

The Role Improvisation Can Play in Higher Education

BA Thesis English Language and Culture, Utrecht University

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January 2021

Acknowledgements

Before we get to reading a piece that I personally feel very passionate about, I would like to take the time to thank everyone who helped me through creating this thesis. As we have all experienced, this past year has been quite challenging. Therefore, I would first like to thank my partner for being there for me, even though sometimes I did not feel up to doing anything at all. He supported and encouraged me through the past couple of months, which resulted in this thesis.

That brings me to my supervisor. Debbie, I am incredibly grateful for having you as a supervisor for multiple reasons. First of all, I really enjoyed our weekly get-together to discuss the upcoming week. It was nice to have someone to talk to, even though it was usually about the upcoming classes. Secondly, I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to ‘experiment’ on the students in your course. You gave me every chance I needed to successfully execute every activity and the trust you had in me meant the world to me. Finally, I want to say thank you for the guidance you offered throughout the process of making this study possible. Thank you!

Next, I want to thank the other people that helped me through making my thesis. Koen, the second reader for this thesis, thank you for showing interest in the subject of my thesis and the feedback you were always willing to offer me. Anne, thank you for helping me with any doubts I had about my thesis as a fellow student and a friend.

Lastly, I want to thank all of the students who were willing to be part of this study, with a special thanks to the students that I interviewed. Without you, this thesis would not have been possible.

Thank you all!

Abstract

In most universities world-wide, the traditional, teacher-centered and passive teaching format is the standard. However, scholars have suggested that changes should be made to make education more student-centered and active. As an alternative teaching method, the inclusion of improvisational activities was proposed. This inclusion is more interactive and requires students to be more engaged with the material by looking at it from different perspectives. To effectively use improv as an educational medium, the foundation of improv as well as educational values must be considered.

The present study aims to investigate the effects of the inclusion of improv as a teaching method in higher education. To achieve this, improvisational activities have been designed based on the different principles proposed by previous studies. These activities were then carried out in classes of the course “Language and Identity: Researching and Writing Who We Are”. Afterwards, some students were interviewed to provide their insight into the effectiveness of improv as a teaching method.

The results of this investigation showed that generally, students experienced the positive effects of the improvisational activities that have been found in previous studies. However, there were also results that indicated things to be considered when using improv as a medium for education, like the time span over which students have the opportunity to grow comfortable with each other and the relatively unique activities.

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The Role Improvisation Can Play in Higher Education

1. Introduction

The format of teaching in higher education has been under debate for the past few decades. Even though the traditional teacher-centered lectures in which students are passively listening are the default in most universities worldwide, multiple flaws in this format have been found (Lindblom-Ylänne et al, 2011; Prosser & Trigwell, 2014; Saroyan et al., 2009; Trentin, 2006)). For instance, Prosser and Trigwell (2014) studies the possibilities of student-centered alternatives in larger university classes. They found that when a student-focused approach is applied, it can result in higher academic achievement, as it encourages an increased depth of thinking, interaction, and feedback. Furthermore, Trentin (2006) makes the distinction between a *transmission model of knowledge* and a more *collaborative* approach and found that even though the former is usually applied, the latter increases students' motivation and stimuli. As an alternative teaching method, some scholars propose the use of improvisational performance (Berk & Trieber, 2009; Loftus, 2018; Steward, 2009; Steward; 2015). Berk and Trieber (2009) elaborate on the definition of improv as "intuition guiding action in a spontaneous way" (p. 31). They further explain that the inclusion of improv in the classroom is a student-centered, collaborative approach to teaching. Making the distinction between participation and engagement, Hoffman et al. (2005) clarify that engagement should be sought after in the classroom to reach students' full academic potential. According to them, engagement can be achieved through activities that require students to step out of their everyday roles and creating something new with their peers. Because improv is a form of theatre in which participants make up material on the spot (Loftus, 2018), creating something new cooperatively is the basis of improv. This study aims to explore the effects that the inclusion of improv as a teaching method has on the students' learning process in a university course.

2. Theoretical Background

A number of scholars argue that there are several benefits to including improvisational activities in the educational curriculum with regard to learning the class material (Berk and Trieber, 2009; Hoffman et al., 2005; Loftus, 2018; Steward, 2009; Vahed et al., 2016; Vera and Crossan, 2005). Berk and Trieber (2009) argue that improv as a teaching method promotes deep learning, a term first introduced by Rhem (1995) as a process through which students retain the material more effectively. He offers four features that are required to achieve deep learning:

- Motivational context
- Learner activity
- Interaction with others
- A well-structured knowledge base, in which the material has been taught and evaluated and discussed from different perspectives

According to Berk and Trieber (2009), the use of improv can satisfy all four of these criteria, making it an effective teaching method. Moreover, as Hoffman et al. (2005) proposed, improv could serve as a way for students to actively engage with the material as well. To be fully engaged with the activities and material, they clarified that an emotional connection to the activities and materials is necessary. One of the elements that allows for this emotional connection is the opportunity for spontaneity, which can be achieved through improv sessions. If the opportunity for spontaneity is there, “people seem more likely to feel emotionally safe, relaxed, and open to connecting with their own motivations and passions” (Hoffman et al, 2005, 2.2). Therefore, including improvisational activities in the higher education curriculum could help students be more engaged in teaching sessions. Powner and Allendoerfer (2008) showed that applying a medium for active learning beside normal lectures leads to overall higher results. A study by Vahed et al. (2016) support this result by

claiming that game-like activities can serve as a way for students to link ‘know-what’ and ‘know-how’, leading to better information retention. The importance of ‘know-how’ as a form of knowledge is also emphasised by Nelson (2006). Because improvisational activities offer an opportunity to discover the ‘know-how’ of abstract concepts, the inclusion of improv as a teaching method could lead to better educational effectiveness.

Beside the educational advantages of improv, there are positive secondary effects as well. Vera and Crossan (2005) studied the effect of improvisational activities in team building. They found that through improvisational activities, teamwork quality increased. Participants also mentioned that they felt more open-minded and were inclined to “look at things from different perspectives” (p. 218) after the period of experimentation. This shows that improv activities can provide an environment in which people can effectively be brought together. Poletti et al. (2016) argue that in every classroom, everyone brings their own academic and personal background. Because of the nature of improvisation, which Stewart (2009) argues is “a blend of personality, creativity, and adaptation” (p. 27), it can be used as an appropriate environment for incorporating those unique backgrounds. He further found that the through improv acquired skills are applied in the way the participants’ daily. Vera and Crossan (2005) also found that people felt increasingly engaged with the activity, which Hoffman et al. (2005) argue leads to an increase in the participants’ wellbeing.

