

Safe Stress: Medical Improv as an Avenue to Teach Motivational Interviewing and Patient Activation

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Background

Medical improvisation (improv) is a new training approach in healthcare education that uses improvisational theater techniques to teach skills such as communication, teamwork, and cognition.¹⁻³ Improv instruction and its impact on student learning, participation, and experience has not been fully described in the literature. Based on previous findings with DPT students, medical improv has been shown to promote better engagement in roleplaying and creates a fun and comfortable environment for student learning.⁴

Research Objectives

Our case study aimed to integrate medical improv techniques into 2 role-playing labs in the Psychosocial Aspects of Human Behavior 2 course of the Northwestern University DPT program and examine the outcome on students and faculty. We wanted to explore the interaction of novel exercises with previous medical improv experience, prior psychosocial coursework and clinical experiences, and its impact on the learning experience for students and faculty.

Methods

All second-year DPT students participated in medical improv exercises (“1776” and “New Choice”) as part of labs focused on motivational interviewing and patient activation. 9 of 11 course faculty were trained in the exercises before the course began. Following the labs, semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted separately with students and faculty. Transcripts were analyzed using segmentation and inductive analysis.

Focus Group Demographics

Students	
Age in years: mean (range)	25.7 (23 - 31)
Gender: Male/Female	2/7
Extroversion: mean (range)	3.7 (2 - 5)
Previous medical improv experience?	9/9

Extroversion measured by asking “How outgoing are you?”; 5 - most, 0 - least

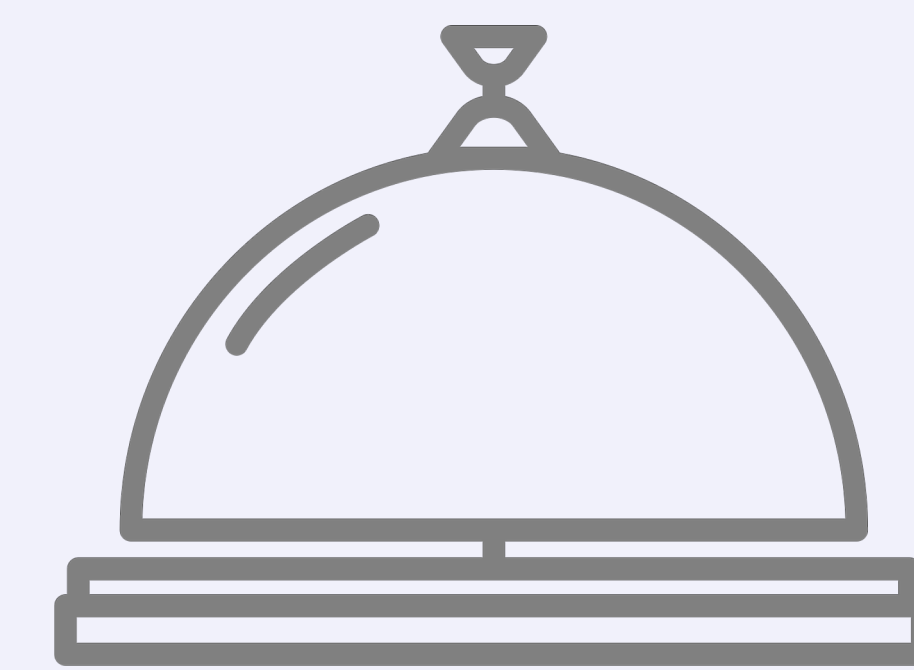
Faculty	
Course experience in years: mean (range)	6.3 (1-17)
Gender: Male/Female	1/8
Previous medical improv teaching experience?	5/9

Methods - Medical Improv Exercises



Activity: 1776⁵

Describe modern day concepts or technology to someone who has traveled forward in time from 1776.



Activity: New Choice⁵

Given relationship, setting, and scenario, perform a scene where you are asked to immediately make a “new choice” after a bell is rung.

