Research Article

'Whose Line is it Anyway?' Using Improvisation to Hone Library Employees' Customer Service Skills

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Abstract

Improvisation is an effective tool for developing actors' skills. It can also be a powerful and unique means for enhancing customer service skills in the contemporary academic library environment. Interactions between library users and librarians / library staff can often be complicated and require excellent listening and communication skills. This article explores how improvisation training can help reinforce customer service skills while also enhancing team building, team cohesion, and interpersonal engagement skills for these library employees. Such exercises are not only enjoyable and entertaining for library employees, they also help develop essential skills which enhance their customer service interactions.

Keywords: improvisation; training; customer service; librarians; library staff; library employees; skills development; team building; interpersonal skills; innovation

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Introduction

User satisfaction with an academic library is normally predicated upon experiences with librarians and library staff (Note: "library employees" for the duration of this article) (Hossain, 2016). But, these interactions between users and library employees can be complicated and require excellent listening and communication skills on the part of the person receiving the query. In the academic library setting, customer service interactions frequently begin with a question outside the range of a library employee's knowledge base or are asked in a way that is ambiguous. Acting, in the theatrical sense, and the art of providing excellent customer service in the library environment have many facets in common. In each, practitioners must be able to listen to learn (without judgement) as to what is being said, respond appropriately, and uphold a certain "keeping in character" demeanor. Just as improvisation training can help actors build acting skills, so too can it help librarians develop interpersonal engagement skills and aide library employees in adopting the role of the knowledgeable and helpful information guide.

Improvisation exercises are an innovative training method in academic libraries, building collaboration that is novel for the participants and, as a by-product, entertaining for any onlookers. When enhanced customer service and increased team cohesion and communication are desired, improvisation exercises reach beyond the traditional team building exercises and offer a true skills-building opportunity, based upon vulnerability and trust. Because of these characteristics, customer service training that utilizes improvisation can also promote increased comfort between colleagues, and a bolstered confidence in the trainees' own ability to provide excellent point-of-need customer service.

This article examines ways that improvisation training activities enhance customer service skill-building while improving the academic library user experience. It also demonstrates how improvisation exercises can help develop communication and collaboration skills among library employees. Moreover, it provides ready-to-implement examples of improvisation activities that will enable librarians to augment their existing customer service training programs.

Literature Review

There exists more than one understanding of the term "improvisation." Improvisation can be defined as a method of marshalling existing resources to cope with unforeseen or unplanned events (Christopoulos et al., 2016). And, in fact, this is what many librarians do throughout the course of their day; meet user needs the best they can, as they can. Improvisation, understood by its Greek Theatre or contemporary jazz music definition, is a performance that is not practiced, in which the participants play off one another, in the moment (Hadida et al., 2015; Trepanier, 2017). Much of the research in business, organizational development, and even leadership is focused on the former definition and not so much upon the latter (Nisula, 2015). This article offers a unique approach, focusing on the Classical definition of improvisation and its value as a poignant tool toward improving library customer service. Improvisation can be an important source for developing creativity and can have long lasting effects on

participants (Fisher & Barrett, 2019). It is an effective and engaging way for individuals to learn about human behavior and for them to develop confidence in conducting themselves in myriad situations (Hodge & Ratten, 2015).

Consider, for example, an improvisation-based training activity that was used by an airline to bolster customer service. Aer Arann, a regional Irish airline, harnessed the power of improvisation training in order to prepare new and seasoned employees for ever-changing customer demands in flight (Daly et al., 2009). The aim of the exercise was not to turn airline employees into stand-up comedians or actors to entertain passengers, but instead to help the in-flight crew develop a skillset that would serve them well when responding to the demands of customers (Stager Jacques, 2013). The airline employees' training portfolio consisted of traditional theatre warm ups such as word association, "conversation playback" - wherein one person listens to their partner intently and tries to mimic back exactly what they heard and saw including any physical movements or gestures - and improvisation activities that required responses to a scenario set forth by the trainer. Of particular relevance to front-line service providers are training aspects related to "game playing, group expression, approval / disapproval responses, audience sensitivity, and physical movement" (Daly et al., p. 462). Aer Arann employees, like any employees offering forward-facing, branded service, needed to learn how to observe, listen, "perform" in front of a customer, and trust and expound the work of their colleagues. Front line service providers cannot carry out their duties in a pre-scripted fashion; rather, they must conceive and implement responses extemporaneously (Yeboah-Banin et al., 2016).

Aer Arann employees benefitted from improvisation as it taught them to accommodate unanticipated customer requests. Learning the art of impromptu service interaction also teaches employees to respond quickly and seamlessly to any service delivery that goes awry (Daly et al., 2009). As is true for employees in the for-profit sector, library employees can improve their communication skills while lowering their anxiety about interacting with customers via improvisation training (Scinto, 2014). This training can also teach library employees how to respond spontaneously and effectively while providing excellent customer service.