To effectively use improv as a teaching method, there are some improv principles that have to be considered. Firstly, the definition of improv needs to be considered. Loftus (2018) proposes that improv is a performance form in which participants make up the material on the spot by reacting to one another. Even though the participants usually receive little instructions, the performance is often prompted by an instructor. The importance of side-coaching, or discussing the activities afterwards, is also of vital importance, according to Barker (2016). Another factor that has to be considered is group dynamic. Vera and Crossan

(2005) found that the improvisational skills of a fixed group of participants increased in quality. Therefore, to optimise the effectiveness of improv as a teaching method, it needs to be carried out in a fixed group over a longer period of time. Steward (2009) studies the effect of improv in an educational setting and offered some tenets to use when designing improv activities:

- Saying “Yes, and”
- Letting go of boundaries
- Decision and meaning making
- Having fun

The first listed tenet means that the participants support each other’s ideas and taking them to the next level by feeding off one another (Loftus, 2018). The second tenet is necessary to bring each participant on the same level of vulnerability, and trust and reliance in each other. Decision making and meaning making is a tenet that requires both participants and observers to be alert in order to interpret the played scenario. Lastly, Steward emphasises the importance of having fun during improv sessions. These tenets, according to Steward (2009), are the way to successfully implement improvisation into secondary school curricula. The effect of this in higher education, however, has not been studied adequately and widely enough.

There are certain factors that come into play when considering including improvisational activities into a course’s curriculum. One of these factors is the anchoring effect, the notion that people only tend to deviate a little from the given standard, or anchor. Epley and Gilovich (2010) propose four different varieties of anchors, one of which is environmental suggestion. This specific variety describes anchors that function as a “clue to the right answer” (p. 22). As Lindblom-Ylänne et al. (2001) found, teachers experience this effect in applying teaching methods as well. Saroyan et al. (2009) also found that students

change their conception about core learning principles only after they have experienced alternative, more active methods of teaching. At the beginning of the inclusion of alternative teaching methods, this could cause a feeling of discomfort through unfamiliarity. Another factor that has to be considered for this specific study is the limitations that are the result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Because of these limitations, the majority of higher education is offered in a virtual environment through media such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Gulbahar and Kalelioglu (2010) studies the influence that an online environment has on active learning and found that the role of a moderator is of vital importance to optimise the use of instruction time. McPherson and Bacow (2015) also emphasise the importance of a personal connection, both between the teacher and students, but also amongst students themselves. Because improv is also found to serve as a medium for team building, the inclusion of improv could prove beneficial in this regard as well.

3. Topic

The course “Language & Identity: Researching and Writing Who We Are” is a course that is offered at the University in Utrecht as part of the specialisation “The Social Life of English”. During this course, the students take part in activities that encourage creativity and improvisation. To examine the effect of alternative teaching methods in higher education, this study aims to answer the following question:

What effect does the implementation of improvisational activities have as a teaching tool in the “Language & Identity” course?

To evaluate the effectiveness of improv as a teaching method, the results will be considered in light of both previous studies and the goal of the course itself. The course goal is as follows: “After successfully completing this course, students will be able to articulate and apply the theories of language and identity covered in class.”

The results of this study are expected to generally be in favour of the use of improv. Many researchers have found that the implementation of improv in several environments has led to generally positive effects, like better material retention, better problem-solving skills and more active engagement with classes (Berk & Trieber, 2009; Loftus, 2018; Steward, 2009; Steward, 2015; Vera & Crossan, 2005). However, there is expected to be a difference between each individual student, because of a difference in learning patterns, motivations, and predispositions (Psychology Campus, n.d.). The anchoring effect as described by Epley and Gilovich (2010) is also expected to play a role in the students' conception of the inclusion of improv as unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

4. Method

To examine the effect of the inclusion of improvisational activities in higher education, dr. Deborah Cole made her university course "Language and Identity" available for observations. Due to the Covid-19 regulations, all meetings for this course took place in the course team page on Microsoft Teams. In total, 38 students signed up for the course. The weekly lectures for this course took place on Tuesday morning, and the seminars took place on Tuesday and Thursday afternoon every week. For the seminar sessions, the students were split into two groups, one of 20 students and one of 18. At the beginning of each week, dr. Cole and I discussed the activities that would be carried out that week, during which it was decided which sessions would be relevant for the present study. During all relevant sessions, I was present to take notes.

The methodology for the present study consisted of two general parts. The first part involved activities with improvisational elements to them and took place during classes of the course "Language & Identity". This course already implements activities that are not necessarily traditional in university setting as it was described in the theoretical framework. In the course description, it is mentioned that "[l]ectures and tutorials will be interactive

requiring participation in games and game-derived elements”. Therefore, the implementation of improvisational activities would not stand out compared to the rest of the course. The second part consisted of an interview with a selection of the students from the aforementioned course about their experiences with the improvisational activities. Each part will be explained in further detail in the following sections.

4.1 Class activities

The activities used as a source of data for this study all conform to the previously given definition of improv at least to some degree. These activities can further be split into two parts. The first set of activities were part of the course’s standard curriculum. The second set of activities were specifically designed to be an appropriate source of data for this study. These activities were carried out during the first six weeks of the course. All students were informed of the fact that observations took place through an information letter about the present study, along with a consent form that they had to sign in order to give permission to use the observed data. The information letter and the consent form can be found in appendix A and B, respectively. For the selection and design of all activities, the following definition of improv proposed by Loftus (2018) was applied: “a form of live performance in which participants spontaneously make up the material— story line, characters, and dialogue—and feed off one another, often starting from a prompt by the instructor” (p. 37).

4.1.1 Curricular activities

Most curricular activities were led by the teacher, with the exception of the Werewolves game. During all other activities, I only observed the classes, with an occasional contribution to the circle survey. The following activities from the course’s curriculum were included as data sources for this study:

The circle survey:

This activity was carried out at the beginning of each lecture in week 1 until 5 of the course. During the circle survey, students were asked to answer a certain question in alphabetical order of the participation list in the Microsoft Teams meeting. At the beginning of the course, the questions were simple and often binary, like finishing the sentence “Please call me ...” or whether each student preferred tea or coffee. In the third lecture, students were asked to provide variants of the sentence “The milk that happens”, a chapter title from the book *Nation* (Pratchett, 2008). Students were asked to change only one thing from the variant before them, but that change could be anything, from lexical to prosodic. In week four, this activity was repeated, but with the instructions to only change prosodic elements. During the fifth lecture, students were asked to briefly outline potential subjects for their ethnography, which they were assigned to hand in at the end of the course.

