AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE APPLICABILITY OF THEATRICAL IMPROVISATION TECHNIQUES TO LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

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This report is not confidential and the UCT Graduate School of Business may use it freely at their discretion.

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I certify that the analysis conducted and the results presented throughout the report are my own work and all references are accurately reported in the document.

Signed: _____________________

Charlie Beall
Abstract

This study hopes to elucidate an alternative form of leadership training - that of improvisational theatre - in which acting under conditions of uncertainty, accepting offers, crafting a disciplined imagination, suspending judgement, being present and enhancing awareness skills may become learnable components of leadership development. The central research question asks whether, when practised by individuals, improvisation can transform the thinking and orientation of those individuals in such a way as to make them better or more equipped leaders?

Through the use of participant observation and semi-structured interviews, the research exposed a diverse sample of individuals to the practice of improvisation and sought to measure whether the discipline enhanced individuals’ psychological and inter-personal skills in order to lead in more uncertain and unpredictable times. The study revealed that improvisation may encourage creativity, possibility, resourcefulness and an ability to manage uncertainty and ambiguity, provided however, that it is appropriately applied. In terms of achieving this application, not only do leaders have to be present, practise dialogue and avoid judgemental behaviour patterns but they also need to leverage their individuals skills, capabilities and education in a properly facilitated fashion.

KEYWORDS: Improvisation, leadership, communication, dialogue, being present, theatre, arts, blame, failure, judgement, creativity, uncertainty, ambiguity, resourcefulness, possibility, facilitation.
#### Table of contents

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................... 2

Abstract ...................................................................................................................................... 3

Table of contents ........................................................................................................................ 4

Table of Figures ........................................................................................................................ 8

Research area and problem ...................................................................................................... 10

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 10

What is improvisation? ......................................................................................................... 15

Improvisation and leadership ............................................................................................... 19

Research questions and Scope ................................................................................................. 23

Research Assumptions and Ethics ........................................................................................... 25

Literature review Being present ............................................................................................... 28

Avoiding blame and overcoming the fear of failure ............................................................ 31

Dialogue .................................................................................................................................. 36

Seeing possibility ..................................................................................................................... 40

Creativity .................................................................................................................................. 45

Resourcefulness and responsiveness .................................................................................... 48

Dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity .............................................................................. 51

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................... 54

Research Approach and Strategy ............................................................................................. 56

Research Design, Data Collection Methods and Research Instruments .................................. 57

Participant observation ............................................................................................................. 57

Participant observation as process ........................................................................................... 60

Field notes ................................................................................................................................ 62

Interviews .................................................................................................................................. 64

Interview process ..................................................................................................................... 66
Sampling .................................................................................................................................. 67
Data Analysis Methods ............................................................................................................ 67
Research findings, analysis and discussion ............................................................................. 74
  Description of the research process .................................................................................... 74
  Description of games played ............................................................................................ 75
Research findings ..................................................................................................................... 79
  Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 79
Being Present .......................................................................................................................... 85
  Being present ..................................................................................................................... 85
  Choice ................................................................................................................................ 88
  Exposing learned patterns of behaviour ............................................................................ 89
Participation ............................................................................................................................. 91
  Physical energy .................................................................................................................. 96
  Spontaneity ....................................................................................................................... 98
Personal capabilities and education ....................................................................................... 103
  Age ..................................................................................................................................... 104
  Authenticity, compliance and rebellion ............................................................................ 106
  Confidence and Difficulty ................................................................................................. 107
  Gender ............................................................................................................................... 108
  Individual talent, mood, personality type and personal idiosyncrasies ......................... 109
  Self-consciousness ............................................................................................................ 112
  Self-revelation ................................................................................................................... 113
Facilitation ............................................................................................................................. 114
  Facilitation skills ............................................................................................................... 115
  Group dynamics ............................................................................................................... 119
  Contracting and Trust ....................................................................................................... 121
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

Rules, boundaries, containment ................................................................. 125
Rank ........................................................................................................... 126
Validation ..................................................................................................... 128
Volunteering ............................................................................................... 128
Process challenges .................................................................................... 128
Anxiety ......................................................................................................... 129
Team building ............................................................................................ 130
Avoiding Blame and the Fear of Failure .................................................... 133
Blame .......................................................................................................... 134
Competitiveness ........................................................................................ 139
Failure and mistakes ................................................................................ 139
Judgement .................................................................................................... 144
Performance anxiety and standard ............................................................ 147
Power .......................................................................................................... 154
Safety .......................................................................................................... 155
Dialogue ..................................................................................................... 156
Listening ...................................................................................................... 160
Altered perspective ................................................................................... 165
Collaboration .............................................................................................. 167
Enhancing other peoples’ ideas ................................................................. 169
Letting go of one’s own agenda ................................................................. 170
Tie with language or familiar vernacular .................................................. 172
Limited time .............................................................................................. 175
Seeing Possibility ..................................................................................... 176
Seeing possibility ....................................................................................... 177
Altered perspective ................................................................................... 181
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagination</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laughter</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positivity</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silliness</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth and lies</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necessary environment</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Originality</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneity vs. creativity</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicability or Pragmatism</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continued practice</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having something at stake</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real life</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work vs. home life</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resourcefulness and Responsiveness</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resourcefulness</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making do</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and information gathering</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

Living with Uncertainty and Ambiguity ................................................................. 223
  Personal anxiety .................................................................................................. 224
  Uncertainty ......................................................................................................... 225
  Uncertainty in life ............................................................................................... 226
  Uncertainty regarding the session ................................................................. 229
  Relaxation into the session ............................................................................. 232
  Comfort zone .................................................................................................. 235
  Managing change ............................................................................................ 235

Research conclusions ....................................................................................... 236

Effectiveness of methodology .......................................................................... 240

Research Limitations ....................................................................................... 242

Future Research Directions ............................................................................. 244

Bibliography ..................................................................................................... 245

Appendix 1 – Informed Consent Form ............................................................. 255

Appendix 2 – Improvisation Training Proposal ............................................. 257

Table of Figures

Figure 1: Areas of improvisation ................................................................. 13
Figure 2: Interrelationship diaagraph ............................................................. 14
Figure 3: Systemic scorecard of improvisational competencies for leadership 15
Figure 4: Entrepreneurial action under varying degrees of novelty and resource constraints. 22
Figure 5: Critical thresholds of improvisation ............................................. 23
Figure 6: Four world views .......................................................................... 24
Figure 7: Framework of Artistic Leadership ................................................. 55
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

Figure 8: The grounded theory analytical process ................................................................. 68
Figure 9: Triangulation approach ....................................................................................... 69
Figure 10: Process in the Constant Comparative Method of Data Analysis ....................... 70
Figure 11: The Chain of Evidence Concept ....................................................................... 71
Figure 12: Funnelling in operation during the research process ......................................... 72
Figure 13: Revised interrelationship diagraph .................................................................... 236
Figure 14: Revised systemic scorecard of improvisational competencies for leadership .... 237
Figure 15: The phases of improvisational applicability in leadership enhancement .......... 239
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

Research area and problem

Introduction

The primary research question of this study is as follows: when practised by individuals, can improvisation transform the thinking and orientation of those individuals in such a way as to make them better or more equipped leaders?

This study hopes to elucidate an alternative form of leadership training - that of improvisational theatre - in which acting under conditions of uncertainty, accepting offers, crafting a disciplined imagination, suspending judgement, being present and enhancing awareness skills may become learnable components of leadership development.

It seeks to test whether a discipline such as that of improvisation can improve individuals’ psychological and inter-personal skills in order to lead in more uncertain and unpredictable times.

Given the dramatic changes taking place in society, the economy, and technology, 21st-century organisations need to engage in new, more spontaneous, and more innovative ways of managing... an increasing number of companies are including artists and artistic processes in their approaches to strategic and day-to-day management and leadership (Adler, 2006, p. 486).

Wheatley suggests that we are living in “uncertain times”, where the growth of global social complexity and the potential crises organisations now face is increasing (Wheatley, 2005, p. 65). Furthermore, Cowan (2007, p.175) acknowledges the significant (though imbalanced) role that science and morals have played in leadership education to date and that it is only recently that artistic leadership has emerged as a viable corollary: “This effort does not suggest that arts are becoming more important than morals and science but rather only that arts play an essential role in the realisation of human potentiality in leadership”.

Adler (2006) lists the following trends, which have caused businesses to turn to the arts for inspiration and guidance:

- Rapidly increasing global interconnectedness
- Increasing domination of market forces
- An increasingly turbulent, complex, and chaotic environment
Advances in technology that have lowered the cost of experimentation, meaning organisations’ scarcest resource becomes their dreamers, not their testers; and

A yearning for significance, whereby success is no longer perceived as being enough

Whyte suggests that corporations now require “more creativity, [more] commitment, and [more] innovation” (Whyte, 1994, p. 21). While such trends are certainly in evidence today, the relevance of art to business is no new thing. Previously artists have been utilised in business settings to bring “emotional truth to established principles” (Zander & Zander, 2000, p. 3). Organisations in the business, education and mental health sectors have all previously used theatrical role-playing to gain understanding of and find solutions to underlying problems (Hodgson & Richards, 1966). Taylor and Hansen (2005) suggest at least four ways in which the arts can contribute to leadership development:

- For understanding organisational action
- To display organisational practices
- To generate artistic content
- To evoke the ‘feel’ of an organisation

The present research seeks to understand an additional application of arts-based learning, in this case for leadership development, by testing the manner in which the arts may help individuals develop leadership skills and competencies to work within organisations more effectively. Vera and Crossan (2005, p. 203) posit:

*If musicians and actors can learn to improvise and to be innovative in real time, can these skills also be learned by work teams in organisations? Despite the considerable attention given to the need for teams to be more nimble and to develop an improvisational capability, little is known about how team members can learn this skill and successfully apply it in organisations.*

The application of arts-based learning in general and improvisation in particular, speaks directly to leadership and management environments, for as Tung (2006, p. 507) has argued there is a distinction between management as an art versus a science, pointing to significant cross-cultural differences in this regard: “…one principal difference between North American and East Asian management practices is that in the former, in general, management is considered primarily as a science; whereas, in the latter, management is typically viewed as
an art”. She argues that this distinction is due to the fact that knowledge is derived primarily by induction in the East as opposed to deduction in the West. In the West, we are said to have an “over-reliance on deduction”, which inhibits the potential for “speculative thought” (Tung, 2006, p. 508) or “disciplined imagination” (Weick, 1989, p. 516). Cowan (2007, p. 157) argues that:

Part of the reason why artistic competencies are seldom explicitly included in programs of leadership development is perhaps that, in Western societies, they are mostly dissociated from leadership behaviour and relegated instead to specialised artistic media such as music, painting, dance, sculpture, and architecture. As an unfortunate consequence, the artistic side of aspiring leaders is less nurtured than other sides, thus reducing their creative potential.

This research questions whether leaders are being taught the most effective skills for today’s context, or can a more appropriate arts-based pedagogy (Cowan, 2007) be formulated?

Specifically, present research examines techniques associated with theatrical improvisation (Chilver, 1967; Spolin, 1973; Johnstone, 1979; Book, 2002) and how these can and are being applied within an organisational context (Hodgson & Richards, 1966). Crossan (1998, p. 593) identifies the following areas in which improvisation workshops have been used in the management context: “interpreting the environment; crafting strategy; cultivating leadership; fostering teamwork; developing individual skills; and assessing organisational culture” [see Figure 1].
The research focuses on two areas of Crossan’s analysis (cultivating leadership and developing individual skills) and builds upon it by identifying seven constructs that appear consistently in both the improvisation and leadership literature, and analysing whether these overlapping competencies can be compared and developed:

7. Dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity (Wheatley, 2005; Boyatzis & McKeen, 2005;
Using a systems thinking approach (Senge, 1990) an interrelationship diagraph has been inductively compiled to illustrate the relationship between each of the constructs listed above [see Figure 2]. A systemic scorecard has been developed with respect to the drivers and outcomes of these constructs [see Figure 3]. The seven constructs inform the structure of the literature review that follows, as well as the subsequent themes for investigation into the applicability of theatrical improvisation techniques to leadership.

Figure 2: Interrelationship Diagraph

An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

Barrett, 1998; Merry 1995).
Cowan (2007, p. 156) explains that “leaders are increasingly called on to function in ways that demand creative smarts as much as book smarts and street smarts. Consequently, more attention is being given to artistic potentialities of leadership”. This research takes a lead from his desire to establish “an integrative foundation for such characteristics and to translate the resultant pattern into an integral array of leadership competencies” and “…to develop a diverse array of artistic catalysts and activities to promote these competencies” (Cowan, 2007, p. 156).

What is improvisation?

Improvisation is derived from the “Latin ‘improvisus’, meaning ‘not seen ahead of time” (Barrett, 1998, p. 606) and can also mean “playing extemporaneously… composing on the spur of the moment” (Schuller, 1989, p. 378). It is found in all areas of life (Sharkansky & Zalmanovitch, 2000) and not surprisingly, there are a number of studies that look at how improvisation operates in the group and organisational context (Eisenhardt & Tabrizi, 1995; Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Moorman & Miner, 1998; Miner, Bassoff, & Moorman, 2001). While these studies focus on the role of leaders in the improvisation process, the current study seeks to understand specifically the value of improvisation processes for the development of leadership. Improvisation in this context “can fruitfully be seen as a special type of short-term, real-time learning. Specifically, in improvisational learning, experience and related change occur at the same time” (Miner, Bassoff, & Moorman, 2001, p. 306).
There is an extensive body of literature that uses jazz and theatrical improvisation as a metaphor for understanding existing processes and structures within organisations (Weick, 1993; Weick, 1998; Hatch, 1997). Rather than training the lens on the organisation, the present research focuses on improvisation as a practical learning tool for personal leadership, applicable to the entire life and effectiveness of an individual leader (Spolin, 1973).

Theatrical improvisation is closely related to everyday communication:

*We create an improvisation whenever we communicate with another person and without having previously rehearsed or memorised what we say or do, or without having the words or actions written down in front of us. Every form of communication is initially an improvisation* (Chilver, 1967, p.10).

As such, those skilled in the art of improvisation are increasingly seen to possess skills and capabilities that are desirable in the business context:

*Improvisers* are adept at dealing with changing and unpredictable circumstances. They know how to cope with uncertainty, be flexible, adaptive and creative under intense pressure. Moreover, since improvisational theatre is based on a number of practices, not on innate talent, it can be studied, learned and applied to situations beyond the stage (Poynton, 2000, p. 40-41).

