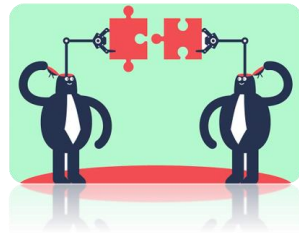




Building character strengths through Improv

IMPROVISATION



Annika Nübold & Eliza de Sousa Fernandes Perna
Global Citizenship Symposium 2023, 22 June 2023

Context

- Students' focus on grades but also their uncertainty and fear of failure have seemingly increased in past years
- Our complex, fast-paced and globalized world has made social skills ever more important (Pereira & Costa, 2017)
- As a university, we should support students' character development to help them successfully master their learning experience as well as the challenges in society at large (Pereira & Costa, 2017; Schleicher, 2016)

What are Character strengths?

☀️ **Positive traits or capacities that ...**

- reflect our personal identity
- are personally fulfilling
- are omnipresent and valued across cultures
- come with positive outcomes for ourselves & others
- contribute to the collective good
- signature strengths



The VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues

Character strengths

VIRTUE OF **Wisdom**



CREATIVITY
Original & Adaptive.
Clever, A problem solver, Sees and does things in different ways



CURIOSITY
Interested, Explores new things, Open to new ideas



JUDGMENT
A critical thinker, Thinks things through, Open minded



LOVE OF LEARNING
Masters new skills & topics, Systematically adds to knowledge



PERSPECTIVE
Wise, Provides wise counsel, Takes the big picture view

VIRTUE OF **Courage**



BRAVERY
Shows valor, Doesn't shrink from fear, Speaks up for what's right



PERSEVERANCE
Persistent, Industrious, Finishes what one starts



HONESTY
Authentic, Trustworthy, Sincere



ZEST
Enthusiastic, Energetic, Doesn't do things half-heartedly

VIRTUE OF **Humanity**



LOVE
Warm and genuine, Values close relationships



KINDNESS
Generous, Nurturing, Caring, Compassionate, Altruistic



SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE
Aware of the motives and feelings of others, Knows what makes others tick

VIRTUE OF **Justice**



TEAMWORK
Team player, Socially responsible, Loyal



FAIRNESS
Just, Doesn't let feelings bias decisions about others



LEADERSHIP
Organizes group activities, Encourages a group to get things done

VIRTUE OF **Temperance**



FORGIVENESS
Merciful, Accepts others' shortcomings, Gives people a second chance



HUMILITY
Modest, Lets one's accomplishments speak for themselves



PRUDENCE
Careful, Cautious, Doesn't take undue risk



SELF-REGULATION
Self-controlled, Manages impulses and emotions

VIRTUE OF **Transcendence**



APPRECIATION OF BEAUTY & EXCELLENCE
Feels awe & wonder in beauty, Inspired by goodness of others



GRATITUDE
Thankful for the good, Expresses thanks, Feels blessed



HOPE
Optimistic, Future-minded



HUMOR
Playful, Brings smiles to others, Lighthearted



SPIRITUALITY
Searches for meaning, Feels a sense of purpose, Senses a relationship with the sacred

What is improvisational theatre?

*A form of theatre in which most or all of what is performed is created **spontaneously** and **collaboratively** by the performers as the improvisation unfolds*

Two principles

- Embracing failure
- Yes, and ...

Fun AND evidently effective

- **Experiential learning** has been evidenced to ...
 - promote students' metacognitive abilities, self-directed learning, and their capacity to apply newly learned skills and knowledge to real-life problems (Kolb & Kolb, 2006)
- **Improv theatre** has been shown to ...
 - reduce students' stress & uncertainty tolerance and improve their affective well-being (Felsman et al., 2020; Seppänen et al., 2020)
 - increase students' creativity, communication, & deep learning (Berk & Trieber, 2009; Felsman et al., 2020; Lavik, 2020; Toivanen et al., 2011)
- **Universities** and **businesses** have recognized that ...
 - flexibility, creativity and resilience are important virtues that are possible to train with improv theatre (Giardella, 2015; Madson, 2010; Rimbey, 2017; Vera & Crossan, 2004)

Improv theatre and character strengths development

- Increases interpersonal attentiveness, trust in oneself and others, and spontaneity and flexibility
- Mirrors real life challenges (i.e., dealing with uncertainty, collaborating with others)
- Creates a positive, playful, and socially oriented atmosphere
- Allows students to explore, embrace mistakes, learn and grow together

Let's get active!

