatever because in improv there are really no rules.” Vince also shared that he changed since he started with improv comedy, he “used to think of myself like way negatively and wasn’t all that great, I think of myself very positively now.” For some, they also take on the identity as an “improviser.” Dwayne shared that his peers described him as “improv czar, so, which I’m taking as a good thing, so yeah, basically I am the embodiment of Jokers improv.” These examples indicate that improv comedy directly impacts a participant’s journey of figuring out who they are.

There were also several examples of the participants creating characters that were based on parts of themselves, people that they knew, or in-depth personas. Through the process of establishing characters, this helped the individuals to make connections with their own identity development and exploration. Players were able to try out aspects of themselves in a space that was safe and they could see what worked for them and what did not work for them as it related to their identity. Amongst the improvisers, there were also several examples of players finding their voice. A member of the Kryptonians shared:

So one of the big differences in improv is the difference between invention and inspiration so a lot of the things in character traits and ideas, I know for me personally, I draw from people I know. And like, voices and things like that. So if I’m doing a woman character, and I like, want to be like a sassy woman character I channel my mom, and then like, phrases and things like that, not that I, not that I think the way that she does but I think like the way that she does as a character. Does that make sense? Like that’s how, where my character comes from.

In this selection, the player drew on the characteristics of individuals that she knew to create a new character. There are many ways to find your voice and it can be a process

for new improvisers.

The Arrows shared that they support and “believe the process and jump in and dive in and go on these amazing journeys with us and do what they can to kind of find their voice.” Another member of the Arrows shared that “there have been instances where it might take a full academic year for someone to find their voice, but you can always tell as soon as someone finds it.” This concept of finding your voice included the participants tapping into whom they were as individuals and displayed it confidently through different characters. Ralph suggested that “I just try to play characters like, or at least try to have attributes in my characters that I know I can convey very very well.” Wesley, on the other hand, shared that since he has started creating characters, he began to realize that:

There are times where caricatures are needed but you know, characters are the things you remember, and, as far as the social aspect, I’ve sort of learned how to show my character you know, what I’m about, what I am as a person, which, to be perfectly honest I wasn’t very sure of when I came to school, when I came to college. People, you know, kind of start doing some soul searching. So I was kind of doing, “who am I?” really...

The excerpt shows that for Wesley, improv comedy gave him the opportunity to explore who he was and try on different aspects on stage, while exploring who he ultimately was as a person. This journey of self exploration is a process, and the participants are all slowly working through the expedition. While speaking with Laurel, she shared that being a part of comedy has helped to understand her salient identities more:

Yeah, so, in the beginning of my improv like “career” or like “college career” be honest- like, (laughs), improv college career, basically, like, I, was very into like doing voices. Like, that was my thing, like I can do a French accent and I can do this and that and that, and, although that really made me stand out as a performer, I slowly realized that hey I’m not being you know, a shade of myself. Like I, I mean, is something that I’ve kind of struggled with, like throughout life, just

because I'm like, I'm multi-racial like, I'm Chinese and I'm Jewish, and like, you know, it's like, kind of like a weird thing, you know, I mean I call myself Chew-ish. It's just a way for me to understand my identity and just understanding my identity a little bit more in college, I've been able to figure out, how to present myself more on stage. Stand up comedy has definitely helped me more with that too because I definitely feel more comfortable using just my regular voice and just doing jokes and that and making weird characters who are like seemingly normal, ya know?

In this excerpt, improv comedy helped Laurel to be her real self by safely exploring parts of her identity as a Jewish Asian American woman.

In some cases, the players do not always have the freedom to draw on what they know. Some of the characters are created by what is needed in a scene. For example, during the Kryptonians group interview, a member shared that “like if two people are talking and they call for, like “oh dad’s going to be home soon” it’s like we’ll I guess I am dad you know, and you walk in as dad.” In those cases, one might not even identify as being male or a father figure, but the player will portray the character that is needed in that scene. The characters will also adapt to support the other players. The Jokers also said that “characters have to be moldable too, like for the scene, you can’t have someone who knows everything about this character, because if someone tells you, you are blind, you have...this character is blind.” For example, you could walk on stage as an astronaut who loves watching movies, however, if another player identifies that you are blind; you must become the best blind astronaut who loves watching movies. Individuals who try on these different characters are able to explore different aspects of identity that they could have never explored before.

Whether you have the freedom to create a unique character or are assigned a role, there must be a grounded reality to the character being portrayed. While they can be a

unique and humorous character, a member of the Arrows shared that the character “has to have wants, he has to have beliefs, or she has to, have loved ones, hopes, dreams, all these things.” In some cases, there is not too much discovery because a participant pulls on a stock character. A stock character is a portrayal that has been used before. For example, a member of the Jokers indicated “the character so much it’s easier to go them in a pinch so I have something that is completely off, or I have no ideas it’s easier to just go just to that character.” The stock characters can be used in more challenging scenes to make it easier for the improvisers because they do not have to create something new within themselves. While these portrayals are just characters, some of the participants believe that those characters are tied to the real person’s identity. For example, Ralph believes that he can see parts of the person’s identity that they create:

like we try to be the default nurturer in the scene or the default like, mediator and I notice a lot outside that’s kind of how they are, is like, they want to have a good time, and they want to make sure everything’s okay. And you see that a lot in scene work, you see a lot of, you can tell a lot from a person's character that they can do, and, it's really funny because that’s coming from such a genuine place in their being.

The performers believe that there is much more to improv comedy than just silly accents and games. There is also a philosophical approach that some participants absorb personas, and they find this practice changes who they are. Naomi offered an excellent example of this:

Improv is life. No it’s just, it’s just more of way of life than people think, like it’s not just a comedy like go around people fart fart ha ha laugh laugh. Like I think it really changes people, it changes comedy, most of the comedians people love and know are improv comedians or were at one point, because it teaches you how to really develop a character acting wise, and teaches you how to develop them and really know what they want and that kind of stuff.

This selection shows that improv comedy is a process of and ultimately affects the way participants view themselves. Exploring their identity and gaining a better understanding of themselves is a process. Improv comedy can contribute to the process in positive ways. As conveyed by the participants about identity development, three key themes emerged which include: confidence, perspectives, and cultural development. Throughout this section, the three topics will be discussed. Table 4 defines the identity subthemes.

Table 4

*Identity Subthemes*

Identity Development and Exploration	Definitions
Fearlessly true to self	Further developing confidence and belief in one's self.
Widening your gaze	Gaining a greater understanding of others' perspectives and also understanding their own perspective.
Way of life	Gaining a broader understanding of your own culture and the understanding of others.

**Subtheme 1: Fearlessly True to Self**

These various improv troupes put on several shows a semester for hundreds of people. The scenes have some structure, but the participants ultimately rely on themselves to create something out of nothing. They put themselves willingly on a stage to make people laugh. While some get nervous, and some of their efforts end with no laughs, the fruits of their ongoing labor have an impact on their confidence and how they see themselves. Sharon indicated that when it comes to improv comedy, she prides



herself on “being pretty confident. Like I don’t really like to, come off as shy or subtle so yeah, I like that people have the impression of me being like secure in myself.”

However, this confidence does not immediately happen for everyone. Often, the players may be overly self-conscious about how they see themselves. For example, one of the members of the Arrows shared her experience after she got her first laugh. She said “And once you get that laugh it's like, Whoa. This is something I fucking want to hear. And ever since then I’ve just been not thinking, and it’s the best thing I’ve ever done. Just not think.” Part of the process of building up confidence includes overcoming fear and accepting yourself. One of the members of the Jokers shared:

When I came here, I was so nervous and shy and frightened, and I didn’t know what to do. I was bad at public speaking, and I had really no idea what to do. I don’t know, there must be a certain number of you have performed on stage this many times. At one point you just stop caring about being embarrassed or like what people are going to see when they look at you, what they think when you are on stage, and that helps a lot. I don’t even care anymore, let’s just do this and let’s just perform, it helps me a lot overcome shyness or awkwardness.

Building confidence does take time, and if someone stays with practicing improv comedy, it can positively affect his or her self-perception. Rodney shared that “It definitely, it absolutely affects how you see yourself, and it's very a positive thing.” Lester also contributed by sharing that improv “really helps self-esteem, and just believing in yourself to do things and not think about them so much, just go for it and make decisions.” Naomi also agrees and said “I feel like a much more confident person now that I know, I feel like I know how to improvise well enough on stage.” There is also an element beyond being confident in yourself and loving who you are. This process includes believing in your decisions and trusting yourself, even if others disagree. Felicity shared that when it comes to making decisions:

I'll just continue on with my day and be like okay, well that was something someone thought of me but whether I disagree or agree, I shouldn't let that weigh on me and I won't because, in the end, it's what I want to do. And it's how I feel, and it's me in the end, it's nobody else. So I've just learned that I need to love who I am and my thoughts and my mind.

It is important to acknowledge that the process of opening up like Felicity shared is not an easy process for the performers. For some, the participants are nervous, and this process of opening yourself up can be stressful. They are put on stage in front of peers, strangers, and occasionally family members. They are baring parts of themselves and experimenting with characters and ideas without a safety net such as having a live audience with no opportunities to try again. With time and commitment, improv comedy can positively influence how participants see themselves. Ralph shared that:

I used to not think I could ever do something like this, I never thought I was good enough to be on a stage I never thought I'd get over the social anxiety of being on a stage and putting myself out there in an extroverted setting that I've chosen and been like scared of doing and I think now, it's showing me that, like, I can do those things, and, that, I do succeed on those things and that, as I shouldn't, what am I trying to say, that I should maybe, to maybe see like I should lighten up and say you are good enough to do those kinds of things and people appreciate what you are doing and stuff in that general area.

This story shows that because of improv comedy, Ralph was not only able to overcome his social anxiety, but there were many more things that he believed he was capable of like engaging with strangers with confidence. For others, their improv comedy team was a place where they could not worry about meeting societal expectations, but a place where they were already accepted. Wesley also offered part of his story:

It definitely, it makes me feel more confident for sure. I feel, I can, I feel better about myself as an improviser, just because it is that, that one, like I know I can come to club and goof off and have a fun time, and I have a lot of fun with these guys, and we're going to have a fun time and I don't have to worry like oh what do they think about me? Like, you know, what clothes am I wearing? Does my hair look alright? I know they don't care about that when it comes down to it we

will just start improvising, and we'll have so much fun, and I think, that when you start thinking of yourself as an improviser you just kind of start thinking of yourself as this kind of witty fast paced like fast thinking person who can, who's going to be comfortable hanging out with anyone...