Improvisation training can also help hone skills in librarians who are offering customer service to students by way of instruction. Instruction is core to many librarians' duties. The metaphor of acting, or perhaps, being "on stage", is certainly not something newly applied to teaching. Teaching and theatre are both crafts that possess a high likelihood of unplanned interludes and chaotic moments (Shem-Tov, 2018). Every librarian who has led instruction sessions has had at least one that did not go as anticipated (Dohe & Pappas, 2017). In the moment, it may not be easy to laugh off, but having a skillset for recovery and moving forward can be beneficial. Reading the audience, taking the instruction session in a slightly different direction, or acknowledging to a room of silent students, "well, that didn't quite go as planned," may garner empathetic audience participation in the next moment or even the next instruction session with the same class. Further, improvisation allows the instructor to break free of a plan that was not working with an audience and to respond in a way that better fits the situation (Hadida et al., 2015).

As is true of other subject liaison and instruction librarians, education librarians should be familiar with the importance of strong communication skills for understanding

the perspectives and needs of faculty, students, and staff. Improvisational training, and specifically the more theatrically-focused, can help education librarians offer enhanced customer service to their stakeholders. Instruction and training for patrons on locating and using K-12 materials, informational tours and orientations to the education library space, and instruction on library resources and services as they relate to class assignments, can all be enhanced by the use of appropriate voice inflection, gestures, and, poise. Improvisational training can enhance the education librarian's ability to support and build user interest and engagement, improving the overall effectiveness of communication skills (Worthington, 2017). Nevertheless, it is relatively uncommon to find librarians with a background in the dramatic arts, and purposeful integration of theatrical improvisation can work to build these strengths (Worthington, 2017).

There are also those employees who offer customer service to the library by serving in a leadership capacity. These librarians not only have to be cognizant of larger institutional pressures, but also have to relate to those they are leading. Library leaders need to be open to alternative ways of problem solving when working within such layers of complexity (Christopoulos et al., 2016). Leadership teams, or perhaps, leadership teams properly constituted, need to include individuals who exhibit empathy as a hallmark of their leadership ethos (Stager Jacques, 2013; Brooks, 2015). Effective improvisation, like effective leadership, requires strong listening skills, an awareness of others, and clear communication (Trepanier, 2017). Improvisation can prepare leaders to be flexible, creative, adaptable, and better conditioned to respond effectively in unpredictable situations (Tawadros, 2015). Given the pressures felt by library leaders, improvisation exercises can foster improved team dynamics and camaraderie in a landscape where those qualities might not otherwise flow organically (Trepanier, 2017). The highly collaborative nature of improvisation also hones a leader's interpersonal skills and increases the likelihood that others will find the person "charming, poised, socially adept, approachable, and rewarding to deal with" (Ratten & Hodge, 2016, p.152). The concept of "vulnerability" echoes through these qualities as well. It would be easier to garner library employees' participation in a meeting and encourage them to share their feelings if a leader first shared their own.

Perhaps the easiest facet of improvisation to recognize and to incorporate into daily library practice is what is known as "Yes, … and" (Moshavi, 2001). The "Yes, … and" technique refers to the practice of an actor receiving information and accepting it in the affirmative and then adding "and" as a way of continuing and building upon the interaction or scene. In improvisation training, a participant could easily shut down the interaction by denying what the other has just said, but by affirming and offering more information, the opportunity to develop a scene comes to fruition. Dohe and Pappas (2017) implore library employees to say "yes, … and" to colleagues and reflect upon the ways that such a phrase - taken from the art of improvisation - can serve as an opening to fluid co-creation and to the building of ideas. In an education library setting, where exploration is part of the process, the concept of "yes, … and" could be employed as a patron is exploring K-12 kits and materials and is working to develop assignments bolstered by the use of such resources. The education librarian can first affirm the patron's discovery (the "yes" part) and then use "…and" to help him or her incorporate contemporary research methodologies, current pedagogical trends, and best practices in instructional development into their lesson design.

Framework for Implementation

Using improvisation as a method of training is an effective way to help library employees hone their customer service skills. The author implemented improvisation training in a former position at an academic library. Trainees consisted of 18 library employees, all of whom worked in forward-facing roles within the public services department. While training details are outlined in the chart that follows, it is important to note that improvisation activities are limited only by the trainer's imagination. Indeed, some of the pleasure offered by this method of training may come from developing the scenarios. That said, in today's hectic library setting, a conceptual framework for setting up such activities may prove helpful in getting started and stimulating creativity, and this provides a framework for that beginning.

