Improv for Researchers

By: Cara Larson

Are you looking at the included videos and thinking, "Wow. That looks like some weird yoga." Well, my friend, that is not yoga. It’s improv!

I've been lucky enough to be involved in the improvisational comedy community for the past three years here in Iowa City. While participating in improv, I've been able to study it deeper and understand how effective a tool it is in improving communication skills. I found inspiration in Alan Alda's improv workshops at Stony Brook, and I thought that using improv as a source for helping undergraduates to spruce up their research presentations would be both entertaining and incredibly helpful.

There are multitudes of amazing research projects going on here at Iowa, but these projects are often lost to people who are not part of the scientific community. I wanted this workshop to help researchers gain skills that would allow them to show off their presentations to any audience. I didn’t want technical jargon to be a barrier to any audience, and I didn't want any topic to be seen as dull. So, I targeted undergraduates and graduate students that were participating in research here at Iowa, to help them improve their presentation skills to a non-research based audience.

In order to get this project kicked off, I had to first collaborate with the Iowa Center for Research by Undergraduates (ICRU.) I met with Lindsay Marshall, who is the associate director for ICRU, and started discussing dates for the workshops. We were able to set three dates spanning late March and early April, right before the spring undergraduate poster festival. I then rallied the local Iowa City improv troupes, and booked Public Space One in Iowa City for
those dates. Through a successful Facebook campaign, and several departmental emails, we were able to draw a crowd of about fifty students for the workshops.

researchers enjoying the "mirror" game

The workshop games were focused on listening to audience and "getting out of your head." Listening more closely to the researcher's audience allowed students to ensure their research was being delivered effectively and it allowed the speaker to see if they needed to alter their delivery methods. Getting out of the students' heads, allowed the researchers to quickly adapt to a variety of audiences. The researcher could quickly change their delivery and they were less stiff with their presentation methods.

The workshops were all an hour long and the improv games were focused, as mentioned before, on listening to one’s audience and getting out of one’s head. At the end of the hour workshop, the researchers were then faced with their greatest task: inventing a new gadget in an engaging way. The researchers were given a random assortment of props that they had 3 minutes to organize into some new invention, that they then had to present to the rest of the workshop in 30 seconds. This was a group activity and the only stipulation was that the presentations had to be engaging, so
the researchers pulled from the games they had been playing from the previous hour. This activity was incredibly successful.

improvisers and researchers pose for a quick picture

I do think it would be more effective if the workshops took place over several evenings, but that would be much more difficult to do. Marketing improv to scientists is challenging. Marketing has to start a month before the workshop and the emails have to be constant and ceaseless. Stressing that there isn't a time when individuals will be put on the spot would be a positive marketing tool.

I hope to continue doing improv workshops with ICRU in the future. There was overall positive feedback from the workshop, and I was approached by many researchers from the workshop, who said they greatly enjoyed the games they played.