In this selection, the improviser was able to confidently be their true self and not have to worry about the judgment of others because they have grown together as people.

Believing in one's self is an important part of identity development. The fearlessly true to self subtheme discussed how participation in improv comedy gave participants the ability to believe in themselves. Having the confidence to take risks and explore other perspectives is also essential to learning about themselves. Part of this process also includes learning about others. In the subsequent section, there will be a review of how performing improv comedy in a college improv troupe can impact participants' ability to take on other perspectives.

### **Subtheme 2: Widening the Gaze**

With the hundreds of different types of relationships, characters, locations, and conflicts that arise in improv comedy, having a broad perspective about life can help you. Having a greater understanding of other's outlook gives individuals the opportunity to better define their perspective. The more a person can define their viewpoint and values; the more the individuals can define themselves. As indicated by several participants, improv comedy has the potential to help participants both gain a better understanding of others and themselves. As mentioned earlier by Naomi, the more she participated in improv, the more she gained a better understanding of herself.

For many participants, being a part of improv comedy helped them to appreciate others. Laurel indicated that improv comedy helped her to gain an "understanding about

their own lives and an understanding about other people's lives.” Lester echoed those comments and shared that improv “helps you recognize certain things about someone, specifically their personality and things they might like and things they want to talk about.” By determining what someone is interested in, participants could shape their conversation to meet the needs of the other individual.

Improviseurs portray many different characters, and they each have different personalities. Rodney said that “you’re playing so many different characters, and because you’re playing and thinking in so many different ways, it opens you up to different points of view and different perspectives on life.” By challenging yourself to look at different angles, improv comedy can change you. Improv comedy helped Wesley to develop his own philosophy:

I think that, I like to, I see others, and just kind of always remember that this person is human. Like they, okay. This is going to sound weird. But there’s this thing I like to call the universe theory, in the sense that everybody has their own universe. Everyone has their own, no one really sees their own face, think of it like that. Everyone’s always looking outside from themselves, and this isn’t necessarily something that I figured out because of improv, but improv definitely helped me relate to that feeling more.

This selection shows that, for Wesley, improv comedy helped him to understand his own universe.

Widening a perspective means that a person has to expose themselves to different types of people, points of view, and ideological differences. The participants shared that having knowledge of different kinds of people can help have more engaging improv comedy. It also helps people define opinions and preferences in order to be self reflective about their rationale. A member of the Jokers said improv comedy:

makes you see the world differently too. You are not just watching something and saying I like that, or I hate that. You're looking at something, the election is big right now, it's made me, oh I hate that, and I'm like why do I hate that? And build on that discovery, form your opinion and seeing the world and taking it in and how you can use that yourself and other people.

This quotation displays that improv comedy can help you to explore why you feel certain ways about a variety of topics. By having a stronger understanding of yourself and your feelings, this can be beneficial in working with others that are different from you.

Individuals need the ability to work with many different people. Naomi had taken courses at a small theater in her home state and offered an excellent perspective:

It was just people doing it for fun – and I think that made the scene work so much more interesting because there were people in the military, there were people who were lawyers, there were people who were doctors, teachers, all kinds of these, all these different aspects of life, and perspectives on life, because part of improv is understanding the other person's perspective is, is trying to like get your objective but also this other person's perspective and I don't know, it makes it really interesting when you have a diverse character who knows about something that isn't just like, like I said before, the relationship's the most interesting thing in the scene or at least that I've heard, how you feel about this person, how you're going to feel how you did feel, that kind of stuff, is most important but if you're able to pepper in some other information on life or, a little bit of satire here and there, that makes your work all the better, it just makes your work more diverse and interesting.

The illustration provided by Naomi shows that improv comedy can be more comprehensive if you perform with lots of different perspectives. Taking on another viewpoint is closely tied to an individual's capacity for empathy. As an improviser takes on others point of view, they also can empathize with others.

Participating in improv can also show participants how one can widen their gaze and understand others. Some of the participants felt that they were a better person for taking part in the art form because they started feel empathy for others off stage. Improv comedy also helps participants to empathize with others. The participants shared that

improv helps you to identify what is needed in certain situations. Improv also helps the individual recognize the feelings and emotions of others. Having an understanding of your own emotions can also increase your ability to empathize with others. If a performer has a broad range of emotions to call upon, they can have a greater understanding of others, what they are experiencing, and demonstrate a more authentic character.

According to some of the participants, before starting improv comedy they had been weary of humanity and held a lower opinion of others. Vince shared that he “used to see everybody as like cold, and bitter, and like, I always had a negative outlook on life but now I look at everyone, and I’m like hey, you’re just all people.” Something had changed within the players, and the transition was influenced by using the “yes, and” approach. Naomi shared that she believes that improv comedy helps “because, learning to listen to the person and listening to yes-and, understanding where that person is coming from.” Once you really listen to someone, you can really respond in an authentic way. Ralph said that “on like a broader scale. I think it’s also taught how to feel empathy and sympathy for a lot of other people.” One of the Jokers recognized that:

improv just makes you a better person. You like start listening to people and in your real life, you start “yes, anding” life. I feel like, once you realize what negating really means, then you go out into your life, someone is like come out to this place with me, and you're like, meh, you realize in that moment, oh if I was going to do that in a scene, the scene would have been over, and I would have never would have discovered if anything we are saying, and were like it gets kind of weird and meta and it really changes the way you think in that way. Life becomes about discovering when you do improv.

In this passage, the participant recognized what the absence of saying “yes, and” had on their life. They could see that by denying opportunities around themselves, it could have lasting effects on scenes and in their personal life.

Along with opening yourself to what opportunities that are around you, improv comedy can develop one's emotional capacity for development. Vince illustrated how he has developed his emotional intelligence:

Emotionally, in improv, you experience a lot of emotions. If you really really get invested into it. And, all of your emotions become, a more refined gray scale. If you've ever seen a grayscale, there's different magnitudes of gray you can get into, and like, so, from the purest white to the darkest black, you're going to have let's say, 50 shades of gray. With improv, you'll have 75. You're able to identify like oh, I'm going to put myself at a 6 on the anger scale but also be like sad at the same time. And you start to identify your emotions and your own emotions like self-reflexively, and once you start like, looking at yourself as like a character, and then it's like oh and it kind of puts things into perspective a little bit.

This excerpt shows, for Vince, improv comedy can develop, identify, and expound upon one's emotional development because with a broader range of emotions, a participant can develop stronger empathy for others.

Emotions can have a powerful influence on one's identity. Understanding what other people are feeling can help not only what is needed in a scene, but can help individuals have a better understanding of themselves. Ralph shared that most of the time, individuals do not take the time to understand and "empathize with that person and I think improv has been teaching me a lot of these skills that I really want to portray in a lot of the work that I want to do after college." Part of this process begins by recognizing what others need. Improvisers support their team by offering gifts such as new characters, items, or conflicts to help strengthen a weak scene. Whether you are in the scene or on the sidelines, you are listening and watching each other in anticipation of helping support the scene. The participants shared that you enter an already established scene because you are going to add something, but not of your own volition. During our interview while sitting across the high top table, Naomi paused before sharing her thoughts on empathy:

I think with other people the way I see other people is like, what do they need? Is a thing you have to know in improv. What does this person need in the scene? That's what you're always thinking in the sidelines, what does this scene need? Even in the scene you're thinking about your partner and what they need right now and I think I've stepped back and even looked at that as a person as well, like what does this person need? If somebody comes to me and they are upset if, their computer got stolen or something... I take a second and look and say okay... how would this person react? How would I help this person? And that's much more prevalent now a days, I just to just be like oh that sucks, and that's it... its more of a helpful, I feel like I need to help people if I can, if that makes sense throughout that.

Development of empathy towards others does seem to be a gradual process and is not something that just happens the first time you walk onto the stage or try to help someone in real life. It takes time to develop those helping skills. Vince found that after empathizing with others, he had better scenes and realized that "We're all very very unique but also very very similar at the same time." Vince realized that we are all in this together and if another person is hurting, they are all hurting. However, this process also takes time, patience, and skill to understand another's culture in improv and in real life.

The widening your gaze subtheme reviewed how improv helped participants gain new perspectives and develop their empathy skills. In the final subsection, there will be a review of how improv comedy can help people understand their own culture and the culture of others.

### **Subtheme 3: Way of Life**

A significant part of the college experience is the many opportunities to gain an understanding of your identity, but there are also opportunities to gain a broader understanding of your own culture and the understanding of others. Learning about other cultures is a critical step in helping students understanding their global understanding. There are, however, reported challenges within the culture of Second City related to



gender/race (Seham, 1997, 2001), but there appeared to be a safer and conducive environment for college student improvisers on the college campuses that were visited. As indicated earlier in this chapter, the participants explored various characters and researched many subcultures, but being a part of a college improv team can also provide safe spaces for the participants to explore all the parts of who they are whether included race, gender, identity, or culture. By doing this, it also gives other members the opportunity to learn about other identities as they are exploring. There was collective agreement from all the improvisers about respecting identities and cultures. For example, When Lester was learning about Jewish culture, he did not want to portray Jews in a stereotypical way, but wanted to understand cultural celebrations including “what they mean and what they mean culturally.” This signifies a deeper respect for understanding the culture of others in order to accurately portray and explore them on stage.

According to some of the participants, improv comedy can also influence their identity development and exploration. Ralph has applied the skills he has learned from improv comedy to gain a better understanding of his racial identity:

My identity being Latino like, I'm using those skills [used in improv] to understand things I never did before. Before I would probably be like your idea is stupid that's not how it is, but now it's like oh, I never thought about it that way, I kinda don't understand what you're trying to say, can you give me a little more? And I think, it widens the perspective of a lot of things that a lot of people don't really try to get into.

Ralph used improv to understand more about his own salient identity while exploring other points of view and recognized a difference in how he would have approached things before participating in improv comedy. Laurel had shared earlier that participating in improv comedy helped her to find her voice as a Jewish Asian American Woman. It also

gave her an opportunity to educate her peers:

I like to think that the presence of me as an Asian-American woman like in comedy like helps a little bit to show that like hey you know there's like lots of different kinds of people out there regardless of race and regardless of gender, and I, I think that, and I hope that, you know, people have learned.