Elephant Game:

This game was played during one of the seminar sessions of the course, in the second week. A detailed outline of the rules for this game can be found in appendix C. Seminar group one was split into two groups because of its size. After a few rounds, these two groups were split into higher and lower ranked animals. The lower half of both groups switched. Then, the game would be played again in the new groups.

Werewolves:

This activity was carried out during the second seminar of week three. Only one game of Werewolves was observed for the present study. For this game, there were two students who volunteered to lead the session. These leaders assigned roles to each participant, which was divided into werewolves and citizens. Some citizens had a more specific role with some advantages. The purpose of the game is for the werewolves to eat each citizen and for the citizens to exterminate the werewolves. After the game was finished, there was a discussion of the observations students made during the game. This activity was included in this study,

because during the game, students are supposed to act out their respective character, which can include much improv.

4.1.2 Designed activities

During these activities, I assumed the role of instructor, which gave me full control over what limitations and possibilities the students were offered.

Bucholtz & Hall Charades:

This activity was based on “Newshour”, as it was described by Hurt (n.d.). In this activity, pairs of students were asked to act out a term from the article by Bucholtz and Hall (2004).

This activity was meant to familiarise the students with these terms, as they were material for the upcoming exam. The pairs were asked to meet together in a separate video meeting, in which they chose the term they wanted to act out and how they wanted to do this. To keep it improvisational, students were only given 2 minutes to discuss their plan. After this discussion, each pair acted out their term. The other students then had the opportunity to guess which term was acted out, followed by a brief discussion of the scene that was done. The discussion served as a form of side-coaching, described by Barker (2016) as an important part of improv.

Role Swap:

This activity was based on “Role Swap”, as it was described by Hurt (n.d.). This activity was meant to illustrate how in different communities of practice, people express their identity differently (Cole & Meadows, 2013). For a previous seminar sessions, students were asked to create a list of different communities of practice they are part of, which they were asked to bring for this session. For this activity, two volunteers were needed for each scene and it was run four times in each seminar group. Students were asked to act out a certain scene in a setting that was decided and explained in advance. One of the two volunteers was then asked to decide on a different community of practice that they would switch to halfway through the

scene. These scenes would last about 90 seconds. Halfway through, the seminar instructor would call out the word “switch”, which was the cue for the switching student. The volunteers received instructions for the following scenes:

- A conversation at the check-out counter in a store, in which the customer would switch their community of practice
- A conversation at the check-out counter in a store, in which the employee would switch their community of practice
- Two friends talking at a party
- An in-class discussion of the material, with the teacher actively present

After each scene, there was a brief discussion of what happened during the scene, again serving as a form of side-coaching (Barker, 2016).

4.2 Interviews

After all observed classes took place, students were asked if they would volunteer for a short interview session about the improvisational activities in this course. Seven students volunteered to be part of this assessment. During these interviews, the following questions were asked:

1. How did the inclusion of improv-related activities influence your learning process?
2. What other influences (positive and/or negative) did the inclusion of improv-related activities have compared to the more traditional teaching tactics in higher education?
3. Do you have any suggestions or ideas with regard to the inclusion of game-like activities in higher educations?
4. Any final remarks with regard to the course’s setup?

These interviews took place individually through Microsoft Teams in a casual setting and were not recorded. Afterwards, a short evaluation with the teacher of the course took place.

5. Results

All notes taken from the sessions that were relevant for this study can be found in appendix

D. The notes that were taken from the interviews can be found in appendix E.

5.1 Class notes

All notes taken from the sessions that were relevant for this study can be found in appendix

D.

Circle survey

This was the only activity that was carried out over multiple weeks, giving students the opportunity to get used to the flow of the activity. During the first two weeks, the questions that were asked had straightforward or binary answers, like the students' favourite seasons or whether they considered themselves a morning person or a night owl. As the last question of the circle survey in week two, the first student was asked to make a certain gesture, which was then mimicked by the next student. The third student had to create a slight variation of that gesture. The fourth student was asked to start the cycle again by making a completely different gesture. This led to some confusion, and students had a lot of questions with regard to what exactly was expected of them. This same confusion arose during the circle survey of the third week, during which students were asked to offer a variation of the short sentence "the milk that happens". After the first few students started with examples of lexical variations, most students kept changing lexical elements. Afterwards, it was noted that one of the students changed the volume for their variation, which was immediately discarded again by the next student, who changed one of the words as well. The student that had whispered the sentence found this noteworthy, because their instructions clearly stated that they could only change one aspect of the sentence. For the fourth circle survey, when students were asked to only make prosodic changes to the same sentence, the students knew better what they needed to do. They went through the survey quicker than the week before that. For the

circle survey in the fifth lecture, students were asked to propose their ethnography topic ideas. This lecture, several students either showed or mentioned that they were feeling tired.

The Elephant game

For the elephant game, there was a significant difference between the first and second seminar group. Because of its size, the first group was split into two. During the switch of the lower halves of both groups, there was a lot of confusion as to what the exact plan was. Because of this confusion, twenty minutes of playing time was lost. As a result, there was less time to discuss what happened during both playing sessions. The second seminar group was smaller, which made it easier to swap roles between the higher and lower ranked animals. However, as was noted in the discussion afterwards, the first seminar group noticed a difference between the “original” and “non-original” group. They also experienced minor inner conflict with regard to how strict they had to be with regard to calling out other people’s errors. This was noted in both seminar groups. In seminar group two, there was a lot of initial confusion with regard to the ranking after playing one round. They solved this by going back to the initial ranking, which cleared up most students’ confusion.

Werewolves

At the beginning of the game, each participant was asked to introduce themselves. Most participants made up a backstory for their character, some even adapted a different accent from the one they usually use in class. These backstories and accents became an important part of the rest of the game. For instance, one of the participants had introduced themselves as a tourist. This made them less trustworthy to the others, even though it later became clear that the made-up backstory had nothing to do with the role they were assigned. One other participant had adopted the pirate accent about which the students had to read an article for the following week. Later on, the participant dropped the pirate accent, which was immediately noted by one of the other participants. Occurrences like these showed how

invested all participants were in the game. This was made possible by the leader of the session, who encouraged the group to be as creative as possible with the introductions. The werewolves session also showed how much influence participants can have on each other. As soon as one participant was suspected of being a werewolf by another participant, many other participants usually followed that suspicion. The idea of the teacher being someone who needs to be respected was also part of that influence. The game leaders made the teacher one of the werewolves. However, she was not suspected or accused of being a werewolf once, even though the other participants were so quick to accuse anyone else.

