Improv & Internships: Using Improvisation to Teach Lawyering Skills

Sample Exercises and Facilitator Guide

Exercise 1: Yes, and

Participants: Class broken down into two groups (or four groups depending on size) with two student volunteers (or four volunteers for four groups). Groups should be no larger than 8 students.

Skills Taught: collaboration, communication, creativity, problem-solving, a tool for postponing judgment, importance of respect in the workplace. Respect for the process of communication and idea-sharing.

Description: Ask the two student volunteers to leave the room. Separate the groups into distinct spaces within the room. Explain that when the two student volunteers come back in the room they will be asked to share their ideas on a particular topic with each group. Assign one group to be the "Yes, but" group meaning that this group will agree with the volunteer's ideas, but immediately explain why they won't work or they can't implement them, essentially shutting them down. Assign the other group to be the "Yes, and" group meaning that this group will agree with all of the volunteer's ideas and then build upon them by adding their own ideas. Now invite the student volunteers back in. Explain to them that they have been asked to present to their colleagues on how to improve their internship office environment to create a better experience for clients (or another topic of your choice). Give them about 30 seconds to start thinking as you assign one of them to the "Yes, but" group and the other to the "Yes, and" group. After about 5 minutes, ask that the two volunteers switch and present on the same topic to the other group for an additional 5 minutes.

Debrief Questions:
- Ask the volunteers to explain what it felt like to present to either group. Did they sense a difference?
- Ask the groups to offer insight on what it was like to provide feedback. Was it easy to "Yes, but"? What did it feel like to be part of the "Yes, and" group?
- Awareness surrounding "yes-butters": Self-audit (Did you feel like you were shutting down their ideas? How did the receiver of those "Yes, but" comments feel?)
- Which group generated more ideas?
- What is the difference between "Yes, and" and "Yes, but?"
- What are some ways you might try using "Yes, and" at your internship?
- Do you think it is already being used? If so, how?
o Has anyone experienced, the opposite, a "Yes, but" supervisor? How was that experience?
o Ask the students to share a "Yes, and" story from their life and how it impacted them (Consider sharing one from your professional life to get the conversation started).

Exercise 2: Character Walk
Participants: Entire class/group

Skills Taught: presence, self-awareness, other awareness (understanding body language of clients, supervisors, colleagues), engagement, professionalism

Description: Ask participants to begin walking around the room naturally, taking others in, making eye contact when appropriate. After a minute or so, instruct them to begin walking as though their head is being gently pulled by a string. In other words, their head is leading the rest of their body. Over the course of a few moments ask them to consider internally: How does this change their pace? Their mood? Their perception of others?

Next, have them walk as if their chests are leading their bodies. How does this change how they feel? Perceive others? After a few moments, change the leading center to the hips. This generally provokes some laughter. Let the students adjust to this change and ask them to again consider what changes they notice in themselves and others. Change the leading center again, this time to the feet, asking them to observe changes once again. Have them return to their normal way of walking, paying attention to their natural inclinations. Have them consider what their natural preferred center is, noting that it will be less exaggerated than the exercise just completed. Finally, ask them to return to their seats for debriefing.

Debrief Questions:
o Did you feel any different making those physical changes?
o Did certain leading centers make you feel more or less open to others? More or less friendly? More or less stressed?
o What did you notice when you passed others? Did they seem more or less easy to approach when they were embodying different physicalities?
o What contributes to perceiving and feeling confident?

This is an excellent transition into talking about body language, non-verbal communication, and the Amy Cuddy clip on presence.
Exercise 3: Last Word

Participants: One to two pairs of students to demonstrate. Exercise continues in student pairs.

Skills Taught: mindful listening, adaptability

Description: A pair is instructed to have a conversation. You might prompt them with a particular scenario or topic or ask that they choose their own organically. Each person is required to start their sentence with the last word of their partner’s sentence. The conversation should continue to flow logically.

Debrief Questions:
- What did you notice about this method of communicating?
- Did you have to slow your conversation down?
- What was going on in your mind as it was happening?
- Did you hear what your partner was saying in a different way than you usually do?
- Often, we are thinking about what we plan to say next rather than giving our complete attention to the speaker. How might you implement the takeaways you learned from this exercise in practice?

Exercise 4: Pointing Circle

Participants: Entire class/group (best done with no more than 15 students)

Skills Taught: Importance of eye contact in communication, listening, collaboration and teamwork, learning to balance competing interests and demands, making sure your message is heard

Description: Have the students form a circle (or multiple circles if the group is large). Ask all participants to put their arms up with their fingers pointed. One person will start by saying a word (example: apple) and pointing to another person in the circle who has their arm up. The next person says a word that is related to the first word, establishing a pattern (example: orange), and pointing to another person with their arm still up. This continues until everyone has said a unique word and the final person points back to the original person who started. The pattern might look something like: Apple, orange, pear, banana, grapefruit, papaya, starfruit, grape. Have them repeat this pattern several times until it becomes comfortable and can be passed around quickly. Encourage them to maintain strong eye contact and to be sure their message is received.

Now start a new pattern, having a different person start with an unrelated word (example: bus). Strongly recommend they do not point to the same person as the first pattern.
Repeat the same process as the first round until everyone has gone and the pattern is established and moving quickly. At this point, add in the first pattern so that they are both travelling around the circle simultaneously. You may need to restart a few times. If the group is doing well and time allows, establish a third pattern and then add in the other two so that all three are moving around the circle at once.

Debrief Questions:
  o  What was necessary to do to maintain the pattern? What allowed you to be successful?
  o  If it was difficult, why?
  o  How can this exercise help us in our professional lives?

Exercise 5: Panel of Experts

Participants: Three student volunteers (plus remaining student participation)

Skills Taught: professional demeanor, confidence, decisiveness, judgment

Description: Three volunteers are seated in three chairs at the front of the room. Ask the others in the class for a suggestion of an obscure subject for each person. The more obscure the better. Examples we’ve seen include: the fuzz on the outside of tennis balls and a breeder of unicorns. They will then become experts in that field for an impromptu Q&A session. To begin, ask the “experts” to introduce themselves at the beginning and create “expert” characters for themselves (something like, “I’m Marybeth Shamwell, PhD in Sandwiches, my research focuses on, etc.). After the introductions open it up to the class for questions/advice from the panel about their subject of expertise. It is up to the players to answer all questions in a knowledgeable way (even though, of course, they are not experts).

Debrief Questions:
  o  What made them seem like a professional in their field?
  o  What seemed disingenuous?
  o  What leadership qualities did they emulate?
  o  Which expert would you want to learn from? Why?

Further Resources

Getting to “Yes And”: The Art of Business Improv by Bob Kulhan (2017)

Yes, And: How Improvisation Reverses “No, But” Thinking and Improves Creativity and Collaboration--Lessons from The Second City by Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton (2015)