For Laurel, it was an opportunity to educate and dismantle stereotypes that might have existed about her race and gender. Felix also found that him bringing a part of himself to the scenes and characters was an opportunity to grow:

Everyone has something different that they can bring to the scene. You know I can't, bring anything about, about, my heritage and my culture is Arkansas, so I can bring some Southern, and I do occasionally, and it's funny because I like, you know I'll be just a little tidbit of information about the South that for me was just like commonplace and everyone else is like OMG that was crazy. Like I, in one scene I used like a colloquial term at one point, I used like some Southern-ism and they're like oh man that's hilarious I would have never said that. It's like okay... but then like, for me it was like that was nothing special, that was just my background, it's just where I'm from, everyone does that. But for other people who don't have that same background it's something new that they never would have thought of, and see if you get enough people would enough different backgrounds with things no one else would have ever thought of, and everyone's thinking of these new things, of these things that no one else could, you'd just add so many layers to that improv troupe.

In this passage, Felix illustrates how improv comedy gives participants opportunities to share about who they are and where they come from. It also gave him the chance to reflect on who he was and how having different individuals coming together to play improv games could make your scenes that much more powerful. Those three passages all illustrate how improv comedy may be used to help further racial, gender, and regional identity development.

College improv comedy also can give you a safe place to explore many different facets of identity while increasing understanding of racial, ethnic, gender, linguistic, sexual, and cultural diversity. Naomi shared that “diversity and understanding people

and also understanding that we're all just the same and that we're all just human, like I said we all have the same goal, we all want to do well." There was a strong consensus among all the players that great respect should be given to everyone's identity, story, and cultural background. A member of the Arrows shared that performers should not just disrespect "somebody for their beliefs, or their way of life, or just who they are. You can't make that the punch line, but you can use it to kind of inform them about the kind of character." Wesley also suggests that if you are going to be portraying different types of people, you should do it in a respectful way. Wesley said that "as long as you do it in a way that either, A. refreshing, B. that's in a way like okay we know that you are doing satire of this thing, then you're fine." For example, a member of the Jokers shared that:

I always like challenging myself to play outside of my gender and age and stuff. If I think about it, I probably have more female, as many female stock characters as I do male characters which is interesting, but I think it is just because it's fun. You're in a place, with improv especially where you can do anything and the audience will follow you right along there because there is such a suspension of disbelief that happens with improv especially even more than acting I think, because they know you are making it up on the spot, they are more willing to go with you. They are like sure we will overlook like whatever and go on this trip with you, playing the weirder or more "out there" zany characters or the characters that you may not get to play when acting...it can be a great time to play with that.

The quotation above suggests that when you are doing improv comedy, a safe space exists as long as the performer agrees to respect the truth of the characters they are portraying. The audience will also go on a journey with that improviser, exploring the character, because the discovery can be fun for both the audience and the performer.

However, if you choose to explore those other character traits that you do not identify with or have a great understanding of, there might be challenges. Even though

sometimes, you get called into a scene and are named a character, a higher level of play or what is described as playing to the “top of your intelligence” was recommended. This type of play means taking every scene seriously and committing with all aspects of you are and not taking shortcuts. A member of the Kryptonians shared that:

One of the things, and it was something I have trouble with, you'd think it'd be hard to be characters who aren't like you. But a lot, like, after the first year, oftentimes, there are these people who get into doing these kind of like wackier characters or people who aren't like them at all, and then you see a criticism a lot, be a little more of yourself, bring shades of yourself into it, cuz then you're a little more informed. So then you have these building blocks of like oh, okay, this voice and tone is inspired by this person I used to work with, but then, this struggle that is the back of this characters mind, I dealt with this once at summer camp, or something, and when you put that like, character format of that like motivation or drive that's coming from you, it makes them feel really real, and that's actually really fun to play characters.

This piece shows that for some participants, it can be challenging to develop more genuine characters. It also helps the participant to build more authentic characters if they can call upon a part of themselves or if they have actual relationships with a real person and integrate those aspects into the character. This can be connected to the dropping knowledge section earlier discussed in the chapter. For example, players will use what they know to create new characters. They could pull from knowledge about a family member, friend, or colleague and drop that identity knowledge into a scene.

### **Summary of Theme**

Improv comedy can have a substantial impact on identity development. Within identity development, three key themes emerged: fearlessly true to self, widening your gaze, and way of life. Throughout this final section, those three themes were reviewed. The results showed how participation in improv comedy influenced identity development through exploration, reflection, and ownership. While it was initially

anticipated that identity development would be more closely connected to race or gender, the participant's identity development coincided more with participants developing formations of themselves in constructed universes (Holland et al., 2001). Within the fearlessly true to self section, participants were able to develop their self-confidence. The participants were less socially anxious, had higher self-confidence, and believed in themselves. For example, Wesley indicated that he believed in himself and was more secure in his identity and stopped worrying what others thought of him.

Within this study, the widening your gaze subtheme reviews how improv comedy aids participants in their ability to gain new perspectives and develop empathy for others. A member of the Jokers shared that improv comedy makes you see the world in a different light and justify what you believe in through exploration of your own worldview. Felix also discussed how improv comedy helped expand and define emotional states. The way of life theme explored how participants understood and portrayed various cultures. Within the study, Laurel, Ralph, and Wesley were all able to articulate how improv helped them to explore their racial identity development and find their voice. A few players also spoke on how they portrayed characters with different genders from themselves. The literature shows that there were many reported challenges with gender/race happening at Second City (Seham, 1997, 2001). However the participants revealed that they felt safe on their college improv team both exploring their various identities and learning about other cultures.

The following subsection is a negative case analysis of identity development and exploration.

### **Negative Case Analysis**

After reviewing the coded data, there were a few examples that might contradict how improv comedy can help develop the self-confidence of the participants. Some players shared that when they had an “off night” in improv, that did not make them feel good and, in some cases, lowered their confidence. However several of those same participants shared that they can learn from an “off night” by reflecting and trying new tactics the next time they are on stage. Others shared that the next time they performed and got a laugh, they felt better about themselves and their improved abilities. The players also indicated that it takes time to understand improv, and it is a part of the process to learn what makes an audience laugh. There were no examples where the participants suggested that improv comedy adversely impacted their cultural understanding and racial, gender, and individual identity development. However, performers may not know the real effects of the characters they portray on stage on themselves, their fellow players, or the audience. For example, they do not know if they are really portraying an accurate representation of a different identity because they may never really hold that identity.

### **Chapter Summary**

The emergent themes emphasized in this chapter illustrate college students’ involvement in improv comedy organizations. Through discussing aspects of their experience within college improv comedy troupes, participants described ways in which improv comedy had affected their academic skill development, social skill development, and identity development. Academic skill development themes included: dropping knowledge, out of thin air, building bridges to new worlds, and creating from scratch. In

the social skills section, the major themes included: teamwork makes the dream work, a way with words, and hand in hand. Finally, the identity development subthemes include fearlessly true to self, widening your gaze, and way of life. Figure 1 provides a model of the themes and subthemes. Chapter VI will describe a mode of understanding how college improv comedy can inform the practice of higher education. The chapter will also provide implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

# EFFECTS OF IMPROV COMEDY

## ACADEMIC SKILLS



### DROPPING KNOWLEDGE

The aptitude to learn new information, retain that information and apply that information to new situations.



### OUT OF THIN AIR

The ability to act quickly upon scenarios, suggestions, or generate solutions to problems.



### BUILDING BRIDGES TO NEW WORLDS

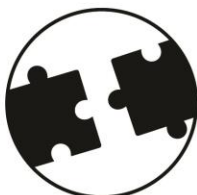
The capacity to tie two seemingly unrelated concepts together.



### CREATING FROM SCRATCH

Using improv to create new worlds, characters, forms, games, poems, songs, music, and other works that can lead to many uncharted creations.

## SOCIAL SKILLS



### TEAMWORK MAKES THE DREAM WORK

Creating community, relationships and supporting others.



### HAND IN HAND

To further develop social aptitude includes the capacity to connect with people and read individuals.



### A WAY WITH WORDS

Communicate with a broad range of individuals through a variety of mediums and be able to navigate these different audiences appropriately.

## IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND EXPLORATION



### FEARLESSLY TRUE TO SELF

Further developing confidence and belief in one's self.



### WIDENING YOUR GAZE

Gaining a greater understanding of other's perspectives and also understanding their own perspective.



### WAY OF LIFE

Gaining a broader understanding of your own culture and the understanding of others.

Figure 1. A Model of the Themes and Subthemes



CHAPTER VI  
CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS,  
AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine the experiences of students who participated on a college improv team and the impact those experiences had on academic, social, and identity development. Chapter I presented the background, problem statement, research questions, the definitions, and discussed the significance of this improv comedy study. Chapter II referenced relevant literature to this study specifically addressing history, guidelines, figured worlds, creativity, memory, cognitive development, identity and student development; chapter two also made connections between those key topics and improv comedy. Chapter III provided a description of the methodology for the research. It also included a review of the trustworthiness, ethics, and implications for the study. Chapter IV offered a description of the institutions, the demographics of the improv teams, and the twelve participant profiles. Finally, Chapter V shared the key themes and discoveries that arose from data analysis.

This chapter will provide a review of the study, its findings, and a response to the questions guiding this study. The findings will also be compared to the previous literature written on the subject. The chapter will also include implications for practice, a critique of the study, and recommendations for future research.

### **Review of the Study**

Nearly every major 4-year university offers clubs and organizations that engage students. Many of these campuses include college improv comedy troupes. While there has been extensive research displaying the benefits of general student involvement to campus life (Astin, 1984; Krause & Coates, 2008; Kuh, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Zhao & Kuh, 2004), there has been no substantial research conducted on how college improv troupes affect student development. The research methodology in this study included selecting three universities that fielded teams that regularly performed and whose members had more than a year of experience within a college improv team. The team structures varied in size and format. After permission had been granted to conduct the research, the process included reaching out to three different teams within the midwest. Campus visits were scheduled along with 12 individual interviews, 3 group interviews, and observations of 3 performances.

After the research was conducted, field notes and interviews were transcribed. The transcriptions were shared with the participants to be reviewed for errors and build upon trustworthiness of the researcher. Next, Nvivo software was used to conduct an open coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that produced 65 different codes. The next stage included identifying and developing themes amongst categories (Miles, Huberman, & Pena, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The major themes that were uncovered included academic, social, and identity development and exploration. The subthemes were then categorized accordingly within the academic, social, and identity themes.

After the categorization process concluded, descriptions were developed to explain how improv impacted academic, social, and identity development and

exploration. Additionally, a negative case analysis was also applied to the data after the themes were established to add to the trustworthiness of the findings (Glesne, 2011). The negative case analysis produced minimal results that countered the evidence provided by a majority of the participants. Finally, examples were pulled from the data and tables were constructed illustrating how involvement in improv comedy influenced the participant's development. After reviewing the examples provided by the participants, nearly all of the participants reported a positive effect on their academic, social, and identity development because of their involvement on a college improv team.