Bucholtz & Hall Charades

For this activity, students had to choose a term to act out themselves. Most duos chose a word that was part of a binary set, like adequation or authorisation and their counterparts. About half of the duos used a prop that they had in their environment to act out their chosen term. One duo even made use of the online setting by handing a mug to each other through the camera. Another duo made a reference to a certain scene in the Star Wars saga to act out their term. After each short scene, there was a discussion in which the relevant term was guessed first with an explanation for their choice. Then, other possible answers were considered as well. For some scenes, there were multiple possible answers, often the counterpart of the intended term. Because of absences and switches between groups, the first group was significantly larger than the second. This caused a minor shortage of time left for the discussion after each scene. In group two, there was more time for each student to contribute to the discussions.

Role Swap

This activity asked for two volunteers for each scene. Because of the size difference between the two seminar groups, there were more students in group two who volunteered multiple times. In each group, there were some students that were more eager to participate than

others. The explanation of the following scene also influenced the eagerness to participate. For one scene, one student was asked to act as a cashier, with the other student being the customer. To one of the students this was a familiar setting, which encouraged them to want to participate. The student that was instructed to switch their identity halfway through the scene did not tell their counterplayer which identity they switched to. They also had to think of another identity to switch to right before they had to act out the scene. Some students noted afterwards that this felt unnatural or unexpected. They also noted that they experienced a difference between people who feel comfortable in such a spontaneous setting and people who do not.

4.2 Interviews

When asked about the influence of improv-related activities on their learning process, most students mentioned positive effects, like:

“It was a good way to implement things we’ve learned”

“It was a lot of fun; it did help to keep more engaged”

“It created something between the students”

The teacher also noted that during the oral exam, during which students were asked to define and explain the terms from the list by Bucholtz and Hall (2004), some students used the Charades and Role Swap activities to explain a term.

However, some students also mentioned some more negative effects of the inclusion of improv. These negative sides were mostly a feeling of being thrown in the deep end, not being used to this method of teaching, and feeling like the more traditional, lecture-based way of teaching works better for them. One student used the term denaturalisation from Bucholtz and Hall (2004) to describe the feeling of discomfort and unfamiliarity she experienced. Another student proposed that an increased length of courses or the implementation of improv more widely throughout higher education curricula could serve as part of a solution

for the feeling of denaturalisation. The influence of the online environment was also considered by most students, some saying that standard methods of teaching would be less effective in the online setting than the methods used in this course. Some students did mention that the online environment limited the possibilities with regard to the use of improv. Lastly, some students said that because of the experimental nature of this course, these activities worked better than they might have in other courses. The material for this course, which is mostly about the expression of identity through language, also lends itself for the inclusion of improv, in which communication is a central principle.

6. Discussion

The general effects of improv as a teaching method in the course “Language and Identity” have been found to be positive and negative. The positive effects that were found in previous studies were also found in the present study. For instance, several students pointed out that they did have fun, which was proposed by Steward (2009) as a vital part of improv. The fact that students had fun was reported to have a positive effect on how engaged they were with the classes. Students also noted that the multiple ways in which they were applying the material to the activities, and through that linking the ‘know-what’ to the ‘know-how’, helped them retain the information better. They also reported to have a deeper understanding of the material because of the way they were encouraged to look at the material from different angles and with a more open mind, which was found by Berk and Trieber (2009) to be a result of improv. Generally, the four requirements for deep learning proposed by Rhem (1995) were shown to have been met as well. However, there were a few factors that influenced the findings in the present study that must be taken into consideration when studying the effect of the implementation of improv in higher education further.

Firstly, there was a development of student input as the course progressed, specifically in the circle survey. The first round during the lecture of the first week served as

a way of getting used to the flow of this activity, which students picked up rather quickly. During the second round, responses were already quicker as students got used to which position they assumed in the name order. In the weeks that followed, students grew more comfortable in talking to the whole group. Answers to simple and often binary questions became longer and more elaborate. After the third week of the circle survey, students themselves noted that they liked talking about what they were passionate about because they were given the opportunity to do so. For the last time the circle survey was carried out, the general question of what they wanted to study for the ethnography they were expected to write a few weeks later. While answering this question, students had grown comfortable enough to mention or show that they were tired. The difference between the Charades activity and the Role Swap activity reflects this development. Even though not initially intended, the Role Swap activity required more imagination on the spot to successfully carry out than the Charades activity, because the students had the opportunity to briefly prepare for their enactment of the terms. During the interviews, students mentioned that they experienced this development as well, by saying they grew more comfortable with doing improv in-class overtime. This is supported by the study that Vera and Crossan (2005) carried out. However, according to them, it would take more time for the group to optimise their improv skills in this particular group. One student pointed this out during an interview by saying that this course is too short to optimally use improv. They claimed that students need to feel comfortable in order to properly use improv. According to them, this could be achieved through more inclusion of improv in the general educational curriculum. As Berk and Trieber (2009) proposed that trust is an important part of improv as well, which can be increased as students get to know each other. Therefore, time is an important factor to consider when using improv as a teaching method. Ideally, students would get the opportunity to grow comfortable with each other and with improvisational activities.

Another factor that was found to be of significant influence was that the size of the group affected the quality of the discussions. Both the Charades and the Role Swap activity were carried out during seminar sessions. For the Charades activity, all students were asked to act out a term from Bucholtz and Hall (2004). Because there were more people in group one, it took more time to give everyone the opportunity to act out their term. This meant that there was less time for the group to have a plenary discussion about the approach and possible other variations or terms. In group two, there were more detailed and longer discussions. For the Role Swap activity, both groups acted out four different scenes. However, because group two consisted of less students, each student had the opportunity to ask more questions and offer more insight. Group size was also a significant factor during the Elephant Game. For this activity, group one was split into two different subgroups. For group two, this was not necessary. During the switch in group one, there was a lot of misunderstanding about how the switch would happen. This caused a loss of game time of twenty minutes. Because of the fact that this switch was less complicated in group two, there was more time to discuss what happened during the game. As Barker (2016) proposed, side-coaching plays an important role in the quality of improv. Steward (2015) also highlights the importance of reflection when trying to combine theory with practice. Therefore, group size should be thought about when including improvisational activities as a teaching method.