In the theatrical context, improvisation is defined as an “impromptu performance by an actor or group of actors, which may be an element in actor-training, a phase in the creation of a particular role, or part of a staged production” (Hartnoll & Found, 1992, p. 233). A continuous theme in the literature is that improvisation is a tool for solving a problem or seizing an opportunity (Sharkansky & Zalmanovitch, 2000) and “drawing upon our imagination in order to achieve [a solution]” (Hodgson & Richards, 1966, p. 3). Furthermore, there is a temporal element to many definitions of improvisation, summed up best by Moorman and Miner (1998, p. 698) who write, “…we draw on prior work to define improvisation as the degree to which composition and execution converge in time. Therefore, the more proximate the design and implementation of an activity in time, the more that activity is improvisational”. Improvisation therefore can be seen as “the conception of action as it unfolds... drawing on available material, cognitive, affective, and social resources” (Cunha, Cunha, & Kamoche, 1999, p. 302).

Viola Spolin (1973, p. 383-384), the ‘grandmother of improvisational theatre’ describes improvisational theatre in the following way:
...playing the game... setting out to solve a problem with no preconception as to how you will do it; permitting everything in the environment (animate or inanimate) to work for you in solving the problem... it is not the scene, it is the way to the scene... a predominate function of the intuitive... ‘playing it by ear’... process as opposed to result... not ad-lib or ‘originality’ or ‘making it up by yourself’... a form, if understood, possible to any age group... setting object in motion between players as in a game... solving of problems together... the ability to allow the acting problem to evolve the scene... a moment in the lives of people without needing a plot or story line for the communication... an art form... transformation... brings forth details and relationships as organic whole... living process

There are two common misconceptions that have hindered the applicability of improvisation in an organisational context. Firstly, improvisation and spontaneity have been too closely aligned and secondly, there is an underlying assumption that what results from improvisation is necessarily positive (Vera & Crossan, 2005). While improvisation is neither positive nor negative, these authors argue that it “has a positive effect on team innovation when combined with team and contextual moderating factors” and “improvisational skill can be learned by organisational members through training” (Vera & Crossan, 2005, p. 203). The present research seeks to test the extent to which improvisation is a skill that can be learned and to test the assumption that: “Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise. Anyone who wishes to can play in the theatre and learn to become ‘stageworthy’” (Spolin, 1973, p. 3).

To frame the context of what is meant by a theatrical improvisation session, the following guidelines provide a valuable starting point:

A typical improvisation workshop begins with a brief overview of the importance of improvisation to motivate individual investment of time and energy in the process. Individuals then work in small groups (10 to 20 individuals) with an experienced improvisation facilitator who takes them through a series of progressively more challenging improvisation exercises for about two-and-a-half hours. The facilitators provide coaching on some of the important principles of improvisation as the exercises unfold. More concrete links to the practice of management are made once the individuals have had a chance to experience improvisation (Crossan, 1998, p. 594).

It is essential that workshops are carried out in a space that is private and sufficiently large for everyone in the group to move freely (Book, 2002, p. 3). The space should be free of obstacles, though the occasional block or chairs may be left for participants to use should they require them (Chilver, 1967, p. 13). An ideal group size is between twelve and twenty but smaller numbers can be accommodated (Book, 2002). In order to develop participants’ levels of involvement and personal freedom, much of the learning takes place through the playing of games:
Games develop personal freedom necessary for experiencing. Games develop personal techniques and skills necessary for the game itself, through playing. Skills are developed at the very moment a person is having all the fun and excitement playing a game has to offer – this is the exact time he is truly open to receive them (Spolin, 1973, p. 4-5).

Learning therefore, is experiential and “equips the actor to be self-sufficient in the practice of his art and career” (Book, 2002, p. xiii). The nature of theatrical improvisation is that it encourages all ideas and suggestions (Johnstone, 1979). Participants are invited to see everything that they encounter as an ‘offer’, which may be defined as “anything that happens which they can take and use” (Poynton, 2000, p. 41).

April, April and Peters (2011 forthcoming) argue that the concept of ‘accepting offers’ is useful beyond the theatrical context because of its breadth and applicability to everyday life and because it allows individuals to change how their perceptions are oriented: instead of judging whether something is right or wrong, good or bad, something I like or something I do not, seeing everything as an offer allows one to ask the question ‘what can I do with this?’

While there are seemingly no prescriptions in improvisation, there are a number of ground rules that cannot be broken. Firstly, everyone plays (Book, 2002, p. 7). No participant is allowed to sit out an activity, nor can improvisation sessions be attended by outside observers: “an observer in a class corrupts this environment. Regardless of the good intentions or kind-heartedness of the observer, judgement is inherent in the act of observing… No one gains from observers being present except the observers themselves” (Book, 2002, p. 7). For an analysis of how this mediates the research process, see the methodology section.

Furthermore, to facilitate the necessary environment for effective improvisation participants agree to the principle of:

‘agree, accept, and add.’ Improvisers also learn to read the cues from their environment and to ‘make do’ with whatever they have at hand (Weick, 1993). This is captured in two rules: ‘be present in the moment,’ and ‘draw on reincorporation and ready mades’ (Johnstone, 1979) (Vera & Crossan, 2005, p. 207).

Spolin (1973, p. 43) reminds us that improvisation is not unrehearsed action but the rules, skills and learning that make such action possible:
Improvising in itself is not a system of training. It is one of the results of the training. Natural unrehearsed speech and response to a dramatic situation are only part of the total training. When ‘improvising’ becomes an end in itself, it can kill spontaneity while fostering cleverness.

Improvisation and leadership

In the first half of the 20th century, studies in leadership by educators, psychologists and sociologists focused primarily on the individual personality traits and characteristics that were necessary for leadership: “Numerous attempts were made to isolate various traits and characteristics thought to be related to leadership behaviour, and which also would ‘explain’ why some persons were ‘leaders’ and others not” (Geier, 1967, p. 316). Latterly, the debate has moved on and there exist a significant number of business schools, which now teach Leadership as part of their curricula (Doh, 2003). There are still those however, who draw a distinction between managers and leaders, suggesting that leadership rests more in intrinsic points of human character, ethics and personality rather than in sets of tools or skills that should be learned purely for the practice of management (Zaleznick, 1992). Addressing the point about whether leadership can be learned or not, Doh (2003) interviewed a series of management thinkers about their opinions on the matter. He explains that: “Historically, there has been debate over whether leadership is a skill, trait, or innate behaviour. Although most management educators now agree that leadership is both a skill and a behaviour that exhibits that skill, this dual definition has generated additional disagreement over whether leadership can be taught” (Doh, 2003, p. 54). Doh’s study suggested that while leadership can be learned, there may be limits to how far this can be developed through formal courses and coaching and additionally, there are individuals who display greater potential and aptitude for leadership learning. Stephen Stumpf (cited in Doh, 2003, p. 57) responds:

Can leadership be learned? Of course. Leadership is not like breathing - if you don't focus your efforts and work at it, you won't be an effective leader. It may be that every person cannot 'learn' how to be an effective leader, but we could say the same about learning chess. Everyone does not have the potential to be a master chess player.

Ultimately, this research takes as its assumption that leadership can be learned to a degree (Doh, 2003) and that this degree is worth pursuing, for as Kim Cameron suggests:

Let's take the assumption that the answer is 'no.' Leadership can't be taught and leadership can't be learned. That means we should change entirely our research and teaching emphasis in universities. We should begin to focus on finding the genetic code...
that is associated with leadership. Forget theory. Forget models. Forget correlations and predictors... If leaders are born not made - and if no one can teach anyone else to improve - let's start investigating leadership in the biology lab rather than in the business world. So yes, unequivocally [leadership can be taught] (Cameron cited in Doh, 2003, p. 59).

The present research is premised on the assumption that leadership can be learned and is not simply a gift of biology but social connectivity and context.

Much attention has been dedicated to understanding the type of leadership necessary to enable “organisational improvisation” (Cunha, Kamoche, & Cunha, 2003, p. 38). Indeed these authors posit the notion of “improvisational leadership - not to introduce a new type of leadership theory, but to characterise leadership in a specific situation” (Cunha, Kamoche, & Cunha, 2003, p. 38).

This research however, seeks to look specifically at techniques associated with theatrical improvisation as a method for individuals in “cultivating leadership” (Crossan, 1998, p. 593): “In a world of increasingly rapid change, improvisation is becoming a competency needed by leaders in particular” (Darso, 2004, p. 120).

Training programmes now exist whereby organisations take exercises commonly used by actors in theatrical improvisation and apply them to their own contexts and problems. However, as Vera and Crossan (2005, p. 203) suggest, “limited theoretical work is available on what it takes to develop this skill. Also, there is a lack of empirical evidence supporting the success of any improvisational training effort”.

The present research seeks to go some way to providing some of this empirical evidence. However, it does not seek to represent improvisation as the sole enabler of leadership capabilities. Indeed, there are numerous studies that question wholehearted endorsements of the practice. Roux-Dufort and Vidaillet (2003, p. 111) suggest that in crisis situations improvisational attributes are only useful up to a point, particularly in organisational settings “that are unlikely to present a ‘pure’ form of uniting conditions that facilitate improvisation”. Hatch (1997) has warned of the danger of romanticising the benefit improvisation is likely to provide organisations and Miner et al. (2001, p. 327-328) suggest that “future researchers should not expect a single benefit from improvisation; instead, we should anticipate and examine such disparate valued outcomes as temporary action patches, troubleshooting, the successful use of serendipitous opportunities, and even aesthetic creations”. This research
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

argues that rating improvisational outcomes as positive or negative is both counterproductive and contrary to the purpose of improvisation, which is an orientation that seeks not to label or ascribe values to actions (Johnstone, 1979). Vera and Crossan (2005, p. 203-204) remind us that “efforts to train teams to improvise need to be based on a realistic understanding of what improvisation is, and what it is not”.

Value judgements only enhance the “culture of blame” (Wheatley, 2005, p. 181) that leaders should be seeking to undermine. Johnstone (1979, p. 118) reminds his readers, “…if I want people to free-associate, then I have to create an environment in which they are not going to be punished, or in any way held responsible for the things their imagination gives them”.

Hodgson and Richards (1966, p. 18) propose a further link to leadership in describing acting as an “experiment in living”. They argue that improvisation is a core activity in understanding life. It takes part on the levels both of doing and being and it allows an actor to impersonate all aspects of the human situation, giving a “spontaneous human response to an idea or ideas, or a set of conditions” (Hodgson & Richards, 1966, p. 18). These authors are particularly informative in their description of how improvisation might be a tool for learning, and more particularly the learning of leadership:

There are many useful means of gaining experience in a passive and substitute way, but drama calls for the living response and resourcefulness... In more sophisticated society the approach of impersonation seems a built-in response in helping to enable every one of us to keep the world in manageable proportions. The young child literally steps into mother's shoes, puts on her clothing and carries out her duties, in order to grasp what that situation is really like (Hodgson & Richards, 1966, p. 25).

This study seeks to understand whether the metaphorical ‘young child’ can be enabled through improvisational techniques to develop the type of leadership skills that Cowan (2007, p. 158) is calling for: “more life affirming qualities, such as harmony, synergy, community, enrichment, and sustainability”. Can a new kind of leadership (Adler, 2006) be learned through improvisation? A leadership where:

...there is no defined leadership role. Individuals must make their own judgements about when to get involved, what to offer, and when to redirect the scene. Being able to take on different leadership roles at different times is heavily dependent upon the ability of the group to work as a team (Crossan, 1998, p. 596).
Critics suggest that improvisation is not altogether useful, nor is it appropriate in all situations (Roux-Dufort & Vidaillet, 2003; Hmieleski & Corbett, 2006). Hmieleski and Corbett (2006) suggest that improvisation is a valuable and appropriate skill for entrepreneurs in conditions of high resource constraints and high novelty, but other learning methods may be more appropriate at other times [see Figure 4].

In addition, Roux-Dufort and Vidaillet (2003) have demonstrated that under conditions of severe novelty and crisis, improvisation skills cease to provide a benefit. As levels of urgency and surprise increase, one’s capacity to improvise increases, but at a critical point begins to wane [see Figure 5]. Interesting, but beyond the constraints of the present research, would be to investigate the continued salience of improvisational techniques in leadership enhancement beyond contexts of crisis and uncertainty.

Figure 4: Entrepreneurial action under varying degrees of novelty and resource constraints. Adapted from Hmieleski and Corbett, 2006, p. 46.
Research questions and Scope

**Primary research question:** Can improvisation transform the thinking and orientation of individuals who practise it in such a way as to make them better or more equipped leaders?

**Secondary questions:** Are theatrical improvisation techniques applicable to leadership? Can improvisational theatre provide learnable components to a wider canon of leadership training and development? Can improvisation improve individuals’ psychological and interpersonal skills in order to lead in more uncertain and unpredictable times?

In terms of scope, the present research focuses on the lived experiences of participants during a single improvisation session and how this might then be applied in a wider leadership context. Therefore, the utility of specific games or the potential for improvisational interventions to address wider organisational problems will not be considered. Furthermore, the research is limited in time, so it will test perceptions about an introductory session to improvisation amongst amateurs rather than a longer-term engagement with more seasoned improvisers.

The present research takes a phenomenological approach in that it seeks to understand respondents’ subjective experiences as they participate in improvisation exercises (Creswell, 2009). A small number of participants were studied to observe developing patterns and relationships of meaning (Moustakas, 1994).
Creswell (2009) distinguishes between four worldviews: post-positivist, constructivist, advocacy/participatory and pragmatic [see Figure Six]. The present research does not draw on the post-positivist tradition, because it deals less with cause and effect and more with how people develop subjective meanings of their experiences. Rather it is informed by a social constructivist worldview which relies on participants’ views of the situation under observation, examines how they construct meaning, and how these meanings are negotiated through interaction with others, as well as how historical and cultural norms play a part in individuals’ lives (Creswell, 2009). Furthermore, it recognises the value of the researcher’s own background, and how this affects his interpretation of events and how he makes sense of it: “Rather than starting with a theory (as in positivism), inquirers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning” (Creswell, 2009, p. 8).

The researcher has drawn some lessons from authors in the advocacy/participatory research tradition (Neuman, 2000). This approach requires research enquiry to be linked to causes and more pervasive political agendas. Within the South African context, where this research was conducted, the socio-political legacy of Apartheid is still evident in everyday interaction.
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

(April & April, 2007). Hence the impact of socio-political factors in a study such as this cannot be ignored and must be monitored. Given that the research participants engaged in a practice that seeks to empower and overcome domination, suppression and alienation (Johnstone, 1979) advocacy/participatory research has some salience. That said, while the present research is cognisant of the philosophical dimensions involved, in terms of the research problem and methods it does not fall squarely within the advocacy/participatory research tradition.