The next section will review the research questions, the major findings, and compare the previous literature with the new data along with identifying the relevance of the new discoveries.

### **Research Question 1**

Research question 1 was: How do college students make meaning of their experiences within an improve comedy troupe in relation to academic, social skill, and identity development? Discussions pertaining to the impact that improv comedy has on development along with the current literature suggest that improv comedy can influence the way students shape their identity, academic experiences, and social skill development. Utilizing a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), findings from this study imply that participation in improv comedy can positively impact the success of college students or further heighten their success on campus.

Comments from interviewees about their experience within college improv troupes indicated that most developed stronger academic, social, or identity development skills. What they reported, and the degree to which they benefited, varied from student to

student, as did their background, training, and education. For example, those who were further along in their improv career seemed to be able to speak more directly about the benefits and they also had played with more teams. Additionally, some of the participants had taken classes from improv training grounds. Furthermore, there was a mix of participants who planned on pursuing a professional career in improv and others who were just involved with improv for fun, but no matter what their intentions, the overall impact proved to have an effect on their academic, social, and identity skills. Throughout this section, the discoveries and themes will be summarized, compared to the literature, and a summative analysis provided.

**Theme 1: Academic skills.** The participants revealed that participating in improv comedy could enhance their academic skills. The four academic skills subthemes included dropping knowledge, out of thin air, building bridges to new worlds, and creativity from scratch. The dropping knowledge theme explored how students can learn information and apply that information to another setting. The previous literature demonstrated there were benefits of being involved in student activities (Astin, 1999). Astin's (1984) work also affirmed that a student's academic experience could be enhanced by involvement outside the classroom. Furthermore, Hernandez, Hogan, Hataway, and Lovell (1999) showed that their involvement in outside activities could have an impact on learning in the classroom. This current study affirmed that involvement in improv comedy could also influence a student's intellectual or academic development based on the students responses and the connections they made to the coursework. While improv comedy troupes are active on college campuses, no previous literature had established how academic skills in a college setting could be developed

through involvement within improv comedy.

It was discovered throughout the interviews and performances that college student improvisers could ascertain and apply knowledge to new circumstances, retain and recall information, and improve their active listening skills. While improv is using the knowledge that a participant already has to apply to unfamiliar conditions (Crossan & Sorrenti, 1997), this concept of dropping knowledge directly connects with Bloom's taxonomy literature (1956, 2001). For example, with Bloom's taxonomy, knowledge is transferred or applied from the one domain to another (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1956; Anderson, Krathwohl, & Bloom, 2001). Bloom's taxonomy goes beyond recalling facts and includes learning new knowledge, comprehension, and critical thinking being applied from one area to another. The difference between Bloom's taxonomy and dropping knowledge is how it is utilized in practice.

Typically, educators would use Bloom's Taxonomy (2001) as a guide to inform their pedagogy, and conduct exercises to develop this skill. However, dropping knowledge is not limited to any one subject and helped the participants develop a thirst for new knowledge in order to learn as much information as possible about numerous topics. While numerous activities in the collegiate setting help students learn, this dropping knowledge activity helps participants foster a thirst for new knowledge and provides a scaffolding where they can apply it. For example, many participants noted coming across new information and unfamiliar words and that they wanted to learn about them so they could eventually apply them later. Furthermore, the participants within the study also developed a desire to understand or construct meaning. The more they could create meaning on their own, the more it would allow them to better understand the

content and then be able to recall it, and integrate that knowledge. There are strong parallels to constructing knowledge (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Greene, 2005; Hargreaves, 2007). For example, the students applied knowledge through a variety of formats and modes such as singing or using metaphors. They also demonstrated the desire to add their interpretation of the data, not just repeat facts. This is significant because involvement in improv comedy demonstrates a different way to approach learning in a university setting which is interactive, engaging, and has not been previously recognized.

Involvement in improv comedy can impact a participant's ability to identify and remember key details about individuals, situations, and activities. The literature revealed that memory allows for humans to draw on their past experience to direct choices and actions (Shohamy & Wagner, 2008) which were demonstrated within improv comedy scenes where they were making decisions in scenes based on something that had happened earlier. Furthermore, within the literature review, various types of memory were explored. Those memory types included episodic, declarative, immediate, and working memory, which all comprise various modes of remembering key details (Purves et al., 2011; Skinner & Fernandes, 2008). This study displayed new contributions to the literature on improvisation and memory development. Additionally, the current study demonstrated that participation in a college improv comedy troupe could enhance the participants' memory by playing games that trained their brain to enhance their retention. The students participated in exercises that fostered greater memorization skills. The examples provided by the interviewees demonstrated that, throughout improv, the various types of memory were used throughout the scenes. For example, short-term memory could be important to remember character names and background details during a scene.

It was also noted by the participants that improv helped them to remember key details.

The participants discussed the different ways in which their memory was improved. For example, they discussed that after participating in improv comedy, their ability to remember key details could be applied to general day-to-day tasks, within improv scenes, and tests or quizzes. By improving students' memory skills, it can add to their academic standing in the classroom and the credibility of an improv scene. This is meaningful because while the previous literature (Purves et al., 2011; Skinner & Fernandes, 2008) had offered definitions of various types of memory, the study provided a new strategy for college students to improve their memory and retention which included activities and exercises that helped develop better memorization skills.

Participation in a college improv comedy troupe also helped individuals develop active listening skills. The literature confirmed that listening is a vital factor for success within improv comedy (Holmes & Qureshi, 2006); however, there was a lack of research demonstrating how improv comedy could develop college students active listening skills. Throughout the study, the participants revealed that improv comedy improved their listening skills on stage as evidenced by students being able to recall key details, read body language, and pick up the context. This is significant because while it was previously acknowledged that listening was required for successful scenes (Holmes & Qureshi, 2006), this study stands apart and shows that participation in improv enhanced students' ability to listen. For example, the students had to actively listen to the players and audience throughout the entire show in order to not miss any key details. Interviewees and the performers also had to listen whether they were in the scene or on the side of the stage. The key difference between the literature and the current study is

what happened when they were off stage.

The participants believed that engaging in actively listening within improv scenes helped them to be more engaged in the classroom by listening and feeling more responsible for participating in class discussions. There were also implications by some of the participants that active listening was critical to be successful in more difficult academic situations such as attending a challenging lecture or engaging in a conversation. Certain participants also believed that improv comedy helped them to listen and understand key concepts and have a better awareness of what was happening in the classroom, on stage, in an interview, at work, with friends, or family. This is important because college students need to learn how to actively listen in the classroom, to their peers, and to the professor so they can fully understand course content. Improv comedy is a tool that can help further develop a college student's ability to actively listen.

The out of thin air theme explores how improv comedy impacts a participant's ability to think, adapt, and respond quickly to whatever situation arose. This included both unique situations on stage or confusing situations in their real life. The literature stated that improv comedy and creativity have affected participants' cognition, mental ordering, and improvisation (Drinko, 2012) and intuition, cognitive, and emotional abilities (Lockford & Pelias, 2004). This study has affirmed the previous literature as the interviewees stated that after participating in improv comedy, they were able to think quickly and adapt to unfamiliar situations. When challenges, issues, or problems arose, the members felt they were better at responding to issues than before they started doing improv comedy.



Participants also discussed how improv helped them think on the spot and respond quickly to questions in class. Furthermore, the participants stated that being involved with improv helped them while doing class presentations by using the various tactics associated with improv comedy. The participants also discussed that after doing improv for a period of time, they were also able to help with quick transitions between scenes. They also shared that improv helped them on a personal level and helped them to be quicker at daily tasks such as solving problems between roommates. This is important because college students need to be able to think quickly, adapt, and resolve problems to be successful in the current workplace. With knowledge growing exponentially and students requiring more skills to adapt, improv develops adaptation skills. It was previously established that individuals who are able to adapt quickly will be prepared for several different professions (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), and participation in improv comedy may give students the skills they need to learn how to adapt to a changing workforce.

In addition to helping students to think quickly and adapt, this study identifies how improv comedy influences college students' ability to problem solve. Participants shared that they were able to generate an abundant number of ideas, solutions, or concepts to solve problems when put on the spot. Players had also shared that they could start to formulate new patterns occurring within scenes. The improvisers also specified that they were able to quickly accomplish goals, tackle problems, and achieve tasks, through a variety of approaches. For example, participants indicated that that once they received a problem, they would look for new ways to solve these problems instead of just using a traditional approach.

As discussed by Bowden and Jung-Beeman (2007), the previous literature shows that individuals need to abandon traditional strategies to forge new original methods to solve a problem. This type of thinking relates to divergent thinking (Foos & Boone, 2008) because individuals must come up with numerous solutions to issues or problems. While the previous literature did show that participation in theater arts programs could advance a student's problem-solving, critical thinking, and reasoning skills (Kindelan, 2010), this study shows that participation in college improv comedy may also enhance problem-solving skills. This is significant because not every student can afford to take a theater class or commit the time required to be in a theatrical production, but every college student could have the opportunity to do improv. This skill is also practical for college students as they prepare to take on more complex tasks in their workplace or graduate school. Improv comedy also helped to create connections between subjects because of the games and exercises that occur within improv comedy.

The building bridges to new worlds theme includes exploring the participant's descriptions of how improv comedy helps them build links between two unrelated topics. Creative thinking is about building and expressing significant new connections between various concepts (Treffinger & Isaksen, 2005). While the previous literature established that creative thinking could build connections between concepts, this study differs from previous research because of the way in which the participants achieve this goal. An example of a traditional creative method might include most of Banksy's artwork and the connections to many societal issues through graffiti art (Ellsworth-Jones, 2013). Banksy will use specific images and words to convey irony. However, within improv comedy, the participants must constantly improvise direct links between

unfamiliar topics through physical movements, dialogue, singing, or dancing. The study also demonstrated that improv can help students to link concepts together and make new information relevant.

The connections could also be made between concepts even if the participants had little information to go on. For example, when all the teams performed, they asked for a suggestion from the audience that was incorporated into the structure of the show. Participants were also able to identify emerging themes within improv games and stories. For example, improvisers will find games within games or stories to make it more interesting. Being able to determine themes and tie concepts together within the improvised scenes can be achieved as an individual or as a team. This is important because this study shows that involvement in improv comedy can help create connections between unrelated topics. If a participant is practicing creating themes and uncovering patterns, this could translate to real world challenges. This ability to connect concepts together could have practical applications for many colleges and universities, especially those who are looking to train their students on how to conduct research. For example, if a student is conducting research in a specified area and starts to distinguish a pattern that is occurring in another research project, that has practical application.

