

Serious Fun: The Perceived Influences of Improvisational Acting on Community College Students

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Abstract

Theatrical improvisation lacks investigation within higher education. The findings from this phenomenological study of seven students from a Mid-Atlantic community college lend credibility to other research supporting arts and extracurricular activities and provide insights into what they value in their educational experience. Positive social change can come from providing students with an education that includes fun, creativity, and socialization for a successful future.

Problem

Without the students' voice and input on what they value in their education, students could become disenfranchised

Lack of awareness of students' perspectives on co-curricular activities may hamper efforts to meet goals of institution

Purpose

Discover, describe, and interpret shared lived experience of improvisational acting

Help community college students make meaning of their on-going development

Research Question

How have experiences with theatrical improvisation training, practice, and performance helped college students make meaning of their ongoing development?

Relevant Literature

Conceptual Framework

- **Flow** – the concept that enjoyment is a dynamic state of being where the challenge of an activity matches the skill of the player (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991)
- **Play**
Man the Player – humans create and become their culture through their play (Huizinga, 1950)
Balance of play elements (mimicry, vertigo, competition, and chance) as described by Caillois (1958)
- **Theatrical Improvisation**
Spolin (1986) – improvisation for theatre
Johnstone (1987) – noncompetitive theatre
Fox (1994) – acts of service through theatre
Boal (2002) – social theatre

Procedures

Design

- Interpretive phenomenology

Sample

- Seven Mid-Atlantic community college student theatrical improvisation group
 - over 18 years old
 - enrolled at least one semester of college
 - performance experience

Data Collection

- Individual interviews
- Focus Group

Data Analysis

Ad hoc analysis (Kvale, 1996)

- **First cycle:** Transcribe, hand coding, and categorizing
- **Second cycle:** Hermeneutic circle of inquiry, participant reflection

Findings

Themes

- **The Hook**-participants described looking for fun play activities without competition (balance of play elements)
- **The Craft**-participants identified skills, abilities and qualities they perceived they learned and developed through the practice of the craft (listening, selflessness, presence). Several noted a flow-like state in their practice.
- **The Rewards and Applications**-skills development transferred to other aspects of the participants' lives (studies, work, personal relationships, and identity development)
- **The Continuance**-participants described relationship to organizational structure of the group and the college recognizing a need for increased awareness and communication between the two. Post focus group, participants recognized a need for more group reflection to perpetuate the group and strengthen the developmental benefits.

Relationship to Literature

- **Gap** - tied three concept strands together that had previously been studied in pairs, presented perspective of students previously lacking
- **Base Knowledge** - added to play and flow literature on potential benefits (i.e., social competency, personal awareness, identity development, and creativity), added support to advocacy of extracurricular art activities

Limitations

Mid Atlantic college student organized improvisation group-may be different in different institutions

Personal bias-researcher bridled rather than bracketed prior knowledge using it to guide but not influence the research

Small, homogeneous sample-all men

Interviews-tailored to individuals and not exactly the same.

Conclusions

Transferability

Findings could transfer to similar extracurricular theatrical improvisation group

Relationship of Data to Professional Practice

- Research-repeat study with
 - Different organizational structure
 - Different age group
 - Different style of improvisation, art form, or flow activity
 - Different methodology
- Educational stakeholders-expand accessibility and understanding of extracurricular activities
- The Society-reorganization of group with performance elements and additional reflection time
- The research site- increased awareness of satisfaction and dissatisfaction held by participants and their relationship to the college

Who Can Benefit from Study

- Participants-increased insight and sense of worth
- Community partner-increased community building
- Educational stakeholders-awareness of positive learning and development experienced through improvisation

Social Change Implications

- Support and foster student organizations
- Confirm and extend research and knowledge base
- Increased awareness for participants
- Better and more programs
- Increased awareness of theatrical improvisation

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