

Allison Hosier

I was once a world famous magician

Using improv to improve performance in the classroom

A wise improv actor once told me that when students come to class, they expect to be bored. Unfortunately for information literacy instructors, there may be no place where this is more true than our own classrooms. Research has shown that the confidence students have in their research-related skills often does not match their proficiency with those skills.¹

For some students, this means that they enter our classrooms believing that they already know how to effectively find, evaluate, and use information as part of the research process. As a result, they are not open to the idea that there might be more to learn. So they expect to be bored.

And often they are bored, at least in the course-related one-shot sessions I teach. They show this boredom in a number of ways. They yawn. They whisper conversations. They check their cell phones. Sometimes, they even fall asleep.

The truth is, though I sometimes resent students for the open boredom they display when I'm teaching them, I can't really blame them. I am bored myself.

Seeking to change

I had no idea how much my boredom showed until I was asked to deliver the first one-to-two minutes of a typical lecture and then subject myself to a critique of my performance. This was as part of

a class I took called "Improv Offstage: Teachers and Youth Workers Edition" in fall 2017.

As I gave my usual introduction of myself and my role as an information literacy librarian, I was proud of how smoothly the words flowed despite how intimidating it felt to stand on a stage in front of my classmates and teacher, Michael Burns, whose wisdom I paraphrased earlier. I started to relax. This was a script I knew by heart. I didn't even have to think about it.

That, as it turned out, was precisely the problem. The feedback I received was that my lecture had seemed rote, like I wasn't even listening to myself.

For the next part of the activity, I was asked to try it again, but this time to pretend that I was a world famous magician, standing on stage at a sold out show in a popular local theater in front of an audience who was excited to see me.

The benefits of improv

There are plenty of articles and books out there about how improv can be used not just by skilled comedians and

Allison Hosier is information literacy librarian at University at Albany, State University of New York, email: ahosier@albany.edu

actors to entertain an audience but also for other professional and therapeutic purposes, including an example specific to the library field by Kate Dohe and Erin Pappas.² I had previously learned some of these benefits by participating in a drop-in class held by the Mop and Bucket Company (MopCo), a popular improvisation group based in Schenectady, New York, of which Burns is the codirector.³ When I learned that MopCo would be offering a four-part course specifically designed for teachers, I was eager to participate.

It should be noted that the goal of the course was not to turn any of us into comedians. Though improv is often associated with comedy, the real aim is less about learning how to be funny and more about learning to be spontaneous. Burns created a safe environment in which to practice this creative spontaneity. As teachers, we learned how to take risks and how to stretch and even step outside of our respective comfort zones.

Giving the first two minutes of a typical lecture while pretending to be a world famous magician was certainly outside my comfort zone. I didn't realize how rote my teaching had become until suddenly I had to actually listen to what I was saying so I could try to find places for pauses and other dramatic flourishes. I not only had to describe what the students would be learning, I had to create excitement about it. I had to use the space, choosing when to approach and back away from my audience to help create mystery and intrigue, the way a magician would.

Did I feel ridiculous? Yes. I also had a lot of fun.

Most importantly, it occurred to me that maybe the students I worked with were bored not just because the content I was teaching them was inherently boring. Maybe they were bored because I was boring. This lesson on performance showed me that didn't have to be the case.

If students come to my class expecting to be bored, I can subvert that expectation just by presenting myself in a different way. And I can have fun doing it.

Putting change into action

In the context of teaching a one-shot information literacy session, the greatest part of all this is that changing my performance isn't something I have to clear with the course instructor ahead of time. If students come to my class expecting to be bored, I can subvert that expectation just by presenting myself in a different way. And I can have fun doing it.

To be clear, I don't come to every class now and pretend to be someone else. In a recent one-shot session, I changed my performance simply by adopting the persona of someone who expected that students would be excited to see me and interested in what I had to teach them. I came out from behind the podium more to use the space that was available to me. I paid attention to the volume of my voice and the pace of my words. I used more humor.

These changes did not feel forced or unnatural. And I had the confidence to make them because I was once a world famous magician.

Notes

1. Valeria E. Molteni and Emily K. Chan, "Student Confidence/Overconfidence in the Research Process," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 41 no. 1 (2015): 2-8.

2. Kate Dohe and Erin Pappas, "The Many Flavors of 'Yes,'" *C&RL News* 78 no. 8 (2017): 422-25.

3. MopCo Improv Theatre, 2017, <https://www.mopco.org/>. *zc*