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 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

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.

Findings

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
- Increased awareness of theatrical improvisation
- 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

Limitations
- 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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