The next factor that should be considered is the personalities of students. During the interviews, one student pointed out that they felt more comfortable in the traditional, teacher-centered way of higher education. The anchoring effect described by Epley and Gilovich (2010) could play a role in this, as students in higher education are used to and expect education in a more teacher-centered, passive form. Other students also mentioned a difference in participation between students, saying that some students were more eager to participate than others. Because of the fact that each student has their own way of learning

(Psychology Campus, n.d.), improvisational activities will be effective for some students, whereas others will only experience a feeling of denaturalisation and prefer a more passive way of learning. In the description of the course “Language and Identity”, it was already mentioned that this course would be more interactive than other university courses.

Therefore, students who signed up for this course could mentally prepare themselves to a certain degree. When using improv in other courses, this should be mentioned in the course’s description, so that students have the opportunity to decide whether they feel comfortable following the course or not.

Lastly, the environment in which the classes of this course took place played a significant role in the effects of the inclusion of improv. As previously observed, the interactive nature of the improvisational activities helped students be more engaged with classes. Some students commented that this was a more noteworthy issue in the online environment, because they would normally be distracted more easily when they were in their own home environment. The fact that during these classes, students were in their own homes, gave them the opportunity to include things they had lying at home, for instance the use of teacups to act out one of the terms from Bucholtz and Hall (2004). However, there were also mentions of the difficulty of discussions through an online environment, which sometimes hindered educational purposes. In previous years, this issue was not relevant, because this course was not previously offered through Microsoft Teams, but in a classroom. One of the students recognised this by saying this course would have been different if it were offered ‘in real life’.

7. Conclusion

In the present study, the effects of the inclusion of improvisational activities as educational medium were investigated during the course “Language and Identity”. As previous research also found, there are several benefits to including improv in the curriculum that were also

found in the present study. Students reported that the interactive nature of the activities helped them feel more engaged with the classes and the material. Another positive effect of the inclusion of improv was that students pointed out that they had a better grip on the material, because they were encouraged to look at it from different perspectives. However, there were also some factors that should be taken into consideration when utilising improv in higher education. The individual differences between students with regard to learning patterns and motivations was found to play a significant role in how effective they found this relatively unique teaching method. Another factor that is important when using improv as a teaching method is the amount of time the students have to get used to each other and the activities. Finally, the fact that the course under investigation, “Language and Identity”, was offered in an online environment was found to have impact on the effectiveness of the learning process of the students as well. As one of the students aptly pointed out: “We have made the most of it in the online environment”.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Information Letter

Thesis Anouschka de Ruiter (a.deruiter3@students.uu.nl)

Topic

The topic of this research is the effect of alternative teaching methods in higher education. Research has shown that the inclusion of activities like games in higher education can be beneficial to the learning process, because of the increased attention toward student individuality (Berk & Trieber, 2009; van Broekhoven et al. 2020; Steward, 2009; Vahed et al., 2016). This study aims to research this phenomenon further.

Data gathering

The data gathered for this research will consist of two parts. The first part will consist of notes taken from activities in the classes of the course “Language and Identity: Researching and Writing Who We Are”. More specifically, these notes will be taken during activities that could be considered non-traditional for the higher education setting, where the teacher mostly explains the material and the students listen and have discussions about the material.

The second part of the data will be gathered during interview sessions with students who are willing to participate in these interviews. During these sessions, they will be asked questions about their general experiences with the teaching approach this course’s teacher takes, as well as more specific questions about experiences with some activities.

The data that will be gathered for this study will remain completely anonymous, except when a participant explicitly requests that their name will be announced.

If you have any questions regarding this study and/or your participation in it, please contact my through the e-mail address mentioned above.

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Appendix B – Consent form template



Universiteit Utrecht

DECLARATION OF CONSENT for participation in: Thesis Anouschka de Ruiter

I confirm:

- that I have been satisfactorily informed about the study via the information letter;
- that I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the study and that any questions I may have asked have been satisfactorily answered;
- that I am voluntarily participating.

I agree that:

- the data collected will be obtained for scientific purposes and retained as stated in the information letter;
- the collected, encrypted research data may be shared with and/or reused by other scientists, possibly to answer other research questions;

I understand that:

- I have the right to withdraw my consent for the use of data, as stated in the information letter.

Name participant: _____

Date of birth: ___ / ___ / ___ (dd/mm/yyyy)

Signature: _____

Date, place: ___ / ___ / ___, _____

To be completed by the researcher with ultimate responsibility:

Name: _____

I declare that I have explained to the above person what participation involves.

Date: ___ / ___ / ___ (dd/mm/yyyy)

Signature: _____

Appendix C – The Elephant Game rules

For this game, each participant was assigned an animal from the following ranking as their role, with which a particular gesture was linked:

1. Elephant
2. Reindeer
3. Gorilla
4. Snake
5. Wild animal
6. Wild animal
7. Fish
8. Rabbit
9. Chicken
10. Pig

The fifth and sixth animal were spots that the students were asked to decide on an animal and gesture for. The elephant would start off the game by making their own gesture, followed by the gesture of another animal. That respective animal would then respond with their own gesture and the gesture of one of the other animals. This would continue in silence until one animal made a mistake, for which they would be punished by replacing the pig. The animals that were ranked under the person that made the mistake would all move up one spot in the ranking. Then, the elephant would start the game again.