Rather, the aforementioned concern with “intersubjectivity”\(^1\) (Gans, 1999, p. 44) suggests a phenomenological approach and the adoption of qualitative research methods, particularly that of participant observation. To translate other peoples’ signs and symbols and to understand “motivational meaning of actions”, an approach that concentrates on the detailed description of conscious experience was deemed appropriate (Buttimer, 1976 cited in Gans, 1999, p. 44).

**Research Assumptions and Ethics**

The study has been informed by the researcher’s own philosophical assumptions and ‘worldview’, defined as “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Guba, 1990, p. 17). As an actor, the researcher has worked with improvisation techniques and has lived with the uncertainty associated with an unpredictable and erratic livelihood. This experience played a large part in framing the research question: “can improvisation transform the thinking and orientation of individuals who practise it in such a way as to make them better or more equipped leaders?” To ensure an objective and reliable conclusion, the researcher remained mindful not to project his own experiences on to those of the participants during the course of this study (Nieswiadomy, 1993).

\(^1\) “The phenomenological tradition is perhaps the most appropriate philosophical basis for participant observation research and, among its battery of concepts, the notion of ‘intersubjectivity’ has already proved itself of exceptional interest to social geographers (But timer, 1974 and 1976; Ley, 1977 and 1978; Jackson, 1981)” (Gans, 1999, p. 44)
Researchers also need to be cognisant of the fact that, in the ethnographic literature, there are multiple conceptions of what constitutes ‘the field’. Gubrium and Holstein (1997) explain that some theorists see ‘the field’ as bounded by a fixed spatial setting whereas others perceive multiple arenas. Some view ‘the field’ as “wherever reality-constituting interaction takes place”, others see it as what occurs in reality as well as its ‘representational venue’, while those from the post-modern school completely divorce ‘the field’ from any notion of spatial location (Gubrium & Hostein, 1997, p. 77-79). It is the researcher’s understanding that ‘the field’ resembles the second of these three views – the workplace has a fixed spatial locus, but also holds meanings and associations for employees within that space. Furthermore, improvisation sessions held at the workplace constitute a constructed reality; an unnatural, though organised, setting, which does not pretend to represent or even imitate the way people live their lives but nevertheless still constitutes a ‘real lived experience’ in a fixed spatial setting.

Research around improvisation raises interesting ethical issues. At one level research participants engage voluntarily and often enthusiastically. At another level the very techniques of improvisation are both exposing and challenging. As such, there are a number of ethical considerations, which arise due to ‘dialogical interaction’ between researcher and informants (University of Toronto Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board, 2005). Research of this nature must ensure that ‘informed consent’ is sought from participants, that the researcher is aware of evolving roles and relationships, that sensitivities around age, gender, class, health and culture be taken into account, that confidentiality be honoured and that the multiple roles of the researcher be acknowledged (University of Toronto Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board, 2005). In undertaking the research, the improvisation sessions and follow-up interviews were entirely voluntary, and the purpose of the study was fully described to all participants (Sarantakos, 2005). The researcher did not elaborate initially on the particular constructs of the research, as it may have skewed results, as participants become aware of their behaviour in a particular area, rather than behaving as they normally would: “...every research project is in a position partly to influence image formation by the way it identifies itself” (Vidich, 1955, p. 355). This poses an interesting ethical consideration: “...while the social scientist may reasonably be expected to have revealed his broad research goals to the subjects of his study, need he also feel obliged to specify in detail the exact hypotheses he seeks to test or the particular topics
upon which he would like to concentrate?” (Gans, 1999, p. 42). It was considered sufficient
to offer an explanation of the broad purpose of the research in order to protect the interests of
the participants, while at the same time retaining the integrity of the research itself.

An informed consent form [see Appendix 1], for all respondents, was compiled. As required
by the Graduate School of Business (GSB) and Commerce Ethics Committees, the form
acknowledged how the research participants were selected, elaborated on the purpose of the
research, identified the sponsoring institution (University of Cape Town), assured participants
that they could withdraw at any time, supplied a contact for future questions, and assured
participants that their privacy and data protection rights would remain secure (Neuman,
2000). The researcher also ensured that, in writing up the research report, the manner in
which language and wording was used demonstrated the lack of any bias towards or exposure
of particular individuals (Neuman, 2000).

While informed consent was the goal for this research project, it was recognised that there
could be instances where this was not possible. For example, the senior management of the
participating organisations were contacted to gain permission to conduct the research. It may
have been the case that, despite assertions of sessions being voluntary, employees could have
felt compelled to take part: “...researchers should also be careful to avoid situations where
such public endorsements/announcements [from leaders] to the community can create
pressure to participate” (University of Toronto Social Sciences and Humanities Research
Ethics Board, 2005, p. 3). To avoid this, managers were asked to ensure that they stress the
voluntary nature of participation to potential participants, and this was reiterated during
sessions and confirmed in the follow-up interviews.

Lastly, any ethically informed study needs to take into account the “...power differentials
rooted in gender, class, health and so on ... [that] also require similar sensitivity” (University
of Toronto Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board, 2005, p. 2). An ethical
approach is sensitive both to the identities of participants and researchers. The identity of the
researcher can mediate the research process. As a ‘white’ male, undertaking research in the
South African context, sensitivity was paid towards the country’s inequitable political history
and how the subjugation of majority communities by a white minority could influence
perceptions of some participants in the research sample.
Literature review

Being present

When fully present, we are more attuned to those around us and to the needs of the situation, and we fluidly adapt to what is needed – in other words, we are in flow. We can be thoughtful, funny, or self-reflective, drawing on whatever capacity or skill we need at the moment (Goleman, 1998, p. 109).

The practice of being present enables leaders to be fully attentive and involved, it means other people view them as accessible and engaged and it ensures that leaders’ levels of energy, intuition and creativity are maximised (Goleman, 1998). It is a state of being contrasted against the “psychological absence” (Goleman, 1998, p. 108), in which many people go about their daily work routines: bored and disconnected. Being present and its twin virtue of “flow” require leaders to be open to others and an ability to understand but not be overpowered by anxiety (Goleman, 1998, p. 108).

“Learning to be present to someone without the interferences of transference consists first in setting an ongoing intention to be present fully in an I-to-you-way” (Richo, 2008, p. 55). Richo (2008, p. 55-56) recommends a technique termed ‘the five A’s’ to check one’s level of presence in any given interaction with another person: “Am I paying attention; am I accepting; do I appreciate her; do I feel affection – that is, friendliness; and am I allowing him to be himself?” There are a number of ways to practise being present, including mindfulness and meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 2002):

Mindfulness is practised first in daily meditation, in which we sit silently and simply notice our thoughts rather than entertaining or rejecting them... we can tolerate what is unpleasant; we do not have to become addicted to what is pleasurable. This is how the mindful style of dealing with thoughts helps us find equanimity in life, an imperturbability in the face of storm and stress (Richo, 2008, p. 56).

Kabat-Zinn (2002, p. 68) writes of the meditative state as being an enabler of presence, rather than as a means of withdrawing from the world:

When it comes right down to it, meditation is about paying attention. It involves purposefully refining our capacity for paying attention, ultimately to anything and everything that might be relevant to navigating in the world with your eyes and your heart open. As you practice, it tends to move from an effort that is formal and deliberate to a much larger field that is more like an effortless attending to the unfolding of life itself; a shift from ‘doing something’ to simply ‘being’.
Being present is akin to a state experienced in Zen where participants are able “to hold the mind in enormous concentration of purpose, yet utterly relaxed; to seek intensely, knowing that the effort itself bars us from success; to see that the littlest act is of vital importance yet what we do is of no importance at all” (Humphries, 1993 cited in Hebdige, 2001, p. 352). Furthermore, being present is something individuals can practise and get better at: “…feelings can be likened to muscles – the more intensively you stay with the exercise, closing the door on escape, the more emotional heavy lifting you can do” (Zander & Zander, 2000, p. 105).

Improvisation challenges feelings and brings them to the fore. Opportunities to practise growth and learning through improvisation are described by Spolin (1973, p. 5) as follows:

Players grow agile and alert, ready and eager for any unusual play as they respond to the many random happenings simultaneously. The personal capacity to involve one’s self in the problem of the game and the effort put forth to handle the multiple stimuli the game provokes determine the extent of this growth. Growth will occur without difficulty in the student-actor because the very game he plays will aid him.

Being present is a fundamental building block of improvisation: “Presence means the performer is fully there, ‘present,’ in the present tense, inside the moment. His attention is wholly on the task and yet, most important, his awareness extends beyond the immediate space around him to include the audience's space” (Frost & Yarrow, 1990, p. 100). Without this underlying presence actors are not aware of the multitudinous offers that surround them:

The secret of perceiving offers is in adopting a mindset which is able to transform instantly whatever situation or statement is thrown at it and respond to it accordingly. This implies being able to distance oneself from instinctive emotional reactions, such as anger or fear, and maintain an ‘open inner space’ into which everything is enacted. It is an extreme level of resourcefulness which allows one to regard everything as a potential tool or lever (Poynton, 2000, p. 41).

Being present is not about being self-conscious (Hebdige, 2001). In improvisation the former is helpful, the latter is not: “consciousness is not only unnecessary for most of the time but can actually get in the way of that immersion in the materials that alone produces the effects and intensities that we come to making for” (Hebdige, 2001, p. 348).

It is important to distinguish between improvisational techniques, which are designed to help the actor improvise better as opposed to the act of improvising itself (Book, 2002).
Improvisation techniques can help the actor to become more present because they involve putting the:

...doing in the body, not in the ‘problem solving’ head... The body doing is accomplished through a technical craft device called the acting focus, a specific form of total body doing in the present. Since body doing improvisations result in the actor’s being in the moment, he doesn’t wind up in his head imagining circumstances, leaving himself open to troublesome thoughts. He never experiences those moments of concern, frustration or anxiety about ‘What do I do, or say, next?’ This is true whether the improvised or memorised text. In improvisation technique, the head plays a supporting role for the whole body. It does not have to provide solutions. It simply provides the desire and will power to stay focused on what has been chosen for the body to do (Book, 2002, p. xvi).

It is argued that leaders require a similar power of awareness in order to be attuned to present circumstances, identify opportunities, see new possibilities, listen to their surroundings and balance the tensions within themselves (Weick, 1998). Improvisation “may be understood as mindfulness in action, involving capacities to interpret and respond fluidly, in concert with emerging circumstances so as to act in ways that appear spontaneously appropriate” (Cowan, 2007, p. 163-164).

There is a different use to which the mind is put in a state of presence - one is not mindless, but at the same time one is not hamstrung by the distracting considerations of thought:

*Improv is all present tense. The focus is on ‘being in the moment’. If you’ve ever spoken with someone whose mind seemed to be elsewhere, you know they’re not living in the moment... Improv is like ping-pong, not chess. The key is in spontaneity, not in thinking ahead. You have to adapt to a [situation], moment by moment, following it rather than trying to control it* (Davis & McIntosh, 2005, p. 178-180).

Scharmer, Arthur, Day, Jaworski, Jung, Nonaka and Senge (2001) argue that leaders need to develop “a new cognitive capacity that involves paying attention to the intangible sources of knowledge and knowing” (Scharmer et al., 2001, p. 5-6). They argue that individuals and organisations need to engage in generative learning (Senge, 2006) to respond creatively to situations rather than reactively:

*This is the notion of ‘presence’, which is predicated on the realisation that the world has gestalt properties, that ‘wholes’ in living systems are more than the sum of discrete parts. Rather, wholes are contained in parts and parts in wholes. This is true of human organisations as well as of nature* (Bartunek & Carboni, 2006, p. 502).
By the same token, experiential techniques used by actors encourage “penetration into the environment, total organic involvement with it...on all levels: intellectual, physical, and intuitive” (Spolin, 1973, p. 3).

...being present to a phenomenon in all its intricate variety also opens up the possibility of designing an altered system, perhaps by adding a single brushstroke or a perfectly timed pause. That such training is a hallmark of an arts-based education provides support for Adler’s argument that arts-based leadership has great potential for inspiring hope (Bartunek & Carboni, 2006, p. 503).

The present research seeks to provide clarity on whether a link can be drawn between improvisation as an element of arts-based education and the value of presence for leadership.

**Avoiding blame and overcoming the fear of failure**

*Nature makes no judgement. Humans do... ‘good’ and ‘bad’ categories we impose on the world – they are not of the world itself* (Zander & Zander, 2000, p. 105).

It is a feature of modern Western societies that individuals are frequently and inappropriately attributed with blame, a fact backed up by evidence from social psychological studies (Williams, 2003). Williams makes two further sociological observations of Western society, both at an individual and organisational level:

*One is a widespread suspicion of judging others, echoing an older injunction to ‘judge not, lest ye be judged.’ This is particularly marked when the conduct of someone who has suffered a wrong is in question (‘blaming the victim’). Yet this suspicion seems not to be very effective in containing such judgement: a "culture of blame" is often felt to pervade public life. In other words, we seem to be aware that judging others is a costly and dangerous activity; yet, somehow, we can't help ourselves from making these judgements* (Williams, 2003, p. 428).

Wheatley (2005, p. 181) describes the negative effect of what she also describes as “cultures of blame” wherein “people become protective and reactive, striking out in self-defence. Innovation and risk taking vanish. What increases are hardened positions, stronger factions, alliances, even cabals”*. An extreme form of blame takes place through scapegoating, whereby groups place shared guilt onto a subgroup or individual who is least able to resist, regardless of their actual guilt (Williams, 2003). Leaders and organisations frequently resort to blame and scapegoating when things are not working well (Wheatley, 2005). The systems approach to family therapy acknowledges that often a family will view one of its members as the “sole dysfunctional individual” though it is seldom fair or accurate to make a single
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

individual responsible for the well-being of the whole family (Wilson, 1993, p. 779). Such dynamics are not confined to families. Weaver (1986) has shown how politicians operate from a stance of blame avoidance that often supersedes their policy mandate. In a desire to avoid blame politicians will adopt “a distinctive set of political strategies, including agenda limitation, scapegoating, 'passing the buck' and defection ('jumping on the bandwagon') that are different from those they would follow if they were primarily interested in pursuing good policy or maximising credit-claiming opportunities” (Weaver, 1986, p. 371).