The strange neighbour

- All students stand in a circle. Each student makes up something fictional about their neighbour, like an accessory or invents a part of the body. They then confront the neighbour with the feature they made up.
- Example: "Wow, you have huge antlers on your forehead!". The neighbour responds positively, without justifying nor defending it. The answer has to start with "Yes, you are right!", and in the case of the example can be followed by "... since I have these antlers on my forehead, I don't need to queue at the cloakroom at parties anymore. I can just hang my jacket on the antlers!".
- It can be a funny response, as long as it is not defensive nor negative, which is most important.
- Be strict on the students not defending themselves – instead they should react positively. Please, do not blame them if they do, rather acknowledge that it is indeed hard to not fall into the negative defensive mode. Explain, that it is not about always agreeing and saying "Yes, you are right!", but about the attitude with which we react in a stressful situation.

The strange neighbour

- You could do a second round, but this time you don't let the students make up fictional things, but rather statements which might happen in student or work life, e.g. "You always forget the attachments in emails you send me". The answer could be "Yes, you are right! I just love sending you emails, and this way I can send you more emails, as I have to resend them with the attachment."
- Make sure to emphasize that examples should be rather light and fictional; this is not meant as a round of real personal critique (in case people know each other) but to make the scenario a bit more realistic
- Debrief questions:
 - What made it easier for you to react?
 - How do you feel about the answers given?
 - How does this exercise help you in your next stressful situation?
- Purpose:
 - Dealing with irritations
 - Enables students to react much calmer and more relaxed to stressful situations
 - Shows them that they have a choice on how to react to discomfort

Expert interview

- Person A and person B stand next to each other and face into the same direction. Like a TV-moderator, person C asks them questions, standing in front of them. Person A and B respond building full sentences by saying one word each, turn by turn. The answerers can be introduced as an expert, e.g. the moderator can say ...
- *"A big welcome to our expert tonight! We are happy having you here in our TV studio. Please, tell us something about yourself – what is your name and what is your area of expertise?"*
- Be clear that it should only be one word and that they should not think for too long!

Expert interview

- Debrief questions:
 - What was challenging for you?
 - How did it feel when the other person did not say what you expected?
 - How satisfied were you with your “answers”?
 - What helped you to cooperate?
 - What (kind of words) made it more interesting?
- Aim
 - Acknowledging other perspectives and mind-sets
 - Inter-personal attentiveness, collaboration
 - Illustrate how hard it can be to let go of our own perspective, instead of listening to / seeing the other person
 - Emphasize that the result is often interesting/funny/good, although nobody knew where it was going
 - When collaborating, it is much more important to connect with the other person than having a clear idea about the end result

The emotional book

- Each participant gets a book. Participant A will read from this book in a certain emotion. Before the person starts reading, person B will tell them an emotion. Stop after a few sentences and let person C guess which emotion it was.
- Debrief questions:
 - Person A: How did it feel for you to act out that emotion?
 - Person B: Would you have expressed the emotion in a different way?
 - Person C: Did you guess the emotion? How exactly did you realize which emotion the person was using?
- Aim
 - Detecting and acknowledging inter-personal and inter-cultural differences in expression and reading of emotions
 - Train empathy and perspective taking
 - Reflect with students on the way emotions are expressed, e.g., face expressions, voice etc. (shift focus away from content of a message)



a.nubold@maastrichtuniversity.nl

e.desousafernandes@maastrichtuniversity.nl