Appendix D – Notes from classes

Lecture week 1

- ❖ Circle survey
 - Introductory round
 - 10 names in, already changing and playing with the concept
 - Trans name change
 - Change in name adjusting to English
 - Sometimes including an explanation
 - “Please call me” changed into “Hi, please call me”
 - My major is ...
 - Generally quicker response, went through the list quicker
 - Quickly the addition of “as well”, “also”, “joining the club”, addition of relevant information to set themselves apart from the group (other major, other specialisation)
 - Changing the sentence completely with another major, more elaborate explanation of
 - Morning person – night owl
 - Immediately changed to night person
 - More elaborate explanation, people are getting more comfortable with talking
 - Quickly, people started defining themselves on a spectrum
 - Breakfast
 - People adhere to “this morning, for breakfast I had...”, with some variations
 - Variations became more elaborate as we went through the list
 - A lot of people had yoghurt, lol
 - Dog/cat person
 - People consider themselves one of the other more often than then morning person/night owl, this one is more binary
- ❖ Show and tell
 - Acknowledging and overcoming feelings of nervousness and being uncomfortable (quite literally -> “I’m shaking, but okay”, “this feels kind of silly”)
 - Generally, most people were smiling, talking about their object excitedly -> personal stories can do that

Lecture week 2

- ❖ Circle Survey
 - Favourite season
 - Playing with name jokes (Lente -> spring)
 - Most often
 - Summer
 - Spring
 - Show you’re watching right now
 - Sooo many different shows
 - Tv quiz instead of show

- Again, responses were quicker and smoother than first time
- Starting at a weird point, some people had to get used to
- Tea or coffee
 - Quantity
 - Tea: IHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH
 - Coffee: IIIII
 - Neither: III
- General observations
 - Seasons: relatively fixed sentence structure, for the other ones not as much
 - Tea vs. coffee gave short answers, the other ones gave longer answers
- Same same different
 - Without limitations: the “different” was often influenced by surroundings
 - Wool – cotton – tree (looked outside)
 - Peanut butter – jam – water bottle
 - Speaker – headphones – bird
 - Bicycle – tricycle – table
 - Apple – banana – chair
 - Painting – sculpture – priest
 - With limitations (movement):
 - Takes quite a long time, due to teams taking a long time to get everyone on screen and gestures might be more complicated to do
 - The first iteration has quite a lot of influence on later iterations
 - Mirror images
 - Very close variations
 - We’re not used to describing what people do with their bodies (Nelson)

Seminar 1 week 2

❖ Charades

- Group 1
 - Illegitimizing
 - One person is drinking water, the other person sees this and aggressively points to a “no drinking” sign
 - Power
 - UNLIMITED POWER scene re-enactment from Star Wars
 - Markedness & denaturalisation
 - Acting out a conversation with older person with an accent
 - Also denaturalisation
 - Indexicality
 - Observe something/pattern, when you see it again, you can create connections
 - One person enacting having binoculars and looking around, the other person pointing up, signifying having an idea
 - Authorisation/illegitimation
 - Person 1: “You’re wrong!”

- Person 2: “No, you’re wrong”
- Person 1: “No, I’m the teacher and you’re wrong!”
- Observations
 - When people are uncomfortable, they laugh a lot
 - Hard to mimic ideas/abstract terms/things that are not physical
 - “great way of memorising terms”
- Group 2
 - Adequation
 - Both have sunglasses on -> “wow, we both have sunglasses on, we’re the same now”
 - Sameness
 - Power
 - Talking in an exaggerated British accent, one demanding a cup of tea -> “yes, milady”
 - One of the characters was re-enacting be the Queen (indexicality)
 - Authentication & illegitimation & denaturalisation
 - “this here is my favourite eraser, I use it all the time” “an eraser isn’t enough, for writing you also need a pen, this pen is the best, I use it all the time” “is this pen also good enough?” “yes, that will do too”
 - Performance & power
 - “ok you have 2 minutes” *playing an instrument* “thank you, I will be touch with you”
 - Adequation and distinction (& power)
 - Two have the same blond hair colour, creating a group based on that trait. A third person joins with a darker blond colour, can’t join the group, because she’s different
 - Observation
 - Use of props (mugs, use of camera, pens, and eraser)
 - There can be several terms that can be applied to one specific act
 - Applicable to day-to-day life
 - Get more out of your shell
 - Everyone just went for it
 - Group size affects how the session works

Seminar 2 week 2

- ❖ Different communities of practice
 - Advantages of set educational system and curriculum
 - Standard version of education
 - Could be changed into more involved in communities of practice (different accents and stuff), but it should be clear-cut how
- ❖ Elephant game
 - Group 1
 - First round went really smoothly

- When switching, both Debbie and I made the mistake of sending the lower half of the list away (should have been the higher half)
- A lot of confusion about who was what in the beginning (we were missing one)
- I didn't know what to do with the wild cards, so I just told them to tell each other each wild card
- When penalising, most people got it, one person got stuck at the bottom
- Bucholtz and Hall
 - Original group vs. non-original group
 - Explain/call out or not?
- Mistake leads to more mistakes and confusion
- Communities of practice
 - How do you learn the rules of a community of practice?
 - ◆ Penalty
 - ◆ Correction by others
 - ◆ Leniency?
 - Elephant got called out less -> hierarchy? A difficult movement to make -> people are more forgiving
- Group 2
 - More errors
 - At a certain point, everyone became confused with regard to their role (partially because wild animals weren't assigned ranks), they reconvened by going back to the initial ranking order
 - Talking about which roles are assigned to whom (even though it is against the rules) was not penalised
 - After the switch, they did not explicitly list everyone's role, but just started playing, which led to more confusion and chaos (good though)
 - Becoming the pig became increasingly like an actual punishment (one time literally "you got demoted to pig again")
 - A lot of "what?" "huh?"
 - The person who joined after the switch transitioned very smoothly
 - "trying to topple the hierarchy"
 - "a lot of people produced gestures differently (moving vs. not moving)" -> not called out though (influence from communities of practice piece?)
 - The animals lower in the hierarchy get called on less (again, trying to topple the hierarchy)
- General observations
 - In both groups I was in, there was 1 person who repeatedly became pig

Lecture week 3

- ❖ Circle survey
 - "What do you like about it getting darker earlier" kind of turned into "What do you like about the colder seasons"
 - Next suggestion was "favourite candle scent", still pretty close to the first things that were run through the survey

- Observations that students made
 - People tend to be more active in participating and willing to elaborate on personal situations, things they're passionate about, because this course gives them the opportunity
 - With the games, students are more involved and playful
 - Mics on during the elephant game offered a nice environment because of laughter
 - Circle surveys are becoming looser, longer answers in comparison to the beginning of the course
 - Differs for students, some just give a short answer, some really elaborate
 - Very few people blur the background
 - We didn't get stressed out because of the mistakes with switching in the elephant game, just rolled with it and laughed it off
 - Calling the elephant "miss elephant"
 - This setting (at home) offers the opportunity for inclusion of personal belongings and props
 - Turning night owl into night person
- The milk that happens
 - The MILK that happ.....
 - The tea that happens
 - The tea that runs
 - The tea that springs
 - The tea that sprung
 - The flower that sprung
 - The flower that died
 - The person that died
 - The person that lived
 - The person that danced
 - The cat that danced
 - The cat that jumped
 - The cat that purred
 - A cat that purred
 - A cat that slept
 - A cat who slept
 - A dog that slept
 - (whispering) a dog that slept
 - A dog who sung
 - A Kardashian who sang
 - A singer who sung
 - A girl who sung
 - A boy who sung
 - The boy who sung
 - The boy who painted
 - The boy who paints