Allied to blame and scapegoating, failure is defined as an experience in which:

(a) achievement is integral to one’s personal identity and accompanying sense of self-worth; (b) one feels a personal sense of responsibility for the outcome; (c) lack of success has significant consequences in psychological, professional, and/or interpersonal domains; and (d) one’s personal definition of self, the experience, and the success–failure continuum is integral to the process (Khanna, Newton, & Thompson, 2008, p. 229).

This definition describes failure accurately in an organisational setting, but it also encapsulates the mental and emotional gravity that is placed in the notion of failing. Failure does not reside in the actual outcome of one’s actions but more in one’s interpretation of the success or failure of the outcome (Moltz, 2008). This orientation is largely learnt through social and environmental experiences as individuals encounter different kinds of situations throughout their life or work (Brewer & Hewstone, 2003 cited in Politis & Gabrielsson, 2009). Moltz (2008) describes how attitudes towards failure differ cross-culturally: some cultures see failure as a necessary pre-requisite for success while others attach a stigma or character flaw status to failure. In fact, these cultural attitudes towards success and failure have a marked impact on individual and societal appetites for risk – US laws around business failure for example, allow entrepreneurs to seek help and start again (Moltz, 2008).

Furthermore, individuals differ in their orientation to failure (Subramanian & Kumar, 2009). The way in which people react to failure depends on their cognitive emotive regulation, their mental health and self esteem and the inter-relation between the three (Subramanian & Kumar, 2009). The authors suggest that there are two types of cognitive coping strategies: adaptive and non-adaptive strategies. Adaptive strategies are positively correlated with mental health and self-esteem and characterised by a willingness to accept failure, putting things in perspective, positive refocusing and positive reappraisal. The non-adaptive strategies are associated with self-blame, blaming others and a lower self-esteem.
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

(Subramanian & Kumar, 2009). Adaptive strategies are also related to one’s level of emotional intelligence, defined as “…an ability to recognise, understand, and use emotional information about oneself that leads to or causes effective or superior performance” (Boyatzis, 2009, p. 757).

Senge (1994, p. 227) speaks of a “reactive orientation”, whereby individuals see the world as a series of forces that exist outside of one’s self and act upon one:

You play the hand you’re dealt and consider yourself smart if you can figure out ahead of time what cards are coming your way... Many organisations unintentionally encourage the reactive orientation, by keeping most employees out of any meaningful participation in decisions, planning, or learning. With no opportunity to take responsibility themselves, people learn to keep their defences up, duck blame, and avoid initiative.

It is argued that in Western societies we are aware that blaming is harmful and wrong (Williams, 2003). Yet we persist in doing it and leaders moreover, persist in stimulating the conditions for blame instead of encouraging what Senge (1994, p. 229) describes as an ‘interdependent orientation’, which gives one:

...the personal, visceral sense that you are part of a greater whole... There is a kinship between your internal awareness and your external reality, because both are part of the same system. Although you recognise your integrity as a separate person, you also feel ‘a part of’ the system which is your environment... The interdependent orientation recognises that you can’t command the larger system, any more than a cell can command a body.

Politis and Gabrielsson (2009) posit an experiential learning framework, where individuals are shaped through various learning opportunities, and actually develop more positive attitudes to failure by experiencing it and learning from it. As a consequence, this research seeks to understand whether leaders can change their orientation towards failure to become more tolerant of it, to avoid the associated patterns of blame and to adopt a learning attitude to instances when it occurs.

Barrett (1998, p. 610) suggests the arts have much to offer leaders in this regard. It is argued that where organisations do learn from errors, it is from the underlying assumption that errors are intolerable and should be eliminated: “…jazz bands on the other hand, see errors as inevitable and something to be assimilated and incorporated into the performance”. Johnstone (1979, p. 82-83) suggests that improvisers do not operate from a position where
errors are intolerable. He suggests we may even have to be schooled out of what was taught to us at school:

At school any spontaneous act was likely to get me into trouble. I learned never to act on impulse, and that whatever came into my mind first should be rejected in favour of better ideas. I learned that my imagination wasn’t ‘good’ enough. I learned that the first idea was unsatisfactory because it was (1) psychotic; (2) obscene; (3) unoriginal. The truth is that the best ideas are often psychotic, obscene and unoriginal.

Improvisation seeks to provide this learning to practitioners by providing a strictly monitored environment in which blame is not allowed and attitudes to failure are non-judgemental: “If I want people to free-associate, then I have to create an environment in which they are not going to be punished, or in any way held responsible for the things their imagination gives them” (Johnstone, 1979, p. 118).

Riveire (2006, p. 43-44) explains that many participants approach improvisation with trepidation and anxiety because of pre-existing attitudes to blame and failure, so it is essential that exercises be presented as games:

There must be trust in the room. Students must feel safe to experiment without being berated or belittled for what they perceive as wrong notes or bad sounds. Teachers and classmates must all agree to ground rules of behaviour (e.g., no laughing or grimacing) and critiquing (e.g., there are no wrong notes, only ones you would change if you played it over). As the teacher, you are the model for this behaviour and must hold everyone in the room responsible for maintaining a standard. Without trust, students will only reproduce what they have seen or heard before, and that is not improvisation.

Individuals may find that improvisation adds to their fear and insecurities in the early stages of participation because they are self-conscious, though Hodgson and Richards (1966) argue that this can be overcome by the practice itself as well as through continued concentration and absorption in the process, which ultimately enhances self-confidence. Improvisation provides a context where individuals can risk what Claxton (1984) terms the ‘four Cs’ or the desire to be consistent, comfortable, confident and competent.

Spolin (1973, p. 6-7) develops the concept of ‘games’ and ‘playing’, which she argues are vital in improvisation because they enhance personal freedom and deny authoritarianism. She states that many of us remain dependent on:
...a need for favourable comment or interpretation by established authority. We either fear that we will not get approval, or we accept outside comment and interpretation unquestionably. In a culture where approval/disapproval has become the predominant regulator of effort and position, and often the substitute for love, our personal freedoms are dissipated.

She argues that in order to be productive we need to divorce ourselves from the twin driving forces of the need to be loved and the fear of rejection: “trying to save ourselves from attack, we build a mighty fortress and are timid, or we fight each time we venture forth” (Spolin, 1973, p. 7).

As a means to liberate their students from such an approval/disapproval trap Zander and Zander (2000, p. 35), prescribe the practice of ‘giving an A’, whereby all students are given an A grade provided they make a contribution and are therefore not benchmarked against one another, nor rated as successes or failures: “…in the realm of possibility, the literal or figurative giving of the A aligns teacher with student, manager with employee, and makes striving for a goal an enlivening game”. They encourage their students to use the term ‘how fascinating!’ every time a ‘mistake’ is made, because they argue: “it is only when we make mistakes in performance that we can really begin to notice what needs attention. In fact, I actively train my students that when they make a mistake, they are to lift their arms in the air, smile and say, ‘How fascinating!’” (Zander & Zander, 2000, p. 31).

Theatrical improvisation games are very different from team games or sports in which players seek to identify the weaknesses and shortcomings of their opponents and exploit them. Rather, group improvisation requires non-competition, cooperation and attention (Hodgson & Richards, 1966). There is an emphasis in improvisation on equality, which should not be seen as “sameness” (Spolin, 1973, p. 381). Spolin (1973) made two discoveries when using theatrical improvisation with inner-city immigrant children in Chicago, whose life was characterised by insecurity and prejudice. She learned firstly that children’s inhibitions, fears and prejudices dissipated when they were involved in games such as tag or ‘red rover’ and secondly, that when she re-framed the problems that had been causing blockages in their lives within the context of a theatre game, the problems seemed to disappear: “…children were never told there was a problem, so there was no need to introduce approval/disapproval issues or fear of failure to the creative process… Theatre
games fix the problem without wasting time talking about it or making it worse” (Book, 2002, p. xviii).

Zander and Zander (2000, p. 109-110) suggest that leaders face complex and challenging problems and if they persist in encouraging environments of blame in failure, they risk neglecting the creative input of vibrant thinkers:

*Often, the person in the group who articulates the possible is dismissed as a dreamer or as a Polyanna persisting in a simplistic ‘glass half-full’ kind of optimism. The naysayers pride themselves on their supposed realism. However, it is actually the people who see the glass as ‘half-empty’ who are the ones wedded to a fiction, for ‘emptiness’ and ‘lack’, like the ‘wall’, are abstractions of the mind, whereas ‘half-full’ is a measure of the physical reality under discussion.*

This research does not seek to undermine the human capacity for judgement and rationality (Williams, 2003). Rather it seeks to highlight occasions “…when judgement too quickly discounts or even excludes other perspectives from its purview”, when rationality may lead to “tunnel vision” (Williams, 2003, p. 436). Leaders should be aware of and seek to quell the “watcher at the gates of the mind who watches ideas too closely” (Schiller cited in Johnstone, 1979, p. 79), lest creativity be stifled. In so doing they may enable a different quality of conversation, emphasising non-violent communication (Lamb, 2005), that might enable the construct to which we now turn, dialogue.

**Dialogue**

*We have the opportunity many times a day, every day, to be the one who listens to others, curious rather than certain. And the greatest benefit that comes to those who listen is that we develop closer relationships with those we thought we couldn’t understand* (Wheatley, 2005, p. 212).

Dialogue is a communication tool distinguishable from other more dominant forms such as discussion and debate (Bohm, 1985; Senge 1994). April (1999, p. 234) explains:

*The word ‘dialogue’, comes from two Greek roots: ‘dia’ and ‘logos’, suggesting ‘meaning flowing through’. This stands in stark contrast to the word ‘debate”, which means ‘to beat down’, or even ‘discussion’, which has the same root as ‘percussion’ and ‘concussion’, meaning ‘to break things up’.*

Dialogue can also be seen as something akin to ‘compassionate communication’ where communicating involves “speaking and listening – that leads us to give from the heart,
connecting us with ourselves and each other in a way that allows our natural compassion to flourish” (Rosenberg, 2005, p. 2-3).

In a theatrical context dialogue refers to:

Words actors use in talking to one another to implement and build the reality they have created on stage; a vocalisation of the physical expression of the scene; verbal extension of the involvement and relationship between players; verbalisation growing organically out of the life of a scene (Spolin, 1973, p. 380).

In many current modalities, “instead of reasoning together, people defend their ‘part’, seeking to defeat others” (Senge, 1994, p. 360). Merry (1995, p. 194) writes:

Dialogue is approached in a climate of inquiry. Ideas are put forward not to win support, but in the spirit of investigation. The participants are not encouraged to debate the relative merits of the ideas. There is respect for differences and acknowledgement of each speaker’s contribution. Judgements are suspended so as to be open to new and different perspectives of reality. Effective listening skills are encouraged and blocks to listening are explored... people listen to each other with selfless receptivity, thus opening themselves to create a common understanding.

The benefit of this mode of conversation is that groups can achieve shared meanings and discover deep patterns that underlie the complexity of humanity in a way that other communication methods fail to enable (Merry, 1995). Dialogue enables collaboration and partnership and “transforms those who engage in it” (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998, p. 180). Furthermore, it can build “critical and independent thinking, openness, and insight” (April, 1999, p. 231).

Gerard and Teurfs suggest that dialogue is comprised of four competencies: “suspending judgement... identifying assumptions... listening... inquiring/reflecting” (Gerard & Teurfs, 1997 cited in April, 1999, p. 234-235).

A key component of dialogue is the ability to suspend judgement, an aspect of theatrical improvisation discussed in the section above on blame and failure:

When we ‘suspend judgement’, we see others’ points of view; hold our positions lightly; and build a climate of trust and safety. As people learn that they will not be ‘judged’ wrong for having opinions, they feel free to express themselves fully (April, 1999, p. 235).

Dialogue requires effective listening capabilities as much as the capacity to frame one’s own views in an inclusive, non-judgemental fashion (Senge, 1994). Wheatley (2005, p. 81-82)
suggests that the mere act of listening has the capacity to bring people closer together: “listening to colleagues – their interpretations, their stories, what they find meaningful in their work – always transforms our relationships”.

The capacity to listen is also a fundamental part of improvisation, which requires actors and musicians to become aware of the contributions and interests of others and give themselves through listening: “acting is not only moving or talking and reacting mechanically at a given cue, but becomes more of a living response arrived at from a continuous thought pattern” (Hodgson & Richards, 1966, p. 23). Spolin (1973, p. 169) goes so far as to suggest that attentive listening is such a key part of improvisation that one would not be possible without the other. Many of the exercises she advocates are about refining awareness and enhancing listening:

*The actor in improvisational theatre must listen to his fellow actor and hear everything he says if he is to improvise a scene. He must look and see everything that is going on. This is the only way players can play the same game together.*

April (1999, p. 231) argues that leaders “open themselves in communication and conversation, and open themselves to input from those they lead. This, often, can be a frightening experience and requires great courage from leaders”. Furthermore, because it allows communities to harness collective wisdom and insights in non-confrontational ways, dialogue can allow us to find a transcendent position beyond the narrow views and self-interest of individuals (April, 1999). Senge (1995, p. 19 cited in April, 1999, p. 233) suggests that “once a society loses this capacity [to have fruitful conversation], all that is left is a cacophony of voices battling it out to see who wins and who loses”.

Poynton (2000) distinguishes between additive and adversarial conversations and explains that most business conversation fall into the latter category. Debate exists solely on the level of thesis/antithesis but this duality can hinder creative processes in three ways:

*First, only two possibilities are ever put on the table – yours and mine. In a conversation of this kind, what I want is ‘my’ idea to ‘win’. With this kind of focus, there is little chance that a new, better, transforming idea will occur. Second, if two points of view meet in debate, one has to lose. So this kind of discourse inevitably produces ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, which in turn creates division, resentment and even conflict – and that is a high cost to pay. Third, adversarial conversations are often decided on the basis of power – the most powerful people, not the best ideas, win. This cements the existing hierarchy,*
prevents a flow of new ideas and energy and reinforces the status quo, when often what is required is a change (Poynton, 2000, p. 43).

Senge (1994, p. 358) describes a conversation in a theatrical setting, which brings to life the concept of dialogue that has been introduced and from which he feels organisations can benefit:

...there’s a quality of engagement about their argument. They listen intently to each other’s language, rhythms, and sounds. The silences between statements seem as striking as the words. Every time someone says something, a texture changes subtly; something new has been seen. Everyone knows that everyone in the group has seen it, and that it represents more than just one person’s model of the truth. As the people in the circle continue to talk, the sense of meaning they share grows larger and sharper. They begin to gain unprecedented insight into their fundamental views. No one can muster this form of thinking alone, and even in a group it takes a wilful desire to build a context for thinking together. It takes a practice like dialogue.