“... 1776 like explaining something, a new invention to someone that was from that time period, did a really good job of practicing effective and most effective ways to communicate”

- Student 2

“I really liked the improv for many reasons. But specifically in this lab, I liked that. It was kind of like a safe introduction to the principles we want to apply to, you know, physical therapy”

- Faculty 1

“[It] was like a lesson on... promoting or developing ...my social intelligence or my emotional intelligence...with improv ...you have to read the emotions within the group and from there, kind of see if you...need to pivot”

- Faculty 3

“We have to be prepared and ready to... based on what the patient states...to react to that in the appropriate way so as to not, you know, elicit more damages to the patient whether it be mental or physical”

- Student 4

“...it also plays a part on the faculty... [the faculty]...explained the reason why we were doing [New Choice] before we did it. And so that helped to...be able to understand why we were doing it and ...benefit from it”

- Student 7

“I’m just not great at [improv]...That’s a good reminder that... I’m not going to be perfect at this...but it’s still a thing we’re going to do. And that is uncomfortable in a I guess a growth mindset way”

- Faculty 6

Results: Themes

Shared between Students and Faculty

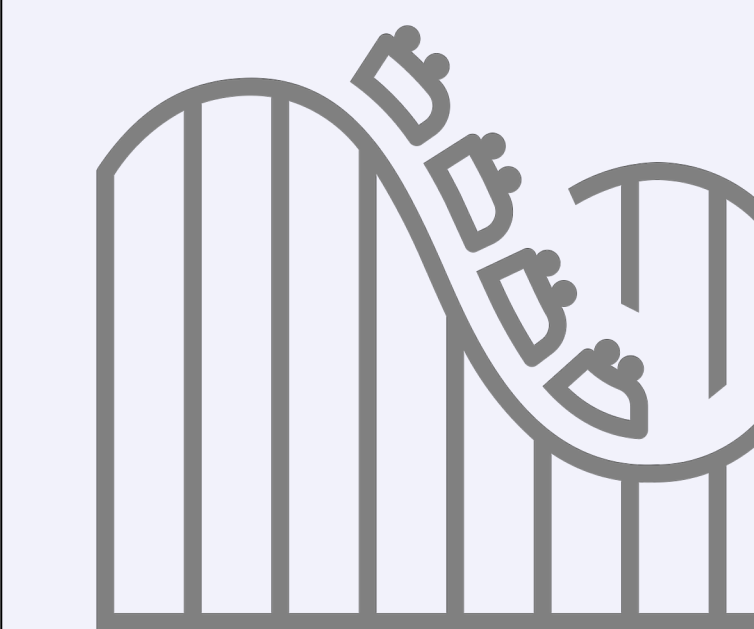
- Facilitator plays a key role in teaching experience
- Debrief of how exercises relates to clinical skills and class objectives is a key component to medical improv
- The chosen medical improv exercises most linked with clinical skills of communication and adaptability

Unique to Students

- Previous medical improv experience was helpful because it allowed students to focus on the “why” and not the “what”.

Unique to Faculty

- Medical improv provides a safe stress for learning.



“I think doing improv, specifically improv, and feeling that uncomfortable feeling ...that feeling of like kind of wanting to throw up and kind of being like really excited that you’re going to Disneyland... they’re the same, right? You know, like, I love that it’s challenging me like, neurologically and emotionally in a way that I do not challenge myself on a regular basis.”

- Faculty 5

Conclusion

Medical improv is a tool to promote engagement for learning motivational interviewing and patient activation as part of a psychosocial DPT curriculum. Prior experience with improv is beneficial for both students and faculty when implementing it into the classroom. A debrief is necessary to facilitate connection between improv and clinical applications.

Clinical Implications

Medical improv can be a useful tool for DPT students and clinicians to practice clinical skills in a safe stress environment. Implementing advanced improv exercises may benefit from more faculty training.

Acknowledgements

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References

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