- The man who paints
- The man who paints?
- The man that paints
- The man that paints pictures

Seminar 2 week 3

❖ Introductory round

- Everyone introduced themselves with a made-up (sometimes) background story
- Some people used an accent (native or not (pirate))
- The made up background stories became a part of the gameplay

❖ Mayor election

- There were 5 nominees, it was a very close call between 2 people

❖ Second day

- 1 person immediately got blamed (tourist)
- To avoid getting killed, they started putting the focus on the rival mayor, who just moved into the town as well
- Worked for a short while, but in the end, the tourist got killed during the day

❖ Third day

- Killing one person to confirm a hypothesis
- The pirate accent disappeared after a while, people started questioning it (defence: political voice)

❖ Fourth day

- The person with the pirate accent claimed that they were the witch, and they killed me because I was a threat
- The rest believed them, through reasoning of “Nous was the only person who actually spoke up, out of all of the victims”
- The tourist yet again got accused, said she would commit suicide because of depression

❖ Fifth day

- Nobody died, but the atmosphere was kind of tense, because it looked like the werewolves were going to win
- The person who said they used scissors to (accidentally) killed someone finally got put on the hot seat
- When they got stuck in the corner, they started blaming many other people
- The discussion over who is the witch was still going on (after everyone established they agreed with the pirate)
- The person who killed someone with scissors (a tailor) got murdered during the day

❖ Sixth day

- The tourist was innocent!! (used as a scapegoat though)
- Debbie was a wolf, but no one blamed her until the last day, because she was the teacher
- At the beginning of the discussions, it was quite chaotic, but later in the discussion, people got more logical

- People embraced the role-playing thing immediately, reacted to others in-character as well

Lecture week 4

❖ Circle survey

- The milk that happens (only change the way you pronounce it)
 - Started of slowly, at some point it got faster
 - Intonation changes to last word and second word
 - Whispering
 - Emphasis on the 3rd word
 - Different pronunciation of milk (mielk)
 - Emphasis on 1st word
 - Louder whispering
 - discussion
 - Someone mentioned that they wondered why they didn't change the accent
 - Changed: intonation of separate word, rhythm of the sentence, pitch change, loudness, voice quality, length of words, stress,
 - We kept the slowness that was introduced by the first person
 - We didn't get a loud one
 - Mainly higher pitches, no really low pitches
- Pirate sentence
 - Most people stuck with their natural voice quality
 - A lot of rolling 'r'

Seminar 1 week 1

❖ Group 1

- Cash register
 - Switched from client to mother
 - Dollar instead of euros -> indexing a certain place in the world
 - Chatty register worker -> doesn't happen often -> markedness
 - The students picked up the assignment pretty easily, even though
 - Cigarettes are bad for you -> denaturalisation
 - Practice
- Cash register
 - Switched from employee to defensive, suspicious person
 - Talk about mainly the groceries
 - "this was in discount right?" -> interpreted as annoying customer
 - He opened with "this was in discount, right?"
 - Marked
 - Authentication
 - Figures of personhood
- Party
 - How was your weekend?
 - Getting a little drunk
 - Follow up on this

- Immediately after the switch, person said “girl” -> index of switch
- Distinction and adequation -> “I don’t do sports, but I commend you for it”
- Interruption
- Indication of drunkenness
 - Slouching a little, actually drinking
- In-class discussion of the material
 - Started talking about identity -> interesting concept -> difficult concept -> let’s ask the teacher
 - Agreeing with each other, trying to explain themselves with comparisons
 - After switch -> immediately started talking about pinballs
 - Marked -> there are things you don’t talk about in this scenario, clearly mentioned
 - Authorisation -> authorising certain conversation topics, illegitimation
 - Power -> the non-switching person immediately noted that pinball machines are not a proper topic to talk about in this scenario
 - Teacher was listening, which caused the non-switching person to bring the conversation topic back to identity
- ❖ Group 2
 - Cash register
 - Switched from client to sister who games with her brother a lot
 - We’re apparently starting at the bakery
 - “great season for pears”
 - Change in vocab, less formal
 - Cashier didn’t hear switch, so they felt like a completely different person came in front of them
 - Interesting switching to an identity that didn’t fit
 - Change in body language as well
 - Performance: making the sound of a bread cutter
 - Norms, markedness, behaviour that fits into a certain scenario, that can be marked and even rude in another
 - Power dynamic -> customer is in power
 - Authorisation -> asking for the manager
 - Cash register
 - Switched from cashier to friendly conversation
 - “beep, beep, beep” indexicality
 - After switching
 - “you look like you could use some chocolate”
 - Period talk
 - Customised card
 - Customer was not expecting this switch
 - The entire thing felt natural as a friendly conversation
 - The cashier started talking a lot after the switch, authentication by connecting to the other

- “you were too much up in my space”
- Party
 - “great party, huh”
 - After switch
 - Didn’t know what kind of identity they wanted to switch to
 - A different vibe of the same person
 - Even “ourselves” is a range
 - Agency: switching person showed agency over their own choices (I want to go home now)
 - Raised questions about constricting agency
- In-class discussion of the material
 - Switched from fellow student to lover
 - Other person got very confused because her questions about material weren’t answered properly
 - “I can see that Debbie is watching” -> power, authorisation, illegitimation (turn the conversation to what it should be about)
 - “you’re not my mom” -> does not mean the other person meant mom, but it was interpreted that way
 - Denaturalisation -> switching person was told not to act like that in that scenario, denaturalised her

Lecture week 5

- ❖ Circle survey
 - Ethnography ideas
 - Everyone felt comfortable enough to mention or show that they were tired (also while explaining their ethnography ideas)
- ❖ What is a meme?
 - Unit of cultural reproduction
 - Usually really hard to understand a meme if you don’t have prior (pop culture) knowledge
 - Showcases suppressed frustrations
 - Different generations and social groups apply memes differently
 - Intertextuality between , memes can be so many formats nowadays
 - Person being the meme, not the picture of the person
 - Things being memes
- ❖ Meme discussion
 - Dependent on the prior knowledge of the audience (Christmas voicemail & receiving Christmas tree)
 - Use of screensharing -> instagram video