This scenario seems remarkably similar to an improvisation challenge known as the ‘talking circle’, which allows participants to view all perspectives but still respond thoughtfully when they are called upon to make a contribution: “A talking circle challenges students to rethink the implicit rules of conversation and provides them opportunities to practise some basics of improvisation, being constructively responsive to one’s emergent, real-time surroundings” (Cowan, 2007, p. 169-170).

Crossan (1998) emphasises that improvisation in theatrical terms is more than a metaphor for how dialogue can operate, since improvisation can actually help participants to enhance their listening, communication, story-telling and therefore their dialogic skills. This shared communion echoes Senge’s (1994, p. 358) conception of dialogue as a process whereby:

...people learn how to think together- not just in the sense of analysing a shared problem or creating new pieces of shared knowledge, but in the sense of occupying a collective sensibility, in which the thoughts, emotions, and resulting actions belong not to one individual, but to all of them together.

Aggressive and competitive communication styles (Eckhouse, 1999) result in people hardening their positions which makes them unwilling to consider alternative solutions, meaning attempts at problem-solving become “battlegrounds where decisions are made based on power rather than intelligence” (Wheatley, 2005, p. 180). Ultimately, Wheatley (2005, p. 197) suggests, the benefit to leaders for embracing dialogic communication styles is that “we learn that it is good, once again, to work together”. In a cross-cultural world, where multiple
conceptions of reality collide on a daily basis it is becoming increasingly necessary that leaders have a tool, such as dialogue “to both communicate and test that these realities exist and that they are perceived correctly” (April, 1999, p. 235-236).

Seeing possibility

...this changing world requires much less certainty and far more curiosity (Wheatley, 2005, p. 211).

This section is concerned with the concepts of vision (Adler, 2006), imagination (Reichling, 1997) and possibility (Zander & Zander, 2000) that may arise when being present, and when blame avoidance and dialogue are in evidence. Hebdige (2001, p. 337-338) argues that improvisation is an ideal device for unlocking possibility, simply because it allows practitioners to go anywhere and see anything:

...anything is sayable within the improvisational space- anything at all- because that space is absolutely empty. It is empty of absolutes because it is a black-box space, an infinitely generative grammatical machine; its only obligation is to the hard truths it produces through the grinding of its gears; its only obligation is to rigorously, ferociously play with the permutations that happen at any given moment to fall within its range. And, it goes without saying, its range is utterly boundless.

Seeing possibility is first and foremost an orientation (Johnstone, 1979). There are people whose first response is ‘yes’ and others whose preference is to say ‘no’: “Those who say ‘Yes’ are rewarded by the adventures they have, and those who say ‘No’ are rewarded by the safety they attain. There are far more ‘No’ sayers around than ‘Yes’ sayers, but you can train one type to behave like the other” (Johnstone, 1979, p. 92).

Seeing possibility in an improvisational context is a skill developed through adherence to the rule that one should treat everything as an offer (Johnstone, 1979). In fact, many of the games that are played involve word play around ‘yes, but’ or ‘yes, and’: these are known as ‘accept-and-block’ and ‘accept-and-offer’ games (Spolin, 1973). Without judgements the improvisational space provides what Zander and Zander (2000, p. 174-5) describe as “environments for possibility” where:

...no one will be made wrong, people will not be talked about behind their backs, and there will be no division between ‘us’ and ‘them’. These environments produce astonishing results that can take people in wholly unexpected directions, perhaps because all their gates are open – inviting us to play in the meadows of the cooperative universe.
‘Yes-anding’ is at the core of improvisation and allows the actor to accept an offer and to build upon it without imposing herself in a controlling manner (Crossan, 1998). The implications for seeing possibility are wide reaching. Firstly, seeing possibility allows individuals to conceive and articulate visions that otherwise would not have existed (Spolin, 1973). Visualisation and the use of images can help an actor arrive at a certain character quality: “Images can be based on pictures or any object, animate or inanimate, that the actor chooses” (Spolin, 1973, p. 261). Zander and Zander (2000, p. 110) elaborate further on how visioning comes about: “Speaking in possibility springs from the appreciation that what we say creates a reality; how we define things sets a framework for life to unfold”.

Spolin (1973) describes an improvisation game called ‘Seeing the Word’, which also ties into these themes of vision, imagination and possibility. In this game an actor will take the stage and begin describing an event or experience. The session leader then asks her to continue talking but to shift her point of concentration by coaching the actor from the side:

No matter what the teacher calls out, [the] player is to continue narrating the scene. He is not to shift his narration to meet the point of concentration. Side coaching: concentrate on the colour in the scene! Concentrate on the sounds in the scene! Concentrate on the way you feel about the way the game is going! Concentrate on the student in the second seat! See yourself. (Spolin, 1973, p. 232).

Spolin (1973, p. 232) argues that this game awakens heightened perception in the student, who begins to “leave the word” and starts relating more to the scene she is describing: “When a student is no longer depending on words but is concentrating on the environment he’s describing, then all artificiality and stilted speech disappear”.

Critics suggest that much of what constitutes vision and imagination in the improvisational context is illusory, self-deceptive or fantastical, but proponents argue that when a practitioner realises the purpose of these exercises - to explore the living situation and his own workings within it - he seeks to uncover and identify misrepresentations (Hodgson & Richards, 1966). So while vision and imagination provide the catalyst, improvisation remains rooted in real lived experience:

...improvisation exists not just in the imagination, but is lived and moved physically alongside other human beings, in time and space. The feet of those improvising are constantly on the ground, sustained by other actors who help to ensure that all claims, hopes, fears and so on are referred to some clarified human response. Throughout
improvisation response will be from and with every part of the person, even though constantly attention will be focused on a particular aim (Hodgson & Richards, 1966, p. 21).

Senge (1994, p. 302) explains the value of visions in the organisational context:

...a vision is a picture of the future you seek to create, described in the present tense, as if it were happening now. A statement of ‘our vision’ shows where we want to go, and what we will be like when we get there... Because of its tangible and immediate quality, a vision gives shape and direction to the organisation’s future.

Cowan (2007, p. 163) states that leaders should see reality as a backdrop not to be ignored, but at the same time engage their imaginations to see possibility because “the power of visioning lies somewhere between” the two.

Block (1991) argues that visions exist within each of us and any reluctance to articulate this vision is based on a reluctance to take responsibility for our lives, or those of our organisations. He suggests that a “vision statement is an expression of hope, and if we have no hope, it is hard to create a vision” (Block, 1991, p. 113). Furthermore, “vision embodies and focuses our creative power to visualise and realise new entities” (Cajete, 1994, p. 145). This feeds into Adler’s (2006) reassertion that a great leader is somebody who inspires rather than someone who simply motivates. Tung (2006, p. 509-510) elaborates on this point by stating that analysing: “the most successful leaders, both political and business, reveals that most of them were visionaries who projected future trends and, more important, acted on their convictions”.

Senge (1994) writes of a creative tension that leaders must experience between the present situation and one’s personal vision. Bartunek and Carboni (2006) argue that without hope it is easy for leaders to attempt to resolve this tension and not to hold it as they should, by closing the gap on reality and their vision (Bartunek & Carboni, 2006, p. 501). Improvisers by comparison are used to working in creative tension (Adler, 2006).

Adler (2006, p. 495) argues that leaders require great courage and hope to engage in the type of vision creation that is required of them in the 21st century: “Envisioning possibility means maintaining hope and not descending into cynicism even when colleagues and friends misinterpret one’s aspirations and disparagingly label them as naive”. Zander and Zander (2000, p. 164) reiterate this statement by suggesting that in “the realm of possibility, there is
no division between ideas and action, mind and body, dream and reality. Leaders who become their vision often seem uncommonly brave to the rest of us”.

While this research finds value in the term imagination, it is not one that Spolin (1973) accepts as being effective in improvisation. She argues that when an actor is asked to imagine something, they remain rooted in the intellect. However, when they are asked to see, they are placed in “an objective situation where reaching out into the environment can take place, in which further awareness is possible” (Spolin, 1973, p. 42).

Nevertheless, others still use the concept of imagination usefully in both improvisation and leadership. Barrett (1998, p. 606) writes of the “disciplined imagination” that is required in the complex art of jazz improvisation. Reichling (1997) too explains that imagination is a key feature of play, which is a central component of improvisation. Play may take place in virtual or imagined space and time but it also takes place in actual, physical space in real “clock time” (Reichling, 1997, p. 50). Imagination produces our images of both outside and desired reality and Merry (1995, p. 187-188) suggests these are crucial factors in determining our behaviour and guiding our evolution: “if we are able to become aware of evolutionary trends and are capable of creating positive guiding images of the future based on these, we have begun to take the first steps toward creating a conscious evolution”.

Hodgson and Richards (1966) argue that our imaginative capabilities are at their peak in childhood but are slowly eroded by the structure of our relationships and society.

Gradually we become anxious to suppress it or hide it until finally the power is lost altogether. Our day-to-day existence conspires against the practice of imagination... Yet imagination is a quality more than ever required in this era of increasing activity and advancement... It is required more and more in building and architecture, technical improvements and throughout community life. Imagination can enrich the existence of all on an industrial, technical, social and personal plane, and acting aids imaginative growth (Hodgson & Richards, 1966, p. 22).

Improvisation allows practitioners to see possibilities in the moment: “Good improvisers seem telepathic; everything looks prearranged. This is because they accept all offers made – which is something no ‘normal’ person would do” (Johnstone, 1979, p. 99). As Crossan (1998, p. 598) argues, one of the key attributes of a skilled improviser is to raise the quality of spontaneous action: “Improvisation is more than a metaphor. Improvisation is one of the
few concepts and tools we have to develop the capacity to be innovative in the moment- a key requirement of organisations today and in the twenty-first century”.

As such, improvisers frequently have highly developed communication skills (Chilver, 1967), a necessary capability for conveying visions to others. Chilver goes so far as to say that improvisation aids the development of language and therefore contributes to the development of thought, imagination and communication. Hodgson and Richards (1966, p. 26) reiterate that because much of improvisation involves participants talking, they are able to gain confidence in a “flow of intelligent speech”, dexterity in the manner of their expressions is enhanced, and the subtleties and variations which they use to construct meaning become more expert: “this aids clearer communication and avoidance of misunderstandings”.

Seeing possibility has other applications for leadership, particularly around change management and entrepreneurship. Hmieleski and Corbett (2006, p. 48) reveal that improvisation is an effective strategy for dealing with change in an entrepreneurial setting, typified by new ventures in high growth industries. Indeed, their evidence points to the fact that “improvisation appears to be an important behavioural strategy for navigating the entrepreneurial process”. With respect to change, Kotter (1995, p. 98) observes that “in every successful transformation effort that I have seen, the guiding coalition develops a picture of the future that is relatively easy to communicate and appeals to customers, stockholders, and employees”. Merry (1995, p. 172) describes how evolutionary change systems typically go through bifurcation points, during which they reorganise themselves on a higher level:

*Through self-renewal, by changing its structure, the system is able to continue to maintain itself as a coherent whole under changing conditions... The system is able to go beyond its former self and create something new. Life has the ability to reach out beyond itself to create new structures and behavioural patterns. This creation of novelty brings forth orders of greater complexity.*

It is in the context of these changes that leaders have the power to guide evolution and change (Merry, 1995) for, it is argued “a universe of possibility stretches beyond the world of measurement to include all worlds: infinite, generative, and abundant” (Zander & Zander, 2000, p. 19). In a theatrical improvisation context, one might borrow from Spolin (1973, p. 46), who commented: “No one knows the outcome of a game until he plays it” and until such time as the game is played everything remains possible.
Creativity

It is argued that creativity is not so much a skill that can be possessed, but a process that anyone can partake in: “Creativity is a process of developing and expressing novel ideas that are likely to be useful” (Leonard & Swap, 1999, p. 6); “It’s possible to turn unimaginative people into imaginative people at a moment’s notice” (Johnstone, 1979, p. 75).

Creativity is increasingly being seen as a necessary competency in today’s organisations, and therefore the leader’s ability to facilitate, encourage and nurture it has become paramount (Handy, 1990; Senge, 1994; Wheatley, 2005). However, it is also seen as a capability that is lacking in many leaders, who “are academically and even practically intelligent, but uncreative; they lead people through their ability to influence rather than through their agenda” (Sternberg, 2003, p. 391). While the capacity to be creative exists in all people, Johnstone (1979, p. 76-77) argues that it has been educated out of many people and needs to be relearned:

Most schools encourage children to be unimaginative... Once we eliminate fantasy, then we have no artists... Most children can operate in a creative way until they’re eleven or twelve, when suddenly they lose their spontaneity, and produce imitations of ‘adult art’.

Moorman and Miner (1998) have demonstrated a high correlation between creativity and improvisation, although one does not necessarily require the other. These authors suggest that:

...although creativity has been defined in a variety of ways, a core aspect of most definitions is that creativity involves a degree of novelty or deviation from standard practice (Amabile, 1983; Barron & Harrington, 1981; Sternberg & Lubart, 1996). Creativity may involve absolutely no improvisation... However, creativity may represent an unusually valuable competence for improving organisations or individuals (Moorman & Miner, 1998, p. 705).

In their work When Sparks Fly, Leonard and Swap (1999) debunk these three common misconceptions with regard to creativity:

- Creativity cannot really be managed
- Creative groups are found only in the ‘arts’ or in high-technology companies
- Creativity is relevant only to big ideas
Rather, they suggest that creativity is a process that can be managed effectively (Leonard & Swap, 1999). Creativity is a process and form of thinking that all people are capable of accessing: “The capacity to create and adapt is universal” (Wheatley, 2005, p. 75). However, De Bono (1985) argues that it usually does not occur at the same time as more rational process-driven tasks or thought processes, making creativity elusive in many organisations. Consequently De Bono’s (1985) ‘six thinking hats’ method is widely used, because it forces individuals to separate out different modes of thought, and dedicate time to each one.

Wheatley (1995, p. 67-68) suggests that trust is a key driver of creativity: “As leaders honour and trust the people who work with them, they unleash startlingly high levels of contribution and creativity”. To enable this trust, leaders may wish to take heed of Sloane’s (2003) twelve ways to crush creativity, which include: Criticism; Neglecting brainstorms; Problem hoarding; Efficiency over innovation; Overworking; Suggesting ideas are not in the plan; Laying blame; Inappropriate rewards; Outsourcing change; Promotion from within; Giving innovation projects to production units; Insufficient training.