The facilitator's role during training is to pitch the improvisation topic, not to coach those performing the improvisation or to guide them in any way. The learning experience takes place when the participants listen to and play off one another; they are not receiving instruction or direction from the facilitator. Only in the case that the improvisation routine has stagnated would the facilitator want to re-engage with those who are role-playing (Dudeck & McClure, 2018).

Table 1 provides examples of specific improvisation activities, created by the author, that can help accomplish library customer service training goals. These may be adapted to fit the training needs of other academic libraries. Tracing the first example in the chart will elucidate how an improvisation activity can enhance customer service acumen. The prompt the author pitched to a randomly selected dyad from the group of 18 library employees was, "a sandwich shop employee must convince the CEO of the sandwich company to offer a never-been-made-before and very unlikely flavour of sandwich." One library employee, playing the role of the sandwich shop employee, and the other in the role of CEO – had to think quickly and play off each other in order to work their way through this given hypothetical situation. The participants immediately recognized the dynamic of the employee-boss relationship (a common trope in improvisation exercises) and took that as a starting point. The participant in the role of the sandwich artist worked quickly to come up with a thirty second "elevator speech" to pitch her sandwich idea. The library employee acting in the CEO role had a choice to make about what kind of "big boss" she wished to portray: one who was benevolent, interested, and puts her employees first, or a harried, disinterested, "I don't have time for you" boss – or, something in between. She went with the more encouraging option and listened to the sandwich artist make her pitch. Their back and forth banter entertained the author and the 16 colleagues watching as they awaited their own turn, and the sandwich that was pitched in the scenario included the unlikely ingredient of frog legs.

The open-ended nature of improvisation requires instantaneous decision-making and an embodiment of the character. Whatever is first on the participant's mind is likely what will come out in the exercise. It is not a stretch to recognize how the employee-boss juxtaposition is relatable to an employee-library user interaction. Library users come into the library with a wide variety of moods and personalities and it's incumbent upon the library employee to reach out and offer excellent customer service, nevertheless. Being able to quickly read the present mindset of the user allows the library employee to offer

them the kind of service they need in that moment. In this way, having to make a sandwich pitch teaches the library employee requisite skills for how to think quickly, adapt to the scenario, and then promote helpful and targeted resources during a brief encounter with a user. It also fosters creativity in thinking beyond the usual "canned" answers and develops a keen ability to problem-solve on the spot.

Table 1. Examples of Improvisation Activities

Improvisation Scenario	Number of Participants	Applicable Skills Developed
A sandwich shop employee must convince the CEO of the sandwich company to offer a never-been-made-before and very unlikely flavour of sandwich.	2	Marked by brevity, the library employee can learn from this type of improvisation experience how to pitch helpful and targeted resources to the user.
Interview with a world-class trampoline champion (or other unlikely premiere athlete)	2	Related to a traditional-style "reference interview," participants in this activity can glean skills in delving into user needs in areas where they are not expert.
A couple is trying to get past the TSA with weird (but innocent) items in their carry-on bags	2-3	Teaches patience in understanding user requests when they may at first seem unusual, or when users ask for specific resources or items they may mistakenly believe they need when an easier starting point may be to ascertain their actual information need.
There is a zombie apocalypse and you and your friend need to go through your survival bags to ensure that you have all you will need.	2	Participants learn how to work with a user to check that they have all of the requisite materials for a class or a research assignment before they walk out of the library.
The members of a committee are trying to convince the President/ Principal of the school to redesign the current mascot's appearance	2-4	Valuable in a group or committee work setting. Library employees can learn how to work together to form a consensus and use the powers of presentation and persuasion to promote their case to stakeholders.
An artist is working to convince a gallery that they need special accommodations for an upcoming show, but the artist is being very evasive about the materials and nature of the show. Gallery employees are trying to figure out appropriate accommodations.	3-4	Teaches participants how to get only the necessary and required information from a patron in order to fulfil a request without violating their privacy. Can be helpful in developing sensitivity to LGBTQ+, ADA, etc. scenarios.
Former cheerleaders from rival schools have to work together to develop another school's mathematics curriculum.	2	Can help frame methods for working with colleagues – even those in other areas or with different approaches - toward a common goal of assisting a patron.

Participants in improvisation customer service training have to react together in the moment, with no preparation time, to deliver a response that directly addresses the prompt as it is given. Improvisation practice exercises are very effective in teaching library employees how to listen carefully to the scenario and respond to the situation as proposed without showing confusion about - or judgment of - the question being asked of them.

Discussion

Since the skillsets enhanced by improvisation exercises are valuable to library employees, adding this type of training into MLIS degree curriculum would be worthwhile. The question to ask may be, "how?" Adding an entire course on improvisation to an existing library and information sciences curriculum would likely be too cumbersome, but any course that touches on themes of customer service, public services, teacher preparation, special libraries, leadership / management, or a host of other topics, could be enhanced by the incorporation of an improvisation activity. Improvisation could support group work, an integral part of LIS coursework, act as a method of engagement (which is not always a given in any classroom setting), and could even be incorporated into degree programs that have an online component, with student videos of improvisation homework that could be reviewed asynchronously.