Appendix E – Notes from interviews

- ❖ How did the inclusion of improv-related activities influence your learning process?
 - 1
 - Generally, very different from what she was used to, felt denaturalising
 - Normally not very focused on improv -> different way of thinking, challenging, especially in the academic world
 - 2
 - Very different type of learning process
 - Show and tell -> a little more prepared, but people got more personal
 - Later on, it became easier to come up with answers on the spot
 - A lot of fun, it did help to keep more engaged (in the online environment)
 - The exclusion of it in other classes were not negative
 - 3
 - Helps, because I'm good at improv and I like it, which makes me more attuned to the class and what is going on
 - Analysing of the moment of him being cashier helped the understanding of the terms
 - 4
 - Good way to implement things we've learned
 - People are a little awkward about it, don't want to put themselves in the front line
 - People that do participate are usually the same
 - Progressed during the past weeks
 - Would work better with longer courses, people could let loose more
 - Tried so many different things, everything combined helped get a better grip on theory
 - 5
 - Helpful, because they give you practical examples of the definitions
 - More effective than just reading
 - 6
 - Think it was interesting to have this experience as a first (part of pre-master intercultural communication)
 - Pretty much everything is fine with regard to assessment
 - Less insecure, put at ease by teacher
 - More creative, not like learning and just reproducing
 - 7
 - Helpful to be able to use examples from activities during the oral exam
 - Helped with visualising the theoretical terms
- ❖ What other influences (positive and/or negative) did the inclusion of improv-related activities have compared to the more traditional teaching tactics in higher education?
 - 1
 - Pretty scary, doing improv is pretty personal
 - Dutch expression: "alsof het tapijn onder je voeten vandaan wordt gerukt" -> like losing your solid footing

- Normally, you know the rules, now you suddenly don't have those specific rules anymore -> academic context is completely different
- After you got used to it, it was fun to communicate with each other in this different way, especially because of Covic-19
- Games did offer opportunity for better team building
- Normally, you only get to know a little group from the course, but this offered the opportunity to at least get to know your entire seminar group better, also with regard to their qualities
- Everyone was relatively active in participation (normally, there's only a small group of active students who seem to be the only ones to converse with the teacher)
- 2
 - It made you feel more engaged
 - Everyone got a chance to speak (in regular classes, students don't feel comfortable to speak up)
 - Put on the spot created a more open and contributing environment
- 3
 - The main positive influence -> easier to pay attention in class
 - Didn't really see many benefits, very good with traditional learning
 - Participation was more fun -> paying more attention
 - Easier learning with just picking up a book, used to traditional style of teaching, works for me
 - It's important to look for alternative methods of education, it's a personal thing
 - Think it's important to coax people to speak up more, improv is an effective medium for that
- 4
 - Implementing activities helps in comparison the only reading about it
 - More engaged with the material,
 - See division between people who get it and people who don't
- 5
 - More fun
 - Created something between students, more effectively included in learning process
 - Helped students to act effectively
- 6
 - Always a surprise what we're going to do
 - Learn a lot from that, everything is so open and voluntary
- 7
 - It makes you think more (standard forms -> you have already seen or done it), improv is more spontaneous
 - Online -> your own environment, more laid-back
 - Standard methods would be less effective
 - Normally, only one person answers a question, this makes everyone think more deeply about the material

- No standard question-answer format
- ❖ Do you have any suggestions or ideas with regard to the inclusion of game-like activities in higher educations?
 - 1
 - We have made the most of it in the online environment
 - IRL you have the opportunity to look at board games, different kind of influence
 - For instance the game Life, which could be played as a sort of theatre activity
 - 2
 - So unusual, classes are often structured to not give this
 - Hard to include in other classes
 - More improv -> less reading (less time to discuss in class)
 - Spent less time on reading compared to other classes
 - 3
 - As this course progressed, people dared to speak up more, which is one of the things that he finds bothersome in other courses
 - Positive effect on participation by every student, not only the talkative ones
 - Often put into groups with unknown people
 - 4
 - It's difficult because you get so little actual contact time with the teacher
 - Built up nicely (first only circle survey, activities got more intense overtime)
 - Courses are too short to optimally use improv
 - You have to become comfortable in the new group
 - If improv becomes part of the general curriculum, it will be easier to get comfortable (what is the norm?)
 - 5
 - Use it more because it tends to be more interesting
 - Learning with fun should be applied more, especially in higher education
 - 6
 - Hard because of online environment, irl would be different
 - The environment is important for the effectivity
 - 7
 - Second language acquisition -> sometimes more effective when you're being active
 - Actively doing things with spirit and body, if you can bring those two together, it could aid the learning process
- ❖ Any final remarks with regard to the course's setup?
 - 1
 - Very fun up until this point
 - Challenging, different from what she is used to
 - Fun to be active with each other
 - Fun to be able to tell others: "I'm going to play games for class", but the games are useful
 - Repetition helps with information retention

- Terms were repeated a lot and applied in different ways, which helps remembering them
 - This course also offers insight into alternative teaching methods
 - Learned a lot about looking into things from different perspectives, within a certain framework
- 2
 - At the beginning, she was confused, person who likes to plan everything ahead of time
 - What do the assignments mean, when should I start?
 - A lot of input into the class
 - Teacher is very open
 - Discuss with other students, hard in the online environment
- 3
 - Felt like this course is extremely experimental, goal is opportunity for students to learn and teachers to research
 - Would have preferred a clearer overview of the course goals
 - Terms were useful, but generally quite vague
 - Would have preferred more diverse sources and theoretical background
 - The way of testing worked for this course
- 4
 - This course lets you be a part of the course
 - Not traditional in the way you get graded and assessed
 - Liked that it was more fluid
 - Theoretical part of this course is really small, but so widely applicable
 - Encouraging to look at things from different perspectives, because you have done it so many different times and in so many different ways
- 5
 - This course was very different
 - This is the first course that she enjoyed in this programme
 - Students really became more comfortable and confident
 - Teacher was main star of this course
 - Gave them the impression that students should not feel stressed, just enjoy it
 - More easy-going
- 6
 - Liked the creative part
 - Used to having everything explained at the beginning, have to get used to how last-minute some things were
 - Encourages/forces to be more creative
- 7
 - Because this course feels low-key, it's a nice course to follow
 - Normally, they take a more expectant position, less actively participating
 - Interactivity offers a low bar to say something, nicer environment to work in