Ryle (1976, p. 73-74) explains that all improvisation is by definition creative, because every situation is to a degree novel, and one’s response to it will therefore contain novelty too:

The fielder naturally expects that during the game some catches will come his way; but he does not and cannot make complete preparations for just this particular catch, coming towards him just where he now happens to be, with just this speed and trajectory and at just this height above ground, and with him himself having had just the thoughts and the intakes of breath that he had been having. He has indeed learned from earlier practice to make catches; but he could not, in logic, have been trained to make just this catch.

This argument is developed further by Hodgson and Richards (1966, p. 26) who argue that such spontaneity results in fresh, honest, and authentic reactions that are palpably different from patterned or learned reactions: “The conventional learned response very readily leads to a rather jaded reaction, but here [in improvisation] there is usually pleasure in the unknown”.

Vera and Crossan (2005) emphasise that when addressing the creative aspects of improvisation one should examine the creative process not the outcome. A creative process does not necessarily bring creative outcomes (Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjian, 1999). The advantage in focusing on process rather than outcome is that it “does not make any judgement about the performance implications of improvisational processes” (Vera &
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

Crossan, 2005, p. 205). Improvisation provides a useful tool for helping teams "attempt to orient themselves to, and take creative action in, situations or events that are complex, ambiguous, and ill defined" (Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjian, 1999, p. 287). Johnstone (1979, p. 88) explains that improvisers should not necessarily seek out novelty or originality because creative outcomes often come from doing what seems obvious or normal: “Striving after originality takes you far away from your true self, and makes your work mediocre”. In the following equation, Spolin (1973, p. 380) suggests that much of improvised creation relies on intuition: “Create (limited) plus intuit (unlimited) equals creation”.

Barrett (1998, p. 606) argues that the practice of improvisation builds up core creative competencies. In the context of jazz music, these include:


Johnstone (1979, p. 105) reiterates the point that creativity and spontaneity are enhanced by doing, not thinking and they can be learned, much like any other skill: “…if you play the exercises with your friends in a good spirit, then soon all your thinking will be transformed”.

Finally, the processes of creativity and improvisation share a similar orientation towards existing rules and prescriptions: “they disregard them” (Hebdige, 2001, p. 346). With an attitude of impudence, adaptation and a disregard for existing rules of instrumentation, tone, scale, mode and mood jazz musician John Coltrane was able to create the following innovations in his art form:

...using multiphonics, playing several notes or tones simultaneously; creating asymmetrical groupings not dependent on the basic pulse; developing an incredibly sophisticated system of chord substitutions; and initiating a pan-modal style of playing, using several modes simultaneously (Hebdige, 2001, p. 346).

If leaders are to find a “new way of doing things” in which they “look at everything in a new way” (Handy, 1990, p. 23) it stands to reason they should be enhancing individual freedom and collective creative capabilities (Wheatley, 2005). As Vera and Crossan (2005, p. 204) have shown, improvisation has been shown to enhance training for team innovation.
Resourcefulness and responsiveness

This section draws parallels between the improvisational technique of using the resources directly around us (Spolin, 1973) in a non-wasteful fashion to solve immediate problems (Poynton, 2000), with the growing ecological requirements to reduce consumption (Hart, Milstein, & Caggiano, 2003), adopt sustainable business practices (Heinberg, 2007) and practise responsible leadership (Maak & Pless, 2006). To avoid ecological collapse (Diamond, 2005) it is argued that leaders should focus less on environmental exploitation and more on building a 21st century context where “de-industrialisation” (Heinberg, 2007, p. 54) may constitute the new reality. The scientific community acknowledges that current production and consumption patterns can no longer continue (Daily & Ehrlich, 1996), especially if we are to reduce, current levels of global inequality:

...equity in consumer lifestyles within and between nations cannot be achieved globally by levelling up to consumption from the bottom. Runaway consumption in rich countries must be curbed as part of an effort to reduce the scale of human enterprise to below [the earth’s] carrying capacity while still permitting needed development among the poor (Daily & Ehrlich, 1996).

Heinberg (2007) argues that many of the world’s resources, including water, fossil fuels, uranium, fish stocks and arable land are being depleted at unsustainable rates (Heinberg, 2007). He suggests that to reverse this trend global society at large should adopt sustainable practices based on the following five axioms, namely:

...any society that continues to use critical resources unsustainably will collapse; population growth and/or growth in the rates of consumption of resources cannot be sustained; to be sustainable, the use of renewable resources must proceed at a rate that is less than or equal to the rate of natural replenishment; to be sustainable, the use of non-renewable resources must proceed at a rate that is declining, and the rate of decline must be greater than or equal to the rate of depletion; and sustainability requires that substances introduced into the environment from human activities be minimised and rendered harmless to biosphere functions (Heinberg, 2007, p. 85-97).

Sustainable enterprises therefore, contribute to sustainable development as described above by “delivering simultaneously economic, social, and environmental benefits - the so-called triple bottom line” (Hart, Milstein, & Caggiano, 2003, p. 56).

Organisations are increasingly adopting strategies to become more environmentally friendly based on three motivations: “competitiveness, legitimation, and ecological responsibility”
(Bansal & Roth, 2000, p. 717). Ecological responsibility is determined by the realisation that industrialisation and material consumption have resulted in wide scale pollution and waste generation which may now have had an irreversible impact “on climate, biodiversity, and ecosystem function” (Hart, Milstein, & Caggiano, 2003, p. 18). Against this backdrop, there is a growing call for leaders to act more responsibly with regard to all stakeholders who fall within their sphere of influence: “Responsible leadership is the art of building and sustaining good relationships to all relevant stakeholders” (Maak & Pless, 2006, p. 40).

Spolin (1973, p. 46) suggests that improvisers have stakeholders too; they appreciate and recognise the people and teams around them: “Without the other player, there is no game. We cannot play tag if there is no one to tag”. In fact, her theatrical definition of environment takes into account externalities such as props and audience: “The conditioned stage life agreed upon by members of the group; all the animate and inanimate objects within the theatre, including self and the audience… [are] an explorable place” (Spolin, 1973, p. 381).

Spolin (1973, p. 89) suggests that through improvisation, actors are encouraged to develop an awareness of the wider physical environment, in three senses:

...immediate, general and larger. The immediate environment is that area close upon us—the table where we are eating, with its food, utensils, ashtrays, etc. The general environment is the area in which the table is placed—the room, restaurant, etc., with its doors, windows, and other features. The larger environment is the area beyond—the space outside the window, the trees in the distance, the birds in the sky, etc. All the exercises in environment (where) are designed to awaken the players to all three areas and to help them move out, penetrate, and work comfortably.

With increasing calls for resource efficiency and pollution prevention (Hart, Milstein, & Caggiano, 2003), Poynton (2000, p. 40) argues that seeing everything as an ‘offer’ becomes a complimentary orientation for sustainable business practice: “Not only can it enable you to find ‘free’ stuff everywhere, but since it echoes natural systems, where all waste is used as food, it embodies a wisdom which could help us move towards sustainability”.

Poynton (2000, p. 43) argues that leaders should seek to learn from natural systems, from their productivity and their elimination of waste:

*If only we could do so much with so little, all six billion of us could live fabulously well without having to worry about the destruction and depletion of the resources on which we*
depend. By contrast, current human systems produce colossal amounts of waste along with finished products. Nature cannot afford that – and nor, in the long run, can we.

Elsewhere this approach has been termed ‘biomimicry’, defined as: “an attempt to emulate nature’s processes to create novel products and services without having to rely on brute force to hammer out goods from large stocks of virgin raw materials” (Hart, Milstein, & Caggiano, 2003, p. 59). Biomimicry can be equated to the improvisational requirement for environmental awareness, as described by Spolin (1973, p. 3): “If the environment permits it, anyone can learn whatever he chooses to learn; and if the individual permits it, the environment will teach him everything it has to teach”.

The practice of improvisation encourages participants to use what they have around them, to create and invent uses for objects that would not ordinarily seem possible (Spolin, 1973). Poynton (2000, p. 42) describes this as a “beautiful economy” in which the ‘use what you have’ approach encourages leaders to broaden their minds to resources that they may not yet have considered:

...look anew at obvious things you may be ignoring. What have you got in the archives, who have you got in the team, what is there in the fridge? Do you have a little bacon, someone who was brought up in China or your predecessor’s assessment of the issue you face?

An emphasis on efficiency such as this may have demonstrable benefits in contributing to a more sustainable world but also driving shareholder value: “extensive empirical work has also now made it evident that... firms pursuing pollution prevention and waste-reduction strategies actually do reduce cost and increase profits” (Hart, Milstein, & Caggiano, 2003, p. 60).

Authors such as Weick (1993) have drawn on the work of Levi-Strauss and his concept of *bricolage*, “the art of making usage of whatever is at hand” (Levi-Strauss, 1966, p. 17) to describe how improvisers are able to create new forms using unique combinations of the raw materials that surround them (Barrett, 1998). Moorman and Miner (1998, p. 705) argue that the more improvisational an act “the more likely *bricolage* is to occur, because there is less time to obtain appropriate resources in advance... [and] being skilful at *bricolage* may actually help produce valued improvisation”.
The skills that improvisers possess in seeing possibility and harnessing creativity allow them to see abundance, where others see scarcity: “seeing offers catapults you into a world of abundance, where everything is stimuli, which makes it much easier to be confident, with all the attendant virtues that brings” (Poynton, 2000, p. 42). As Zander and Zander (2000, p. 21) acknowledge, the distinction between scarcity and abundance is usually a question of one’s frames of possibility: “True scarcity and scarcity-thinking are different phenomena”.

This research argues that the planet’s current resource crisis (Heinberg, 2007) requires leaders to adopt a more pragmatic *bricolage* approach where “their ability to juxtapose, recombine, and reinterpret past materials [may] fashion novel responses” (Barrett, 1998, p. 619).

**Dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity**

Adler (2006, p. 490) recognises that the context for leadership in the 21st century is one of globalisation, coupled with the dominance of market forces and “high rates of change, ambiguity, unpredictability, and turbulence”. She argues that Newtonian models for predicting, ordering and controlling our environment may have been appropriate under conditions of stability and continuity evident in the 19th and 20th centuries, but as chaos and complexity increases: “21st-century leaders are shifting away from the more hierarchical machine-like models to more human and biological metaphors [such as those found in the arts] to guide their strategies” (Adler, 2006, p. 490).

Boyatzis and Mckee (2005) continue this theme, suggesting that the changes we currently face (including climate change, natural disasters, ineffective social systems, technological advancements, significantly altered organisational and business models) render existing organisational frameworks that focus on predictability and stability ineffective. Handy (1990, p. 5) argues that the rate and nature of the change currently taking place is ‘discontinuous’ and unprecedented in human history, so we need “discontinuous upside-down thinking to deal with it”. This change has led to increasing levels of uncertainty and ambiguity (Wheatley, 2005), defined as “an excessive tendency to find uncertain situations stressful and upsetting, to believe that unexpected events are negative and should be avoided, and to think that being uncertain about the future is unfair” (Dugas et al., 2004 cited in Grenier, Barrette, & Ladouceur, 2005, p. 595).
Wheatley (2005, p. 10) argues that many leaders reach positions of high rank due to their ability to radiate certainty, “but everything has changed since those sweet, slow days when the world seemed knowable and predictable. The growing complexity of our times makes certainty about any move or any position more precarious”.

Merry (1995, p. 106) distinguishes between pre-modern societies and our post-modern reality, suggesting that current levels of uncertainty and change may be causing a crisis in our collective identity:

In pre-modern societies individuals did not face questions about identity that trouble modern man. The pre-modern mind had anchors everywhere, in the rituals and customs of society, in the statuses and roles of society. Today that has changed. People wander confused between the numerous identities they can choose from. They stray between lifestyles, ideologies, and religions. They have before them endless choices and variations. Throughout fast-changing life circumstances they wander from identity to identity.

Merry (1995, p. 114) argues that uncertainty is prompting individuals to seek out greater “steadiness, regularity, stability, certainty, order, predictability, generalisability and controllability” through “domination and control of the environment… with more structure and more technology”. Instead, he suggests, humanity will need to learn more about the relationship between creativity and chaos in our own cognition:

...chaos flings together existing components that were far apart to create a new state.... Increasing novelty necessitates enhanced creativity. The measure of human creative ability must fit the degree of increasing novelty in the environment... An age of chaos demands the release of the hidden reserves of creativity lying untapped within mankind (Merry, 1995, p. 152-153).

Wheatley (2000, p. 10) echoes this need to relinquish certainty because it is uncertainty, she argues, “…that creates the space for invention. We must let go, clear the space, and leap into the void of not-knowing, if we want to discover anything new. In Tibetan Buddhism, ‘the root of happiness’ lies in the acceptance that life is uncertain”.

There are those who have used the arts and improvisation as metaphors for how organisations may cope, learn and innovate within an environment of change (Barrett, 1998; Weick, 1993). Others however, see improvisation less as a metaphor and more as a skill that can be honed to cope better in conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity:
...because people are less predictable than things, we are more often called upon to adjust to what is said and done by others in a way which we cannot easily plan. If we are open and receptive, we can make discoveries both about ourselves and others from these moments. If we are less receptive, the tendency will be to reproduce what we consider to be socially accepted responses and these become standardised and stereotyped (Hodgson & Richards, 1966, p. 3).

Improvisers by definition need to be comfortable with not knowing for the act itself implies exploring, experimenting, examining possibilities and not knowing how it will all pan out (Barrett, 1998). Johnstone (1979, p. 116) argues that the improviser should never seek to make predictions but rather “…be like a man walking backwards. He sees where he has been, but he pays no attention to the future. His story can take him anywhere, but he must still ‘balance’ it, and give it shape, by remembering incidents that have been shelved and reincorporating them”.

An example of how this attitude may be developed in practice can be found in the game ‘basic blind’ one of a number of ‘blind’ games, which are applicable both to the development of dialogue skills and comfort in uncertainty:

After preparing a simple Where, Who, and What, the members of a team should be blindfolded. They must devise a What in which many things will be handed from one person to another – a tea party, for example. The playing must be done with real props and set pieces. A scene in which ‘not seeing’ is implicit (such as with blind characters or in a dark room) cannot be used. Point of concentration: the blindfolded players are to move about the stage as if they can see (Spolin, 1973, p. 171).