The creating from scratch subtheme demonstrates how being a part of an improv comedy team can impact their creativity skills. The literature established a relationship between improv and creativity (Limb & Bruan, 2008) and this study affirmed that improv comedy can help participants be more creative through creating lyrics, songs, poems, jokes, games, and scenes. The creative skills learned in improv can carry into a student's life through internships and work-study jobs. The study also showed that

participation in improv also helped the participants to experiment and become better writers, too. As a member of an improv troupe, participants discussed the impact that improv comedy had on their ability to be creative.

The participants shared that, within improv comedy, a participant can create new worlds, characters, forms, games, poems, songs, music, and other works. The participants also revealed that they did not need any additional resources, like computers, paper, paintbrush, or instruments, to be creative. Interviewees also indicated that there was a shared responsibility between teammates to create the scenes together. Throughout the study, the improvisers shared that most of the exercises, activities, and games generate opportunities for the participants to be creative in more untraditional formats, like taking an art class. Additionally, some of the participants shared they had stress and experienced challenges that improv was an ideal escape for them to be creative.

Involvement in improv comedy also helps participants to experiment. Within the study, it was revealed that improv comedy is a safe space where students can experiment with many different concepts, identity, forms, and characters to tell stories to an audience. However, while experiments can be duplicated, improv is an art form where the performance can never be exactly replicated and that sets improv apart from many other traditional art forms. For example, a musical piece has exact notes that must be followed with precision, whereas, in improv comedy you may have the parameters for experimentation, but the participants and audience have no idea where it will lead. It was also disclosed that failure was sometimes expected within experimentation, and improvisers can learn from failed experiments. This is significant because failure is not

the end of learning, but a part of the process.

The participants revealed how improv comedy benefited their writing skills. The literature shows that improv comedy can be utilized to improve the literacy of secondary students (Welsh, 2014). While there is a significant difference in the level of writing required at the collegiate level compared to the high school level, this study affirms that improv comedy can be used to improve writing and comprehension skills of college students. For example, not only were participants able to write more efficiently, their ability to gain context was more significant since they started doing improv comedy. The interviewees also shared that within improv comedy, a performance could be similar to the writing process. Just as within an improv performance, they might be given a topic to speak about, within writing, they would be given a prompt and started writing more efficiently.

This study is noteworthy because there is a movement in higher education to be more creative, innovative, and resourceful (Kezar, 2014; Wagner, 2008). However, how do we train students how to be creative in their work or in higher education?

Participation in improv comedy can help students be creative and also experiment through performing hundreds of activities and scenarios. This is also significant because college students experiment both inside and outside the classroom. Students experiment in the classroom by conducting various investigations. They experiment outside the classroom by trying new activities and becoming friends with new individuals.

Furthermore, with the increased need for higher levels of literacy, improv comedy can be another tool for higher education to help students become better writers. In addition to writing and other academic skills, participation in improv comedy can also help with

social skills.

Within academic skill development, participants identified that they were able to drop knowledge, increase their memorization skills, and enhance their active listening skills. The students also shared that they were able to think on the spot or out of thin air, think and adapt quickly, create connections, and be creative. These are significant revelations because there is a need for more college graduates who have the skills to be successful for the world of work (American Marketing Association, 2010; Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2010; Wagner, 2008). The results from the academic skills section are significant because if students can apply the skills learned from dropping knowledge, they will be able to more successful in the classroom and the workplace. Students will be able to apply knowledge from one field to another field seamlessly. If students could take this into the workplace, they could be cross functionally trained to take on multiple roles in the workplace and not just limited to one specific functional area.

Participation in improv may also improve students' memorization skills. This would infer that students could improve their ability to take tests or quizzes, take on more challenging assignments, and be more effective in group work. Involvement in improv comedy also helps students improve their active listening skills. If students are more aware of their surroundings, these could open them up to new information, more context for situations that they are in, and help improve their overall grades, because they would be more engaged with learning. Listening also helps them to take in more information so they can add their own perspective.

Students who do improv also reported the ability to think on the spot. This skill can help students to be quicker on their feet and generate numerous ideas or questions

when engaging in the classroom or the workplace. Classroom assignments can require students to develop several answers to challenges that are posed. Employees could be given a task to create ideas to save money on a project. Improvisers are trained to generate numerous quick solutions and can bring value to a classroom or a company. Improvisers are also adaptable and can problem solve. This is important in the classroom or the workplace as even with great planning, very rarely do things go according to plan. Improvisers can also adapt to challenges quickly.

The participants in the study were also able to create connections between concepts. This is significant because there is value that comes with people who are able to forge connections between problems and solutions (Wagner, 2008). Improvisers can detect patterns, identify themes, and uncover what information is missing. These skills could help individuals and groups that need different perspectives to engage with challenging problems. Involvement in improv comedy also fosters creativity. Many individuals do not believe that they are creative, but improv comedy gives participants the skills to be creative. Improv also teaches participants how to use their imagination together as a team. Creativity can be used to disrupt flat patterns and can reflect innovation. Improv can also help participants become better writers. Writing is important for the world of work, crafting stories, and general life skills.

**Theme 2: Social skills.** In addition to having a significant impact on the academic experience, improv comedy also influences the social experiences of participants. In particular, participants learn the skills to develop community, develop relationships, and support one another. Participation also improves the ability to communicate and make meaningful connections with others. Within the teamwork

makes the dream work theme, the participants identified how participation in improv comedy impacted their ability to build and connect with a community. Each team created their own community where they would support each other on and off stage, attend other improv events, and hang out with each other socially. It was revealed that those who participated in improv comedy had improved their ability to build community with one another. The participants shared that being a part of an improv group was a unique and special experience that bound them together. The participants believed that community and team building skills could be transferable to campus. For example, several participants suggested that improv be incorporated within residence halls and orientation to break the ice and help communities work through issues. Several of the participants also discussed the value of making sure everyone was included and supported. If a player was not fully engaged, participants would invite them into the next scene so that everyone had a role to play. Furthermore, since participating in improv comedy, several participants felt that they were more comfortable interacting with familiar and unfamiliar groups.

The literature demonstrates connections between longform improv comedy and community, social, cultural development (Fortier, 2008), which affirmed how community was developed between improvisers. Within this study, the participants were able to recognize how to build community with one another, but what set this study apart was how those individuals built community beyond their improv comedy team. For example, participants developed friendships that extended beyond the stage and helped create new social connections with others having nothing to do with their improv team. It was also recognized in the literature that developing friendships at the start of college can set the



tone for how social capital is built (Tinto, 1993), yet, improv teams are not always built in the first week and take time to mature. Many members acknowledged that the more they knew another person, the stronger they could improvise together. Additionally, being involved in activities outside the classroom can influence the social experience of college students (Kuh, 1995). His research included involvement in activities like student government, the newspaper, sorority life, community service, and residence life; however, Kuh's research did not include participation in college improv comedy troupes, specifically. This is significant because there has been no extensive study focusing on improv comedy and the affect it has on developing social skills thus far. If improv comedy does enhance the social experience, this could help shape how community is developed on a college campus altogether. This would include helping students develop relationships.

The hand in hand subtheme explores how the participants developed relationships and the associated social skills for interacting with others. As demonstrated in the literature, participation in improv comedy games includes being able to develop relationships and characters through improv games on stage (Lockford & Pelias, 2004). This study moved beyond the stage and reviewed the social experience and social skills that were occurring in their personal lives of research participants. Participation in college improv comedy can enhance peer and family relationships.

As it pertains to the social experience, people typically portray formations of themselves as actors in socially constructed universes (Holland et al., 2001). For example, people will present a role that they think they are supposed to demonstrate in specific social setting. While Holland et al.'s (2001) socially constructed worlds were

not all focused on improv comedy scenes, there are correlations. For example, within improv scenes, the participants can create whatever characters they want and have that character socialize however they wish in this new universe. This provides an opportunity for participants to explore various social skills in constructed scenes. By participating in a college improv troupe, the participants were able to develop stronger social skills that help them to develop healthier personal relationships.

Within improv comedy, an infinite amount of relationships can be explored through the different scenes. After doing improv, the participants shared that they were more interested in developing stronger relationships and had the skills to do so. Some of the members discussed that improv helps them to be completely invested in their teammates while being open and vulnerable with one another. The players also found that having relationships with each other off stage typically resulted in better relationships on stage. The participants discussed the value of being on an improv team and that helped them navigate difficult conversations with each other and helped them grow together as a team. This is important because improv comedy can help teach college students how to develop community and relationships in ways that have never been recognized before. Improv comedy also helps participants develop skills for supporting others.

Members of the improv teams were also explicit about the importance of supporting each other. Sanford's (1962, 1966) challenge and support concept was revealed in the interviews and observations, and there were many applications for this concept used throughout improv comedy because of the consistent supporting and encourage building the conflict within scenes. Participants discussed that being

involved with improv comedy was synonymous with being a part of a support structure. Some of the members shared that being part of an improv team was the most supportive environment they had ever been a part of. This could be as a result of how players experience support from their fellow players. In some cases, it was taking bold risks on stage and receiving support from their fellow players. For others it was receiving support for personal issues dealing with family or whether they really belonged on that specific campus.

The notion of challenge and support was evident within improv teams as the different teams also challenged each other to keep growing and developing through trying new types of challenging games and forms of improv comedy. For example, players might start off with simple games where they have one or two parameters and then later on move to games with dozens of parameters and rules. This is significant because Sanford's (1962, 1966) challenge and support concept can be applied to improv teams and encourages growth between those teams. Teams have opportunities to grow when they are challenged to take on more complex tasks and it proved to be successful when they challenge and support one another. This study also demonstrates how improv comedy can enhance a college student's ability to communicate.

A way with words theme explores how participation in improv comedy influences one's communication skills. The aforementioned literature shows that improv comedy can be used as a communication tool for resolving issues within the corporate world (Arterburn, 2012). This study found that to be true, but also moved beyond just resolving issues occurring at the workplace. For example, involvement in a college improv team can help students to communicate key ideas, themes, conflict,

portrayals, and relationships by using different mediums like songs, physical movement, poems, dancing, and dialogue. The participants also discussed how improv comedy helped to develop their conversational skills with not only their peers, but strangers as well. Involvement within an improv comedy troupe also enhanced their ability to actively listen to another person.

College improv troupes may also help individuals develop their public speaking skills. After participating on a team, participants could quickly articulate ideas promptly and efficiently to numerous audiences. This included performing improv on a stage, responding to questions in a classroom, or working with groups on coursework. Improv comedy also was helpful when approaching difficult subject matters. For example, some players shared that they were able to more effectively communicate with their family and friends about difficult topics. This is important because participation in improv comedy can further enhance college students' communication skills to a variety of audiences without requiring them to take additional coursework. Furthermore, involvement in improv comedy gives students the opportunity to move beyond theoretical communication strategies and communicate to live audiences.

