

Course Description

Improvisation is unique in its ability to heighten our awareness of ourselves and others, to own our authority, and to share it well. In this course, you will use improvisation theories and practices to help you think on your feet, connect with others, and build trusting relationships. You will learn how to listen openly, let judgments fall away, and embody change. You'll identify habits of thought, feeling and action that hold you back and begin to develop new ways of expressing yourself so compellingly that you will be better able to bring new ideas to life. So get up and take your first step down a new path towards becoming more empathetic, agile, and present in a world filled with ambiguity and adversity that needs your help.

Course Outline

This course is divided into three modules that teach the language and skills of improvisation to develop authentic leadership.

Course Objectives

- 1) To apply improvisation techniques as communication strategies to enhance leadership presence
- 2) To think on your feet and communicate strategically, confidently, and authentically
- 3) To stimulate curiosity in teams and collaborate effectively in groups

Cultivating Curiosity: Starting with 'Yes, And'

In this first module, students begin to rediscover their intrinsic curiosity, exploring the foundations of improvisation. That approach allows self and other prejudices to fall away and for creativity to emerge. Students begin to explore their own leadership story through the improviser's lens, which they'll revisit throughout the course. As Leonard and Yorton write "Work cultures that embrace 'Yes, And' are more inventive, quicker to solve problems, and more likely to have engaged employees than organizations where ideas are judged, criticized, and rejected too quickly." Additionally, the module will introduce tools for the rest of the class — mindful presence, the mind-body connection, and storytelling and meaning making.

Connecting and Collaborating with Others: The Power of the Ensemble and Co-Creativity

In the second module, students consider the interrelated concepts of *ensemble* and *co-creativity*. For generations, business consultants and academics have offered many theories about teamwork — from the executive board to the retail staff. But improvisation provides a more direct way to uncover the potential of our work with others through radical listening, collaborative learning, and purposeful and co-creative play — all in the present moment.

Developing Conscious Leadership: Embodying Authentic Presence

In our third module, we will revisit the student's leadership story, using exercises that encourage students to take and support responsible risks, and to find a balanced approach to authority — when to command it and when to share it. The class culminates in a charge for the students going forward — the more they practice the principles from the class, the more they can heighten their awareness of themselves and others. And they can also overcome the fear of being judged and the tendency to judge others in a way that allows creativity to flourish.

Addendum

Possible Text

Leonard, K. & Yorton, T. (2015). *Yes, and: How improvisation reverses “No But” thinking and improves creativity and collaboration*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Sample Lesson: Thinking on your Feet

These exercises will help students gain practice with listening to others, letting go of preconceived ideas, sharing leadership, adapting to what is arising in the moment, modulating expression, and committing to the task at hand.

Exercise 1: Expert talker

A student volunteer is given an area of expertise selected from suggestions from the class. They are the ‘expert’ who is invited to “think on their feet” and give a 2-minute talk on their area of expertise at a conference (the class). Their objective for the expert is to stay on topic, listen carefully, and share expertise while remaining open and present to the questions asked by the class. After the exercise, the class is invited to share what was effective in the expert’s communication.

Exercise 2: The Conducted Story

Students work in groups of 4 with whom they’ve not yet worked. One team volunteers at a time and is given a topic from the class. The goal of the team is to tell a cohesive story together. The conductor (instructor or designated leader) will point to one member of the team at a time who will tell the story picking up on where the previous team member left off. This is repeated again in different groups but with controversial topics to gain practice with modulating expression and messaging within a team.

Exercise 3: Panel of Experts

This exercise asks students to bring the communication skills explored in the previous two exercises into a collaborative, creative setting. Three or four student volunteers are asked to sit at the front of the class to form a “panel.” Suggestions are taken from the class regarding the panel’s area of expertise (e.g. the history of ice cream). Once the area of expertise is selected, the audience may ask the panel questions. Each student on the panel must use the concept of “yes, and” to accept any information one of their fellow panel guests offers and build upon it in the moment.

Faculty biographies

David Purdy is a Clinical Assistant Professor of Management Communication at NYU’s Stern School of Business. He draws on more than 25 years of experience and education in business and the arts to help students, executives and entrepreneurs think and communicate more effectively. His research in Aesthetic Intelligence draws on the arts and humanities – and insights from neuroscience – to help others connect, communicate, and create effectively.

Dr. Nisha Sajnani is an Associate Professor and Director of the Drama Therapy Program and Theatre and Health Lab at NYU’s Steinhardt School of Education, Culture, and Human Development. She leads research on how improvisation and performance techniques facilitate meaningful and effective personal and group communication, collaboration, and advocacy.