By removing the actor’s dependency on sight energy is released in listening, attentiveness, concentration, awareness and possibility: “blind develops an awareness of space and sound in space and makes this space a living, palpable substance for the player” (Spolin, 1973, p. 173). This exercise, involving actors learning from having their senses temporarily taken away from them, provides a learning experience oddly reminiscent of what many leaders describe as “the most important learning experiences in their lives… of times when continuity ran out on them, when they had no past experience to fall back on, no rules or handbook” (Handy, 1990, p. 11-12).

Crossan (1998) explains another principle of improvisation, that the environment cannot be controlled but will teach you if you let it. In order to do so the actor must develop their
intuitive capabilities, by carrying out contradictory actions. An example of how one might go about this is a game called, ‘nonsense naming’:

In this exercise, individuals quickly walk around the room and give the wrong name to the objects they point at. The exercise demonstrates that it is difficult to break out of familiar patterns of seeing things. Even when individuals find another name for a chair, for example, it is often another item of furniture like a table or desk (Crossan, 1998, p. 595).

To keep pace with change, leaders need to blend their pre-existing planning and analytical skills with the ability to respond to problems in the moment as they arise (Crossan, 1998). Adler (2006, p. 492) has suggested a shift in leadership skills emphasis “from sequential planning-then-doing to simultaneous listening-and-observing-while-doing”. She suggests that in order to develop such skills managers should and currently are utilising the skills of actors, dancers and musicians. This requires some unlearning too, for: “Most of us weren’t trained to like confusion or to admit when we feel hesitant and uncertain. In schools and organisations, value is placed on sounding assured and confident. People are rewarded for stating opinions as if they’re facts” (Wheatley, 2005, p. 210).

However, Barrett (1998, p. 615) suggests that improvisation occurs more than many would care to admit, and that much of what seems purposeful in organisational life is only made so by “retrospective sense-making”, which “makes spontaneous action appear purposeful, coherent and inevitable. Organisations tend to forget how much improvisation, bricolage, and retrospective sense making are required to complete daily tasks”. Mintzberg (1973) has also written on the high degree to which managerial activity is spontaneous and emergent.

**Conclusion**

Through the lens of the seven constructs discussed above, this study aims to elucidate an alternative form of training, that of improvisational theatre, in which acting under conditions of uncertainty, accepting offers, crafting a disciplined imagination, suspending judgement, being present, aware and listening are all part of the leader’s raison d’être (Johnstone, 1979; Spolin, 1973; Barrett, 1998; Hodgson & Richards, 1966; Ryle, 1976; Weick, 1993; Poynton, 2000). It will analyse improvisational practice in relation to the theoretical constructs detailed above and in doing so it seeks to develop a conception of artistic leadership that adds detail and character to Cowan’s (2007) framework of artistic leadership [see Figure 7].
Figure 7: Cowan, 2007: Framework of Artistic Leadership, with constructs added by the researcher

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2 “The outer circle depicts four dimensions of artistic leadership. The middle circle depicts corresponding characteristics of art at work (Sandelands & Buckner, 1989). The innermost circle depicts the four directions of the Medicine Wheel of human potentiality, which provides an integrative foundation on which to align both outer circles (e.g., Meadows, 1990; Storm, 1972, 1994)” (Cowan, 2007, p. 159)
Research Approach and Strategy

The aim of the research is to explore whether the seven constructs discussed extensively in literature pertaining to leadership and elaborated upon above, can be developed and enhanced through the practice of improvisation techniques. The approach, therefore, is inductive in that the researcher is not seeking to prove or disprove a pre-existing hypothesis (Punch, 2005). Rather, the aim is to explore a specific research problem (Creswell, 2009, p. 98), namely whether understanding the value of improvisation techniques will expand knowledge around leadership capabilities. It does so by drawing premises from leadership literature and comparing them with the results of this research in order to support a conclusion that, if these premises are true, it is improbable that the conclusion will be false (Silverman, 2000, p. 21).

It is proposed that from these premises and inferences the following conclusions may be drawn:

1. The seven constructs outlined above facilitate leadership development (a premise, drawn from extensive leadership literature as previously outlined).

2. Improvisation facilitates the development of these seven constructs (premise, to be proved or disproved through qualitative research methodologies).

3. Improvisation is a tool for developing leaders (conclusion).

While the conclusion may yet be false, through inductive reasoning the conclusion may be said to be very likely possible or reasonable and regardless of outcomes will expand our knowledge in the area of improvisation (Punch, 2005). Put another way: “knowing what you want to find out leads inexorably to the question of how you will get that information” (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 42). While there may be little instrumental value in the results of this research as its purpose is not to solve a practical problem but rather to contribute to a body of knowledge (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994), it is anticipated that it will be of demonstrable, relevant and specific use in the field of leadership.

A qualitative approach has been chosen because it is the most appropriate methodology for understanding subjective experiences (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, there would be no point in aggregating the data into a statistical format in order to undertake quantitative analysis (Creswell, 2007). Secondly, the nature of improvisation practice is participatory – everyone
must take part - so the role of the researcher will inevitably be, in part, that of participant observer (Zelditch, 1962; Vidich, 1955; Fox, 2004; Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955). Qualitative methods are appropriate for this study because data will be collected in the participants’ setting, questions and procedures will emerge in situ and because there is very little research thus far on the concept or phenomenon that needs to be understood:

In this situation, the researcher seeks to establish the meaning of a phenomenon from the views of participants. This means identifying a culture sharing group and studying how it develops shared patterns of behaviour over time (i.e., ethnography). One of the key elements of collecting data in this way is to observe participants’ behaviours by engaging in their activities (Creswell, 2009, p. 16).

Finally, the choice of method also reflects the researcher’s personal training and experience (Creswell, 2009): the researcher has a social science background, enjoys working with other people and writing in a literary manner.

Research Design, Data Collection Methods and Research Instruments

Participant Observation is usually just one part of a cluster of other non-experimental, inductive, field-based research strategies (University of Toronto Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board, 2005, p. 1).

The principal method of inquiry was participant observation, which can be viewed in three parts: “observation, enumeration, and informant interviewing” (Zelditch, 1962 cited in Bouchard, 1976, p. 385). The researcher followed a three-step approach: namely participating and observing, documenting observations in extensive field notes and then following up with participants to conduct a series of in-depth, “semi-structured interviews” (Punch, 2005, p. 169) to elicit from participants their experience of and responses to the participatory sessions. The methods are further elaborated on in what follows.

Participant observation

Participant observation is a strategy of inquiry rooted in anthropology (Gans, 1999) and ethnography (Creswell, 2009). It is now commonly used across many disciplines as a research tool independent of the ethnographic method with which it was originally associated. It typically has the following characteristics: it explores social phenomena, data is unstructured, analysis takes place in a small number of cases and the analysis of data requires explicit interpretation (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Research is flexible and
evolves in response to realities experienced in the research environment (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). As such it is the research method that comes closest to improvisation. Schwartz and Schwartz (1955, p. 343) see participant observation as a process “in which the observer’s presence in a social situation is maintained for the purpose of scientific investigation. The observer is in a face-to-face relationship with the observed, and, by participating with them in their natural life setting, he gathers data”. The process is broken down further into registering, interpreting and recording (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955).

Participant observation and ethnographic method more generally, are useful for understanding the fact that in human life there are multiple views and multiple truths:

There is never an orthodoxy. Rather there is a constant process of oppositions, of successive heterodoxies and heresies... ethnographers collectively seek to distance themselves repeatedly from versions of ‘mainstream’ orthodoxy (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, p. 249).

It has been argued that all social research contains an element of participant observation, because it is impossible to study the world without being part of it (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). In the case of this research, however, participant observation involved several specific and demonstrable steps which are elaborated upon further in the process section.

Participant observation is particularly useful for its allowance of ‘thick description’, interpretation and the way it can evoke for the reader the sensation of ‘being there’ (Geertz, 1973). It also allows the researcher to focus on an individual’s behaviour rather than simply their words, as is the case with verbal interviews (Bouchard, 1976, p. 385). It is a useful method for “…elaborating, explaining and even debunking findings” (Gans, 1999, p. 540).

Participant observation is useful too because it allows for the discovery of unanticipated, though important anomalous data or “the serendipity pattern”, which can be developed further as part of the research proposal in a way that is less easy with other methods (Merton, 1949, p. 98). Direct observation is a useful tool for researching “…behaviours that most people cannot accurately describe, such as interaction rates or fleeting expressive movements” (McCall, 1984, p. 266). Much of what occurs in the practice of improvisation is interactive, physical and fleeting, so this method was apt.
Furthermore, Bouchard (1976) highlights the holistic nature of research conducted using participant observation, which looks at whole organisations or environments in more integrated ways than other methodologies. It is also less predictive and controlling than other methodologies which, given that the research in question is seeking to uncover new approaches to uncertainty, ambiguity and control, is appropriate:

This focus is both compatible with and complementary to the developing emphasis in industrial and organisational psychology on understanding as opposed to a more immediate emphasis on prediction and control as well as the trend toward the use of systems models (Buckley, 1967; Berrien, 1968 cited in Bouchard, 1976, p. 385).

Another area where methodology and research topic are complementary is in espousing the virtues of collaboration and dialogue. Tyler (1986) describes the ethnographic setting as being characterised by dialogue, co-operation and collaboration, which is useful for overcoming distance and achieving objectivity.

Anthropologists share the view that participant observation is able to capture the richness of human behaviour in a manner which positivist methods, in isolation, fail to do (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). However, it was decided that participant observation should not be used to the exclusion of other methods, but merely “...as an approach with a common core of appropriate methods inherent in all forms of participant observation” (Gans, 1999, p. 39-40). The follow-up semi-structured interview is seen as one such appropriate method. There are important reciprocal benefits between interview methods and participant observation (Gans, 1999), which informed the decision to use both in a complementary fashion.

Participant observation often requires a long time and a variety of settings (University of Toronto Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board, 2005) and one of the limitations of the present research is that it contains neither. Furthermore, participant observation studies remain plagued by questions of validity and objectivity. Bouchard (1976, p. 391-392) remarks that “...objectivity is a goal for which all researchers should strive, but one which is only approximated, never achieved”. Cone (1982) states that observation is always conducted for a purpose, and so the validity of one’s data is ultimately defined by whether it is fit for that purpose. Ultimately however, “...authenticity and credibility is dependent on readers’ adopting shared strategies of reading and interpretation” (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, p. 254).
Due to the fact that the participant observation element of this research was conducted in groups, the researcher had to remain aware of what is known as the “risky-shift phenomenon” whereby an individual makes riskier decisions when part of a group than as an individual (Bouchard, 1976, p. 366). This may have affected the validity of the findings. Observers also point out that no social research can be truly objective because it will be coloured by the paradigms of the researcher, in this case, possibly ‘masculinist’ or ‘bourgeois’ paradigms (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Powdermaker, 1966; Bouchard, 1976). The researcher, though, remains aware of the feminist and Marxist literature that describes such barriers to objectivity: “A valid evaluation of data must necessarily include a reasonably thorough comprehension of the major social dimensions of the situation in which data were collected” (Vidich, 1955, p. 360) and this informed the research process.

Participant observation requires the researcher to be aware of setting effects. Hoyland (1959) explains that the outcome of studies will vary according to setting, and that setting will have a strong influence on studies involving attitude changes (Hoyland, 1959). The researcher was interested in detecting attitudinal changes in respondents, so needed to interrogate the impact of setting in his findings, including the researcher’s own role as participant observer and the perceptions respondents had of him and his social position, and how this might have affected the data he was able to collect (Vidich, 1955).

Vidich (1955, p. 355) notes: “In every case the field worker is fitted into a plausible role by the population he is studying and within a context meaningful to them”. The question is whether in this case, this poses a significant risk to the validity of the responses. Participants may feel compelled to be there, in which case the researcher might be perceived as a ‘spy for the bosses’. Alternatively, they may view the researcher sympathetically as an innocent student and disregard his intentions. Furthermore, the fact that the researcher was explicit about telling the respondents about the research intentions might have made them self-conscious about being observed.

**Participant observation as process**

Observation is a process of “planned, methodical watching that involves constraints to improve accuracy” (Weick, 1968, p. 358). This section seeks to explain how accuracy was maximised. While participant observation does not usually require the researcher to generate
or test a hypothesis, a degree of theoretical and practical preparation is imperative (Fox, 2004). This involves three stages (Becker & Geer, 1960, p. 271 cited in Bouchard, 1976, p. 388): “(1) the selection and definition of problems, concepts, and indices; (2) a check on the frequency and distribution of phenomena; and (3) the incorporation of individual findings into a model of the organisation under study”. The first step has been covered by performing a detailed review of the literature to uncover relevant themes and constructs. Second, the researcher sought to observe where these did, or did not, appear in practice. Third, the researcher documented his observations in detailed field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001).

The research assembled groups of professionals in a space, either in the work context or outside it, where they were taken through various exercises over a period of one-and-a-half to two hours in order to develop their understanding of theatrical improvisation. The exercises were designed to make people better improvisers and, by their nature, elucidate on the following constructs: being present, seeing possibility, dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity, resourcefulness, creativity and overcoming the fear of failure. Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis and the researcher observed what reactions individuals had to the training, in their body language, behaviour, levels of participation and engagement, as well as questioning. Thereafter, the researcher organised a series of semi-structured interviews with participants to gauge the effect and relevance of the improvisation session, particularly with regard to their competencies in the construct areas highlighted above.

The research design implied a high degree of participation, energy, time, the development of rapport and a dependency on the researcher’s own recollection in observing themes, patterns and behaviours (Bouchard, 1976). The researcher attempted to observe “repeatable patterns of behaviour that are, as it were, the building blocks whose concatenations and clusterings create the more elaborate sequences and structures” (Kendon, 1982, p. 474-5). The responses were grouped thematically, which is why it was decided to divide observed interactions into themes or category systems of observation (Medley & Mitzel, 1963).

The intention, going into each session, was to look for emerging themes, but the researcher remained cognisant of the fact that observation is frequently “selective” and “purposive” (McCall, 1984, p. 270) and therefore was aware that allocating significance to a particular
episode could preclude the observation of another equally important or relevant one (McCall, 1984, p. 270). To increase the level of objectivity, in the field notes the researcher married both ‘molecular’ (very detailed) and ‘molar’ (more generalised) observations from each session (Hollenbeck, 1978).

The researcher was also sensitive to his own level of involvement (Fox, 2004). When designing the research with theatrical improvisation expert Megan Furniss of theatre company Improvision, it was decided that participants’ overall levels of comfort would be increased if the researcher participated fully in each session, rather than observe from the side or even film the sessions. Thus, according to Gold’s (1958) analysis of how participant observation can be broken down – (1) complete participant; (2) participant as observer; (3) observer as participant; (4) complete observation – the researcher operated in the second category. While apparently a complete participant, the researcher’s intentions in the room to observe were made clear to the group before each session (see ethical considerations).