The hand in hand subtheme explored how the participants make meaningful connections with their teammates, friends, and strangers, along with being able to read one another. Interviewees also discussed that improv comedy helped them to fully support, understand, and read their teammates. It was previously discussed in the literature that improvisers must be able to totally conscious of their teammates while understanding their actions (Baumer & Magerko, 2009). The current study also affirmed that participants believed they must be in sync with another on stage, but this study

moved beyond the literature (Baumer & Magerko, 2009) and demonstrated how this skill could be applied to their personal life. This was exemplified by the connections made between players and how that relationship transferred off stage and friendships were likely to form. Some participants described this as a special connection that moved beyond just reading body language, but included fully understanding one another. The interviewees also believed that improv helped them to make instant connections with individuals they had not ever known. This is important because students will need to be able to connect with other individuals who are different from them and participation in improv comedy can help develop the skills needed to make those connections with other human beings.

Within social skill development, participants identified that they were able to build community, communicate, and make meaningful connections with one another. These are significant because those who are involved in communities have a better social experience and better grades (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). The results from the social skills section are meaningful because students can apply the skills learned from community development, communication, and building connections with each other. Improvisational comedy not only helps build community between improv teams, but gives students the practical skills to engage in other communities. Community is important because it helps students feel a sense of belonging. Students who feel like they belong can make mistakes and feel confident enough to learn great lessons from those failures. Once students feel like they belong, they can be their best self.

If students are their best self, they can also reflect and communicate their best self to others. Communication with others is important for higher education and the

world of work. Individuals need to know how to share ideas, work through conflict, and direct messages to diverse audiences. Improv comedy helps participants with communication and how to improve discourse so they are building upon conversations. It was also shared that improv comedy can serve as public speaking class. This could save on money and resources for students and universities. Along with saving resources, improv comedy also helps cultivate relationships. Improv helps participants develop connections and build relationships between those on the team and those the improvisers do not know. Those that do improv can be more confident in social situations, job interviews, and networking. Improvisers can also read body language and can anticipate where conversations are going which will help them craft their conversations and result in better relationships.

**Theme 3: Identity development and exploration.** Participation in improv comedy may have an affect on someone's identity. Throughout the study, the participants shared that improv comedy helped them find their own voice, believe in themselves, gain new perspectives, and gain cultural competence. The fearlessly true to self sub-theme explored how improv comedy helped participants develop confidence in themselves. While it was initially anticipated that the participants identity would be more closely connected to their race or gender, however, the participants development coincided more with developing formations of themselves in constructed universes (Holland et al., 2001). The individuals would reflect parts of themselves in the various scenes. The results showed that after participating in improv comedy, participants were able to believe in themselves both as a person and as an improviser. This is significant because improv comedy can influence how people see themselves either in a positive or negative way.

Improv comedy can give college students the confidence to trust and believe in themselves. Participation in improv comedy also helps college students gain a new understanding of others viewpoints related to identity, viewpoints, and ideologies.

The widening your gaze theme explores how participants develop their own ideas on topics while gaining an understanding of others. The literature demonstrated that participation in the arts can help individuals construct new viewpoints (Greene, 2005), however, this study shows that college improv not only exposes participants to different types of people, points of view, and differences in improvised scenes, but also helps them try on different perspectives. Improv comedy helped the interviewees to explore why they felt certain ways. By performing new characters, they were also able to take on different charismas, personalities, and new opinions on topics relating to current issues, ethics, and values. It also helped certain members see the world differently and what they believe in through exploration of their own worldview. Improv provides students with the opportunity to present ideas about what they believe and work them out with the team and the audience. The participants can get immediate feedback about societal issues.

The widening your gaze subtheme also explored how participants made meaning of their emotional development. The research shows that those who participate in improv comedy can apply their emotional abilities through scene work with short notice (Lockford & Pelias, 2004). As it relates to college student development, there are also many facets of a student's emotional state, mindset, or mood even if they have not fully been explored (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). It was revealed through the conversations that several of the participants had a discouraging outlook on humanity before

participating in improv. After participating in an improv troupe, the participants indicated that their hearts were changed and they felt like they were better people. The participants were able to have a space where they could fully explore their own emotions while learning how to be empathetic to others. This is significant because no other study showed how participation in college improv comedy can help students to take on new attitudes while building empathy skills with others. Improv comedy can also help participants explore various aspects of culture.

The way of life theme reviewed how participants understood and portrayed various cultures. Previous literature shows that there was oppression, sexism, and racism occurring at Second City (Seham, 1997, 2001). However this study reported an inclusive environment existing within the groups. Several participants revealed that they felt safe on their college improv team both exploring their identity and learning about other cultures. The literature also explored Phinney's (1989) ethnic identity model, Cross & Fhagen-Smith's (2001) black identity development, Ruiz's (1990) Latino Identity development model, Kim's (1981, 2001) Asian American identity development, Helm's (1993) white identity development model, and Josselson's (1996) women's identity development model. There were only a few participants who were exploring their racial and gender identity development through their improv scenes, but these identity theories were not clearly present in the findings.

The interviewees felt that involvement in improv comedy was a place where they could safely explore their identities and try on other areas of their identity that they had not experienced before such as students finding their voice in their racial identity development. Improv comedy also provided participants with the opportunity to learn



about other cultures and cultural traditions. Being a part of a diverse community of learners comes with many opportunities and challenges. This study is important because no study has shown how improv comedy has helped college students explore their identity and understanding of other cultures. While the results did not specifically align with the racial, ethnic, and gender theories, improv comedy can help those involved find a better understanding of themselves and others. For example, improv comedy helped some students find their voice in their racial and gender identity development and who they were as individuals.

Within identity development and exploration, participants identified that they were able to be more confident in themselves, gain more perspectives and empathy, and increased their cultural competence. These are significant because identity and self-actualization are considered some of the most important goals of a person's existence (Maslow, 1943). The results from the identity section are meaningful because students can apply these skills to improving their self-confidence, their identity development, widening their perspective, and cultural competence. Improv comedy can help participants be more secure in their identity. Those who are more secure have found their voice and have the confidence to share who they are. Confidence in themselves can impact student perception of themselves, how far they will go in their careers, and even effect their happiness.

Improv also can help develop perspectives and cultural competence. Being a part of diverse community of learners, helps students actively participate in the marketplace of ideas. Improv can help students develop their own perspectives while taking on new perspectives. This is important because having a balanced and holistic

viewpoint will help students in their coursework and their personal lives. If they can understand where another person is coming from, they have a stronger relationship with that person and approach conflicts with civility. Furthermore, improv also helps participants learn about culture. This is important because the world is getting smaller and students need the skills to interact with those are different than them. Students need to be able to adjust their approach to welcome, learn, and respect new cultures, while being able to share their own.

Throughout this section, the findings and interpretations of this study were compared with the published research. After reviewing the findings and comparing them with the previous literature, it was shown that improv comedy can influence academic, social, and identity development and exploration. The academic skills included learning and applying new knowledge to other disciplines, adapting to situations quickly while using effective problem-solving skills, building connections between topics, and being creative. The social skills gained by participants included community development, communication, and learning to read others. Finally, the identity development and exploration skills included participants' finding their voice and developing self-confidence, new perspectives, and cultural competence. While those who participate in college improv troupes reap the benefits, there are many opportunities to expand improv comedy to other functional areas of higher education. In the following section, there will be a discussion of how improv comedy can be applied to other areas of a college campus.

### **Research Question 2**

Research question 2 asked: What potential does improv comedy have for influencing student growth and development on college campuses? It was established that

participation in a college improv comedy troupe does influence identity, academic experiences, and social skill development inside and outside the classroom. The classroom experience is not comprehensive enough for students to holistically learn (Kuh, 1995); however, within improv comedy, an out-of-classroom activity, there are significant opportunities to shape academic skills, social skills, and identity of college students. While improv comedy could be simply used for icebreakers or team builders, many benefits come from participating in improv comedy. Throughout this section, I will discuss the potential that improv could have on higher education through academic skills developed within the classroom and beyond, the social skills and interaction happening between the improv teams and their peers, and identity development and exploration that is occurring on a college campus.

**Academics.** If colleges desire increased student success and higher graduation rates, then student and academic affairs professionals and faculty need to broaden diverse teaching and learning strategies and could use improv comedy games and exercises to engage students in learning. For example, there are several applications for dropping knowledge. Professors could use a case study method where they teach or assign subject matter the students need to gain content knowledge and comprehension before receiving the case study. The professor then could design behavior-based problems and have the students apply that new knowledge to real problems in the discipline. There are also opportunities within the classroom to increase students' memory. Professors could use improv games that focused on memory development during midterms, finals, or before quizzes. If a class required a formal presentation, games and exercises could be incorporated or modified to explore concepts taught in class. Another potential benefit

will include students learning or improving their ability to actively listen. When students engage in improvisational comedy exercises, they have to put away their cell phones and engage with each other. It is easy for students to be indifferent, but improvisational comedy invites all participants to be a part of the process. This could be used during group work or for classes that require active listening.

Students can also benefit from adapting to life's struggles, responding to challenges, or creating new ideas out of thin air. It was established that creativity can be used to influence cognitive development (Lockford & Pelias, 2004) and certain improv games could be used to help student's developmental and cognitive abilities. This could apply to the academic setting, but also within their personal life. For instance, when individuals are trying to balance multiple priorities and must multi-task, improvisational games can help to develop those skills. This could help student students with their campus activities, studies, their jobs, and basic life skills which require cognitive abilities. Furthermore, improv comedy could help students to develop new problem-solving skills. With the lack of resources, increasingly more complex problems, and the need for novel approaches to resolving old problems, improv comedy can benefit students. Especially with classes requiring complex group work, students who participate in improvisational activities could bring energy, excitement, and creativity to answer challenging problems. Students could use these skills in just about any class and would help students to not only solve problems but generate new ways to work through them. Some approaches to solving problems can be time intensive and not always produce results. The participants in the study shared that improv shows multiple ways to solve problems.

Students could also benefit from creating connections or building bridges to new worlds. This could also be applied to any class, but especially in those classes where patterns or questions require students to gain more context and information to solve the problem. For example, an engineering focused class on sustainability could pose the question of how to reduce carbon emissions in Asia while not impacting the economy. The students would have to build connections between various concepts such cultural competencies, economic conditions, budgeting, and resource management; in order to have a meaningful response. They could also use improv games to learn to develop connections between different ideas or create prototypes while answering the question.