At the University of Maryland College Park campus, for example, the libraries and the iSchool (College of Information Studies) partnered to create an innovative "Research and Teaching Fellowship" that allowed MLIS students to gain paid and for-credit experience in leading instruction, providing research assistance, and learning basic methods of assessment (Kellner et al., 2016). This connection between library school students and practicing librarians provided a unique opportunity for students to gain simulated on-the-job training while they were still studying in the degree program. Other types of mentoring programs for students may also provide opportunities to introduce an element of improvisation. Job shadowing, informational interviews, and other less formal mentoring partnerships between librarians and library students, can act as additional opportunities to teach students about customer service, and such lessons could easily be enhanced by including creative improvisation activities.

Another example, in which improvisation training could be inserted, is from the University of North Texas. The College of Information at the University of North Texas prepares students with an enhanced competency-based library and information sciences curriculum, with specific emphasis on digital curation (Kim, 2015). A competency-based curriculum seeks to ensure that students can recognize, apply, and execute the knowledge, skills, and abilities currently desired in the library field (Kim, 2015). As is to be expected, determining an assessment program to measure student acquisition of competencies is difficult, as is keeping a clear focus on field-desired competencies in a rapidly changing job landscape (Saunders, 2019). One competency required in the library profession is the ability to offer excellent customer service. Perhaps a curriculum could be designed, in the spirit of the one at the University of North Texas, that integrates excellent customer service as a competency, and this training could perhaps be bolstered with improvisation exercises.

These examples, taken together, indicate that an element of improvisation training could be added into MLIS curriculum courses, enhancing customer service skill building. Perhaps contemporary library and information science coursework should focus on certain themes and skills rather than on pre-fabricated examples of customer service (Simons et al., 2016). However, library and information science students represent only the future generation of library employees. For those professionals who are already working within the library setting, on-the-job training is an important venue for improving customer service skills. Luckily, librarians, by their nature tend to be inquisitive, eager to learn, and are often exposed to many different disciplines through their day-to-day professional experience (Condic, 2016). Targeting those library employees with demonstrable strengths in offering excellent service, and tapping them to assist in training their colleagues, creates a mutually rewarding environment for teaching and learning within the library (Decker & Townes, 2016). This peer-to-peer style training may also prove an effective method for incorporating improvisation training. These, and other customer service training initiatives within the library, can be enhanced by the interactive, engaging nature of improvisation activities.

Future Research Directions

The efficacy of improvisation training is well understood in the performing arts as a tool to promote actors' skills. Businesses have documented their successes in implementing improvisation to enhance customer service skills in their employees as well. In another venue, a recent study undertaken by a professor of MBA students, assumed that entrepreneurial self-efficacy - that is, an entrepreneur's ability to adapt to uncertain environments - could be improved with improvisation training (Balachandra, 2019). There are few proven techniques for developing entrepreneurial self-efficacy, but impression management, a collaborative focus, and being constructive during team conflict, all support this goal. These are all skills bolstered by improvisation training. This has also been the case as it pertains to education programs for those developing skills to become counsellors in the health sciences field. Improvisation exercises have helped future practitioners develop skills in perspective taking, spontaneity, and enhanced empathy (Bayne & Jangha, 2016).

To date, a longitudinal assessment, studying the quantitative understanding of improvisation as a tool to promote customer service skills in library employees, has not been completed. It stands to reason, however, that such a study of library employees would yield similar findings to those in business and other education training curricula. To undertake research on the effect of improvisation training on library employees, focus groups of different types of libraries (academic, public, school, special), their staffing, their focus, their size, and other information, needs to be taken into consideration. Coupled with this is the need for the development of before and after skills assessment surveys to further elucidate the outcomes of the study. In addition, since customer service skills increase with experience (understood as numbers of interactions), a study that spans a number of years would be most appropriate to understanding the data.

Conclusion

Library employees are most successful in their roles when they are user-centered and customer service oriented and these values are born of well-developed interpersonal and communication skills (Saunders, 2019). In the rapidly changing library and information sciences field, a focus on "soft skills" as being necessary to succeed in a contemporary library job has developed. Improvisation training enhances the aforementioned skills and can help library employees enhance their customer service skills and communicate more effectively with their colleagues. "Communication skills, interpersonal skills, flexibility and adaptability, and customer-service skills" are noted as being critical to library employees' success in their roles (Saunders, 2019, p.7). Improvisation training can also work to break down barriers in communication, help library staff develop empathy and trust, and allow them to develop confidence in their abilities to provide excellent customer services regardless of what questions gets asked of them.

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