Students could also benefit from having skills that foster creativity or creating from scratch. Just about any improv game will help develop student's creative skills. For example, the game *101* shows participants how to create and improvise unique jokes on topics that are not typically joked about, such as a spatula. The game *Genres* require participants to recreate a scene in different ways by incorporating a new genre (i.e. a scene was played in western and then recreated in musical format). Creativity can be transferable to several courses as it provides students with the tools to respond to new situations with creative means. By having new creative tools and skills, students can push their limits and the boundaries of problem-solving.

Being creative also helps students to experiment. College students will need to learn how to develop thoughtful experimentation procedures so they can learn and understand new material and create new knowledge. Students may also experiment and test their limits by through joining new clubs, internships, and jobs. Furthermore, improv comedy can be used to develop writing skills of college students. This could be an easy

application to English, marketing, or a creative writing course. By using longform approaches, the participants are given many different storylines as a model for what they can draw on to formulate a full story. Students are also able to identify and create themes, patterns, and critically think which can be applied to writing.

**Social skills.** It was established that certain out-of-class experiences influence college student social development (Kuh, 2005, Zhao & Kuh, 2004) and improv comedy has the potential to change a student's approach to socializing. College students can benefit from having stronger social skills to effectively engage with their peers, future colleagues, supervisors, and faculty members. Many of the members recognized how improv comedy enhanced their social skills or teamwork makes the dream work skills including developing strong communities. As it pertains to community development, improv comedy activities could be used during orientation or within residence halls to help students reduce anxiety, get to know each other, and have fun doing it. By participating in these games, it could also teach students about how to engage in healthy relationships with each other. Students would have the opportunity to try out various approaches to relationship building through the games. Furthermore, improv comedy could potentially be used to reduce bullying or social isolation as improv comedy invites participants to support one another.

Improv comedy also has the ability to develop college students' way with words or communication skills. Several participants suggested that improv comedy helped with presentations and public speaking skills through practical application, learning to read an audience, and changing communication strategies. There are several games and exercises that could develop their public speaking skills, but improv comedy also could help

students develop new ways to communicate with one another. For example, students learned how to connect with each other, read non-verbal signals, and communicate more clearly with another. Furthermore, improv comedy has the potential to help students build connections with teammates, friends, or even strangers. Improv comedy can help students read body language but also how to understand another person. This could be helpful in social situations when addressing conflict, when getting to know a new friend at college, or addressing a faculty member for the first time.

**Identity development.** Spolin (1963, 1999) identified early on that improv could be used to shape participants' identity. Improv comedy has the potential to help college students develop their identity, even though students did not report this as much as was expected. In particular, improv comedy has the potential to develop college students' confidence, by being fearlessly true to themselves. College students constantly receive messages about who they should and should not be from friends, family, and the media. Participation in improv comedy may allow college students to try on different parts of themselves while creating new aspects of who they are as individuals. For example, a performer preferred to portray characters that were from a different gender than they identified as. Improv comedy could also help college students find their voice. Involvement within improv groups could also lead college students to take on new perspectives on politics, values, ethics, or ideas. A commonly played improv game called *Ding* has been used to change the perspectives of players by pushing them to adjust their choices to reflect new ones and in so doing, there are applications for college life. For example, students could be asked to debate real topics but have to take on opinions that were completely different from their own. If students took on a different opinion than the

one they held, they would gain a stronger appreciation of the different opinion, their own, or a combination of the two. Participation in these games also gives students the potential to develop their empathy and care for one another. Many participants shared that they felt like they did not care as much for other individuals before starting to do improv.

Being a part of an improv comedy troupe could also help students develop their cultural competence or a better understanding of themselves. Some of the participants mentioned that they were able to help develop their own racial identity development by being able to explore, observe, and describe their lived experience on stage. There are avenues to gain a better understanding of other cultures through improv comedy. For example, when culture is explored in improv scenes and games, it gives participants the opportunity to be exposed to, learn, and explore them in a safe environment. Participants were either given homework assignments or determined various cultures or sub-cultures that they wanted to learn and gain a stronger appreciation for.

The improvisational exercises, activities and applications could take time to incorporate and could be integrated through pedagogical practice, discussions, and training. These concepts could be taught in faculty workshops and incorporated into the curriculum and learning outcomes for courses in many different disciplines. The practical applications of improv comedy could be included in orientation programs, residence life, and leadership development. From discipline to discipline, from student clubs to internships or jobs, the applications are endless for how improv activities might used to inform theory and practice.

In this section, the discussion explored how improv comedy could be used on college campuses to enhance academic skills, social skills, and identity exploration. The



following section will include implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

### **Implications for Practice and Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the study, there are many implications for how this study might benefit higher education. However, there are potential challenges for practitioners. Improv comedy is not something that can be learned by reading, but takes active training and participation. As noted by the participants, improv comedy does take time to understand. The process of learning improv comedy is also accompanied by success and failures. Just because it is improv comedy does not mean that it will always be funny or remarkable. The participants in this study also indicated that there was potential for improv comedy scenes or games that do not work. If a scene just did not work or no one laughed a scene, the participants spent time reflecting why it did not work, and what needed to be done to adjust that strategy for the next time they performed. Furthermore, improv comedy can also be subjective and occasionally more of a detriment. For example, if a performer chooses to make fun of a recent current event that no one in the audience is aware of, the scene might not work or it might be inappropriate to actually joke about.

As a response to these challenges, I would encourage faculty and student development professionals alike to consider taking courses in improv comedy. It is important for someone who is incorporating these strategies, exercises, and games to have an understanding of what the structure of the activities are. Faculty and staff should also model the games first and then allow their students to participate. This would allow students a scaffolding in understanding how to do the activities. I would also encourage faculty and staff to keep doing the activities and not give up if one activity completely

fails. The activity might be need to be modified or it might work with another group on a different topic. There is learning that can occur even in failure within improv comedy. Finally, there should be some groundwork laid for the class to create a safe space where inappropriate and prejudiced humor is discouraged. It is important for the educational practice to create a space where everyone is safe.

For faculty, I would encourage them to integrate improvisational comedy games and exercises into the curriculum. Faculty can use specific exercises in the beginning of a course to create an environment that explores and fosters learning within the context of improvisation. Next, I would encourage the faculty to design improv exercises, learning outcomes, and rubrics that match the learning intended in the course. Faculty could also easily integrate dropping knowledge and building bridges to new worlds into different improv activities. For example, faculty could put random images on a screen and have their students give an improvised speech about the image while connecting previous information from the course into their talk.

For student affairs professionals, I would encourage them to integrate improvisational comedy games and exercise into leadership development, teamwork, orientation, and residence life. Student affairs professionals could use games and exercises with orientation leaders so they can break the ice with the new students. Leadership development programs could use improv to apply to challenging leadership case scenarios. Student affairs divisions could use improv activities to foster more creative approaches to working in teams. These practices could also be used to teach students about white privilege by having them take on new perspectives. Finally, student affairs staff could use these exercises for students within residence halls to handle

conflict, build community, and for residential staff to learn to respond to challenging situations. For example, professional staff could use the game *Ding*, which has participants change their responses when dinged, to teach resident assistants how to adapt and think on their feet or out of thin air to respond to a crisis situation.

Finally, I would suggest that faculty and student affairs professionals be strategic with how they integrate these activities. They should create learning outcomes and determine how they would assess these outcomes before jumping into improv games or activities. However, with innovation, I would also encourage flexibility for the individuals who were integrating improv comedy into their practice. There are bound to be some mistakes with integrating a brand new practice like this into teaching and work settings. There are also opportunities for new research about improv and its use on college campuses beyond a co-curricular activity.

While this current research study provides a foundational benchmark for studying improvisational comedy within student development and higher education, this research could speak to several topics more in depth. First, while it was imperative to include a variety of institutions to gain a broad understanding of the culture of improv comedy troupes on college campuses, there could be value that comes with spending more time with just one group over a longer period of time. For example, this study could have followed one or several groups over an academic year to observe how participants grew in their understanding of how improv comedy was affecting their development. Additionally, the study was limited to the Midwest, and there would have been value in expanding the study to other regions in the country or the world.

With the applications to academics, research could explore how students would be influenced by participating in an academic class focused on improv comedy. Students could be provided with a curriculum, learning outcomes, structure, written reflections, and other approved assessment measures. By providing a course that explored improvisation, there could be meaningful research conducted on the topic. As it pertains to social and identity development, a study could include incorporating improv comedy into orientation and residence hall activities. Upon participating in new student orientation, participants could be given various improv games to get to know each other. Roommates could also be allowed to improvise various potential conflicts to help them build rapport and learn how to work through differences. This study could be compared to an orientation group or residence hall who did not participate in improv and the results could be analyzed for differences that occurred in each of the groups. Furthermore, I wonder if there could be a study using grit theory (Duckworth et al., 2007) could explore how adaptability and grit are intertwined and then compare those with students who participated in improv and those who did not.

Throughout the study, the students expressed how improv comedy was a great de-stressor and helped them feel better. A study could explore how improv comedy could be used to help treat mental health issues that college students are dealing with. Whether it is bi-polar, depression, addiction, or obsessive compulsive disorder, there are significant opportunities to study how improv comedy could be used to explore or enhance treatments for mental health issues. Future research could also include studying how the brain is influenced by participating in improv comedy. With the student's claims about intellectual, memory, cognitive, and emotional development, there are opportunities to

explore what is happening on a neurological level.

After reviewing the data, it was evident that between academic, social, and identity, the academic theme produced the bulk of evidence to substantiate the claims made by the students. While academic skills and intelligence could be framed in the same category, intelligence was something that I considered incorporating, but did not connect to the central questions guiding the study. This led me to wonder if improv could be framed as a form of intelligence. If intelligence is the creation of something that is of value in society or eliminates problems (Gardner, 1999), there could be a case made to explore the connection between improv comedy as a form of intelligence. Improv comedy can be applied to any discipline, it is to value of society, and can be used to address and stop problems occurring in civilization.

As inferred in the recommendations above, if the study were to be conducted again, I would include a few suggestions. For example, I would have liked to spend more time with each of the individuals and the groups. While the participants were forthcoming, some of them had not put much thought into how involvement in improv comedy affected their lives. If the participants were interviewed several times, there could be time for the participants to reflect on their experiences. Furthermore, providing those students with journals to reflect upon their experiences could also be beneficial in collecting more data. While time and budget are the reality of every research process, the research could also benefit from exploring more improv troupes and teams because more perspectives could be shared about the effect that improv has on their development. Finally, the performances all occurred during the end of the semester, and there might have been value in exploring other performances throughout the semester or the year.

## Conclusion

To better understand students and their success on campus, academics have examined involvement on campus (Astin, 1984; Krause & Coates, 2008; Kuh, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). In order to better grasp identity development, scholars have studied racial and gender identity development of individuals (Hall, Freedle, & Cross, 1972; Josselson, 1996; Helm, 1993; Kim, 1981, 2001; Phinney, 1989; Ruiz, 1990). Researchers have also identified how improv comedy impacts limited academic disciplines like teaching and education (Aylesworth, 2008; Hackbert, 2010; Maheux & Lajoie, 2010; Sawyer, 2004), biology (Holmes & Qureshi, 2006), business (Pinnington, Morris, & Pinnington, 2003; Flucht, 2012; Aylesworth, 2008; Miner, Bassoff, & Moorman, 2001), social work (Steitzer, 2011), theatre and curriculum integration (McFadden, 2012), and engineering (Thilmany, 2005). This study acknowledged the current literature and attempts to create new knowledge by investigating the experiences of college students and how they make meaning of their involvement in improv and the effect that has on their academic, social, and identity development.

Overall, discoveries from this study affirm earlier work that affects student involvement and development. The observations and comments revealed by the participants clarify the academic, social, and identity development skills that were gained from participating in improv comedy troupes. Further, the participants' impressions also affirmed that participants grew as individuals, were able to create social connections, and were better students because of their involvement in improv comedy.

This current study deviates from the previous research because of the focus on collegiate improv teams and their overall effect on academic, social, and identity development. Whereas previous studies affirmed benefits of participating in improv comedy, this study provides a perspective that revealed participants were influenced by their involvement in a college improv comedy troupe. For many participants, being a part of a college improv team helped them learn new information and transfer that information to other areas of their life, adapt and problem solve quickly, forge links between new networks and topics, and be creative. Interviewees were also able to build and cultivate community, communicate commendably, and connect with other individuals. Finally, the students who were involved with a college improv team were able to believe fully in themselves, learn about who they were by gaining new perspectives, explore other cultures, and find their voice.

While the study did not generate a direct theory, it provides a scaffolding to understand how improv comedy may impact college students. Although these students were diverse in gender, race, and experience within improv comedy, their shared experiences emphasized the value that improv comedy can have on student development in higher education. This was especially evident in those students who had more exposure to improv comedy and previously reflected on how improv comedy had influenced their lives. Furthermore, the notion of improv comedy aiding in the educational and student development process at college campus opens a dialogue for the potential applications of improv to academic, social, and identity development and exploration.

In closing, this scholarship provides an examination of 12 individuals, 3 improv teams, and a variety of improv performances throughout 3 Midwestern universities. The

shared experiences of the participants offer higher education leaders, administrators, faculty and students a glimpse into how improv comedy may be used to enhance educational practices. If new ways of engaging and teaching students are expected and required of higher education, then faculty and professionals must consider the insights of the participants in this study. The previous literature and discoveries from this research provide a captivating case for further discussion and application, but how is this achieved in the best way through universities? As with all exploratory research, this study offers more questions for academics to say “yes, and” to answering.



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APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me your improv story...
2. What has improv comedy meant to you?
3. Have you benefited by being a part of improv?
  - a. Social skills?
  - b. Academic Skills?
  - c. How you see yourself? How you see others? How others see you?
  - d. Learning on college campus?
4. Would you say there have been any drawbacks to being a part of it? If so.....please explain
5. Do you think improv could be used in other ways on college campuses?
  - a. Classroom?
  - b. Residence halls?
  - c. Extra-curriculars?
  - d. Student affairs/development?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add about improv?
7. May I follow up with you if I have additional questions?

## APPENDIX B

### INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### **Interview Protocol**

Institution: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee (Title and Name): \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Other Topics Discussed: \_\_\_\_\_

Post Interview Comments or Leads: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Improv interviews**

##### Introductory Protocol

*To facilitate my note-taking, I would like to audio tape our conversations today. Please sign the release form. For your information, only researchers on the project will be privy to the recordings which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. In addition, you must sign a form devised to meet our human subject requirements. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) I do not intend to inflict any harm. Thank you for your agreeing to participate. I have planned this interview to last no longer than one hour. During this time, I have several questions that we would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning.*

##### Introduction

You have been selected to speak with us today because you have been identified as someone who has been a part of an improv troupe and regularly performs/practices. My study's focus is on the impact that improv comedy may have on your learning and development. This is an exploratory study and the hope is to identify how improv effects students so that it can augment student learning and/or development in the future.

##### A. Interviewee Background

How long have you been performing improv?

Participants age? Gender, major, and involvement in other extracurricular activities?

Interview questions (be sure to ask for specific examples!)

### Interview questions

1. Tell me your improv story...
2. What has improv comedy meant to you?
3. Have you benefited by being a part of improv?
  - a. Social skills?
  - b. Academic Skills?
  - c. How you see yourself? How you see others? How others see you?
  - d. Learning on college campus?
4. Would you say there have been any drawbacks to being a part of it? If so.....please explain.
5. Do you think improv could be used in other ways on college campuses?
  - a. Classroom?
  - b. Residence halls?
  - c. Extra-curriculars?
  - d. Student affairs/development?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add about improv?
7. May I follow up with you if I have additional questions?

Thank you for participating in this interview.



## APPENDIX C

### GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### **Interview Protocol**

Institution: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee (Title and Name): \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Other Topics Discussed: \_\_\_\_\_

Post Interview Comments or Leads \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Improv interviews**

##### Introductory Protocol

*To facilitate my note-taking, I would like to audio tape our conversations today. Please sign the release form. For your information, only researchers on the project will be privy to the recordings which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. In addition, you must sign a form devised to meet our human subject requirements. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) I do not intend to inflict any harm. Thank you for your agreeing to participate. I have planned this interview to last no longer than one hour. During this time, I have several questions that we would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning..*

##### Introduction

You all have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who has been a part of an improv troupe and regularly performs/practices. My study's focus is on the impact that improv comedy may have on your learning and development. This is an exploratory study and the hope is to identify how improv effects students so that it can augment student learning and/or development in the future.

- A. Questions will be derived from notes taken during one-on-one interviews and performances aimed at answering the overall interview questions.

Thank you for participating in this interview.

APPENDIX D  
RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am conducting a research study for my doctoral dissertation that involves interviewing members of improv comedy troupes by exploring the impact that improvisational comedy has on the college students who participate. Your participation would involve meeting with me one time for approximately one hour to determine if the study would work with your improv team. I would hope to interview selected improvisers on the troupe, observe a performance, and conduct a group interview with the team. Please know that all of your information will be kept confidential. The study is being conducted under the guidance of Dr. Phyllis McCluskey-Titus in the Department of Educational Administration and Foundations at Illinois State University.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email so we can schedule a time to talk.

Sincerely,

Colin Stewart

APPENDIX E  
LETTER OF CONSENT

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Phyllis McCluskey-Titus in the Department of Educational Administration and Foundations (EAF) at Illinois State University. I am conducting a research study to explore how improvisational comedy impacts the development of college students. I am requesting your participation because of your involvement in the improv comedy troupe on your college campus. Your participation will involve a one-on-one interview, observations of a performance (which will be video-recorded), and a focus group, which will be audio recorded.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty and it will not influence your future involvement with the program. Your responses are confidential and any information that might allow someone to identify you will not be disclosed.

There are minimal risks involved with participation. For example, a potential risk could be loss of confidentiality but all data will kept in a locked, secure location to ensure this does not happen. Additionally, when exploring identity, social skills, and learning, there may be some emotional risks. Although there may be no direct benefit to you, a possible benefit of your participation is a better understanding of the instructor and student relationship. If you have any questions concerning the research study, please call me at [REDACTED], or Dr. Phyllis McCluskey-Titus at 309-438-5422

Sincerely,

Colin Stewart

I consent to participating in the above study.  
Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_

I consent to be video recorded.  
Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_

I consent to be audio recorded.  
Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_

Are you over the age of 18?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Research Ethics & Compliance office at Illinois State University at 309-438-2529.

APPENDIX F

VIDEO RELEASE FORM

As part of this project, I will be making videotape recordings of you during your participation in the research. Please indicate what uses of these videotapes you are willing to permit, by putting your initials next to the uses you agree to, and signing the form at the end. This choice is completely up to you. I will only use the videotapes in ways that you agree to. In any use of the tapes, you will not be identified by name.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ The videotapes can be studied by the researcher for use in the research project.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ The videotapes can be used for academic/professional publications.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ The videotapes can be shown at professional conferences or meetings.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ The videotapes can be shown in classrooms to students.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ The videotapes can be shown in public presentations to non- professional groups.

I have read the above descriptions and give my consent for the use of the videotapes as indicated by my initials above.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)



APPENDIX H  
DATA ACCOUNTING LOG

	Date	Location	Length	CodeName	Brief Description	Transcript time and sending message to student
1	12/4/15	Quill University	50 minutes	Vince	Individual Interview	3 hours
2	12/4/15	Quill University	55 minutes	Rodney	Individual Interview	3.5 hours
3	12/4/15	Quill University	50 minutes	Clark	Individual Interview	2.5 hours
4	12/4/15	Quill University	55 minutes	Lester	Individual Interview	3 hours
5	12/4/15	Spartan Hall Auditorium	85 minutes	Arrows	Follow-up interview	3 hours
6	12/4/15	Spartan Hall Auditorium	50 minutes	Arrows	Performance	3 hours
1	12/9/15	Gotham University	55 minutes	Laurel	Individual Interview	3 hours
2	12/9/15	Gotham University	55 minutes	Wesley	Individual Interview	3.5 hours
3	12/9/15	Gotham University	37 minutes	Dwayne	Individual Interview	3 hours
4	12/9/15	Gotham University	38 minutes	Ralph	Individual Interview	3 hours
5	12/9/15	Gotham University Student Center	33 minutes	Kryptonians	Follow-up group interview	3 hours
6	12/9/15	Gotham University Theatre	2 hours	Kryptonians	Performance	3 hours
1	12/11/15	Star City University	55 minutes	Felicity	Individual interview	3 hours
2	12/11/15	Star City University	37 minutes	Sharon	Individual interview	2.5 hours
3	12/11/15	Star City University	48 minutes	Felix	Individual interview	3 hours
4	12/11/15	Star City University	53 minutes	Naomi	Individual interview	3.5 hours
5	12/11/15	Star City University Student Center	40 minutes	The Jokers	Follow-up group interview	3 hours
6	12/11/15	Star City University Student Center	1.5 hours	The Jokers	Performance	3 hours