The researcher ensured that his personality did not overly impact on the research setting and where appropriate sought to be: “...flexible, adaptable, and free from ethnocentricity and egocentricity in relation to contrasting ways of life...” (Mukherji, 1973, p. 29).

It is somewhat appropriate, given the theatrical nature of the research question, that participant observation calls for the researcher to be a “role player” (Fox, 2004, p. 314) who “...carefully thinks through how she will present herself to the people being studied, without deceit or falsification, in a manner that is ‘acceptable to the people among whom [she] works and is congruent with the activities that they will see [her] carry out’” (Mead, 1970, p. 155 cited in Fox, 2004, p. 316).

**Field notes**

Writing up field notes is a key stage in participant observation because, while the researcher immersed himself in a new social milieu, it is the written accounts and descriptions that will inform how others see his version of this milieu (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001). While the format of field notes is not prescriptive, they may take a variety of forms, be that descriptive, interpretative, contemporaneous, representative and/or selective (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001). The following were always included: time, location, participants, purpose, function,
frequency and duration (Sellitz, Jahoda, Deutsch, & Cook, 1960). Furthermore, on the advice of Cone and Foster (1982, cited in McCall, 1984, p. 270), the researcher also noted the following elements of behaviour: “(a) its frequency, or a derivative such as its rate, relative frequency, or conditional probability; (b) its duration, or a derivative such as the interval or latency; or (c) its quality, e.g., its intensity, accuracy, or acceptability”.

It is noted that a time gap frequently exists between an event’s occurrence and recording it as data (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955). The researcher ensured that all field notes were written up on the day of observation (Jackson, 1990) to ensure accuracy and a reliable mnemonic record (Vidich, 1955, p. 360).

There is a divergence of opinion, based on differing assumptions of what ethnography should be, about whether field notes should serve as a mere account of the facts or one’s own interpretation of, or reaction to, events (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001). The researcher embraced both, by tracking broad patterns rather than looking closely at day-to-day routines and processes, which are the concern of some ethnographies (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001).

While the field notes are crucial, the value of the fieldwork comes in doing as well as reflecting. This is echoed in the views of an anthropologist interviewed by Jackson (1990) who stated that: “This is what I would call fieldwork. It is not taking notes in the field but is the interaction between the researcher and the so-called research subjects” (Jackson, 1990, p. 23). The mere act of participating can generate “deep, intuitive insight and perception without day-to-day note-taking” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001, p. 355). While this is not seen as a reason to avoid note-taking, the point is made to illustrate how learning occurs both through immediate and reflective observation, or what Atkinson (1992, p. 5) calls a “double process of textual production and reproduction”.

In terms of textual strategy, the researcher adopted an integrative approach, which “...produces a smooth thematically focused text with minimal spatial markings to indicate where the field note ends and interpretation begins” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001, p. 364). The researcher recorded in writing events or observations that were viewed as significant. As such the field notes were inevitably “selective” (Atkinson, 1992, p. 17). The researcher
remained careful in this approach not to fall victim of confirmation bias or selecting those elements that simply supported his assumptions (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001).

The researcher remained aware of his own position as ‘narrator’, and therefore his own stance or perspective which could affect how he identified with those being studied (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001) or bring a “cultural relativism” to his analysis of events (Mukherji, 1973, p. 27). The researcher chose to write the field notes in the first person because “first-person writing is particularly effective when the ethnographer is also a member of the group she is studying” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001, p. 360).

In the analysis of field notes, the researcher remained aware of problems regarding scepticism and relativism, including confirmation bias or ‘ontological gerrymandering’ (Woolgar & Pawluch, 1985). Ultimately, the description of the findings is the researcher’s ‘representation’, and he will never be able to ‘speak for’, or on behalf of, a group (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994).

It has been argued that the process of participant observation is one of the best techniques on which to base the content and structure of subsequent interviews, because it provides familiarity with experiences and meanings of respondents (Vidich, 1955). Indeed Fox (2004, p. 321) sees the research process as one of “participation, listening, and asking questions”, and it is to this theme of asking questions that the research now turns.

**Interviews**

While structured interviews have a limited and formalised set of questions, semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to explore a series of pre-determined topics or themes by asking questions around each topic and allowing new questions to develop dependent on the responses of interviewees (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). An example interview guide, which is an informal "grouping of topics and questions that the interviewer can ask in different ways for different participants” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 195) was drawn up in advance of interviews [See Table 1, for an example of the types of questions that arose as part of a semi-structured interview].
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

Table 1: Example of the structure and flow of a semi-structured interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General</th>
<th>Seeing Possibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What were your thoughts on today's session? Was it useful for you?</td>
<td>Did these exercises make you see anything different? Did any possibilities open up for you that otherwise might not have? What's the weirdest idea that you came up with in the session? Did you think it was good at the time? What do you think about the idea now? Are there any problems you'd like to tackle using the exercises from today?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Being Present</th>
<th>Creativity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Which tense best describes today's session: past, present or future? What did it feel like to do things at a moment's notice? Are you spontaneous? How did it feel to have to be spontaneous? Was there a moment where you felt like your brain switched off but you still felt comfortable and in control? Explain. Did you feel a sense of flow in any exercises? Did improvisation make you feel more 'present'?</td>
<td>Did you have any interesting or novel thoughts or ideas during the session? If so, what were they? Were they imaginative, practical, new ways of applying old things? Do you think the session unlocked any creativity within you? What was it? Is your organisation creative? Why? Did or could these exercises make you more creative? What is creativity for you?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoiding Blame and the Fear of Failure</th>
<th>Resourcefulness and Responsiveness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did you feel safe from blame? Were mistakes encouraged? Did you feel anyone did make a mistake? How would you fail in an environment like this? How different, if at all is this from your own work environment? How do you normally feel about failing?</td>
<td>How does it feel only to use the objects directly around you? What did you do when you had to improvise with only a few objects? How did it make you feel? Are you used to making do with only a few resources? Do you think improvisation would help you be more resourceful? Do you think it's an important skill? Why? What uses could it be put to?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialogue</th>
<th>Living with Uncertainty and Ambiguity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You were asked to listen to your colleagues in today's exercises: explain what happened? Did anything change about your behaviour? Did everyone understand one another? What was the quality of the communication in the session like? Did you feel you were being heard? Did you feel you had to pay extra attention to what others were saying? Did this exercise help or hinder your communication with colleagues? Explain.</td>
<td>Did you know what to expect when you started the session? How did you feel about not knowing what was going to happen? Did things work out ok? Would you have preferred to have a plan? How often do you feel similar feelings in your life? Would practising these exercises make you feel better prepared for uncertain situations? What do you normally do when you don't know what to do? How much of your life is planned?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviews are a complementary tool to participant observation because they allow the researcher to build on observations of behaviour to understand both the lived experience of others and their subjective understanding of that experience (Seidman, 2006). They range from “...tightly structured, survey interviews with preset, standardised, normally closed questions or open-ended, apparently unstructured, anthropological interviews” (Seidman, 2006, p. 15). The researcher opted for a semi-structured approach, or engaging in what Spradley (1979, p. 15) describes as “friendly conversations”. This method of interviewing involves predominantly open-ended questioning, which requires participants to build on and explore the answers that they give in order to reconstruct his or her experience of the material in question.

A major advantage of interviewing is that it allows the researcher to identify themes and patterns in participants’ responses, and compare experiences of certain respondents against
those of others (Seidman, 2006). It enhances rapport with respondents and allows for heterogeneity of responses, which may be appropriate in diverse sample groups (Richardson, 1960). It is also useful to use interviews to elaborate upon “…data collected by other means” (Bouchard, 1976, p. 368), in this case participant observation.

**Interview process**

Interviews require an approach that reduces differentials in status, enhances goodwill, trust and motivation and builds confidence in the interviewer’s own levels of authority, confidentiality and neutrality (Bouchard, 1976). In terms of process, the following checklist (Seidman, 2006, p. 78-94) was deemed useful:

- Listen more, talk less
- Follow up on what the participant says
- Ask questions when you do not understand
- Explore, do not probe
- Ask to hear more about a subject
- Avoid leading questions
- Ask open-ended questions
- Limit your own interaction
- Avoid reinforcing your participants’ responses
- Use an interview guide cautiously
- Tolerate silence

All interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone and stored electronically, after which they were transcribed verbatim, and underwent a process of “labelling”, “classifying” and “coding” (Seidman, 2006, p. 125).

Researchers have three ways in which to record interviews: they may tape record the session, take detailed notes or do a combination of the two (Weiss, 1994). It is not possible to record every word of a conversation through note-taking alone, nor does the researcher employ full concentration when tape-recording alone (Weiss, 1994). Therefore, the researcher opted to tape record interviews and write additional notes and observations. Detailed note-taking is also said to prevent the researcher from observing body language and mood (Weiss, 1994). Creswell (1998) suggests that when taping interviews, efforts should be undertaken to ensure
the Dictaphone is as unobtrusive as possible and that back-up notes may provide a useful resource in the event of a tape-recorder malfunction.

**Sampling**

The researcher created the research sample by inviting organisations to participate in a one-off improvisation session lasting approximately one-and-a-half to two hours. Crossan’s (1998, p. 594) description is once more useful in explaining:

> A typical improvisation workshop begins with a brief overview of the importance of improvisation to motivate individual investment of time and energy in the process. Individuals then work in small groups (10 to 20 individuals) with an experienced improvisation facilitator who takes them through a series of progressively more challenging improvisation exercises for about two-and-a-half hours.

These sessions were voluntary, and offered to employees as such. The level of uptake and the size of the sample groups did not differ from those suggested by Crossan (1998) above. A particular community or group for study (Mukherji, 1973) was not selected. Rather, a strategy of random sampling was adopted whereby organisations were approached and made available the staff they could. The participants were volunteers and, as such, the sample that emerged was not one that the researcher had a great deal of control over (Bouchard, 1976).

**Data Analysis Methods**

Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) software, entitled ATLAS/ti, was used to categorise and structure the data thematically (Kelle, 2007, p. 442). Software packages of this kind are extremely useful for the storage, filing and retrieval of large quantities of interview material (Silverman, 2000), are now well-established in qualitative analysis and can often make problems or answers more visible than they would appear through manual methods alone (Kelle, 2007).

After interviews are conducted they need to be interpreted (Wolcott, 1994). Data analysis was informed by a grounded theory approach, which begins with the data and seeks to build a theory from it, literally from the ground up (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Leedy and Ormrod (2005, p. 140) state that when using a grounded theory approach, the researcher should begin
“with the data and use them to develop a theory”. The approach has been defined by Bryant and Charmaz (2007, p. 608) as “a method of conducting qualitative research that focuses on creating conceptual frameworks or theories through building inductive analysis from the data”. As illustrated above there is insufficient evidence to corroborate current theories about the link between improvisation and leadership, so a grounded theory approach is particularly useful (Cresswell, 2002 cited in Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

Data were organised and interpreted using a four step coding process [See Figure 8], advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1990):

1. First, open coding was used, whereby data are fragmented and organised into similar discrete groups, where data are labelled conceptually and concepts are categorised (Wilson Scott & Howell, 2008). After having been categorised, data are examined for properties or subcategories. In this case, the initial categories were determined by the seven constructs identified in the literature review.

2. Second, axial coding was used to organise and link categories and concepts from the open coding stage (Burden & Roodt, 2007).
3. Third, selective coding was employed to identify links between categories at a dimensional level (Daengbuppha, Hemmington, & Wilkes, 2006). Inter-relationships between categories were combined to form a narrative of the phenomenon under study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

4. Finally, a theory was developed based entirely on the data that were collected.

Using Silverman’s (2000) ‘realist’ approach to interview data whereby, in order to create a ‘fit’ between the researcher’s interpretations and ‘some external reality’ using triangulation [see Figure 9], a comparison was made between the researcher’s own observations, participants’ interpretations of their behaviour and the academic literature.

![Figure 9: Triangulation approach, adapted from Silverman, 2000, p. 122](image)

A ‘realist’ approach was adopted, inclusive of elements from the ‘narrative approach’, treating “…interview data as accessing various stories or narratives through which people describe their world” (Silverman, 2000, p. 122). Of interest were the research participants’ own categories, how they used them to tell stories and describe the experience of improvisation (Silverman, 2000).
Figure 10: Process in the Constant Comparative Method of Data Analysis, adapted from Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 135.

Figure 10 above illustrates the interpretive and hermeneutic nature of grounded theory research (Parker & Roffey, 1997). Through a number of iterations, category coding is subject to several rounds of revision, patternning, categorisation, integration and understanding, so that the researcher develops as rich a picture of the data as possible (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The research used the chain of evidence concept (Paré, 2002) to illustrate to readers how each element of data categorisation and abstraction took place (April, 2004) [See Figure 11].
CAQDAS can sometimes be said to apply a narrowly exclusive approach to the analysis of qualitative data (Silverman, 2000, p. 173). This problem was overcome by interrogating the data in full before using software to draw out themes.

The presentation of qualitative data, at the report stage, is often subject to criticisms of “anecdotalism” and selectivity, whereby researchers only include those examples that support their thesis and the basis for selecting or excluding evidence is insufficiently explained (Mehan, 1979, p. 15). To overcome this, ‘critical rationalism’ was used (Popper, 1959) or the ‘refutability principle’ in the analysis, i.e., “… one solution to the problem of anecdotalism is simply for qualitative researchers to seek to refute their initial assumptions about their data in order to achieve objectivity… we must seek to refute assumed relations between phenomena” (Silverman, 2000, p. 178). Furthermore, the approach outlined by Bouchard (1976, p. 372) was adopted, whereby the researcher uses a series of ‘funnel sequences’ with feedback loops, starting first with a broad and open questioning of the data, subdividing it into domains and
then later returning to the original data to see if the funnelling was relevant or appropriate [see Figure 12].

In terms of validity, interviewers can never divorce themselves from the interview process but they can remain “...disciplined and dedicated to keeping the interviews as the participants’ meaning-making process” (Seidman, 2006, p. 22). It is extremely important therefore to be sensitive to the social environment and one’s place in it (Cannell & Kahn, 1957). Socially-constructed differentiators such as race, sex, education levels, age, religion and social class have been shown to have an influence on data collected through interviews (Cannell & Kahn, 1957), so researchers need to be mindful of the potential influence of such factors on responses.

Rather than see these issues as problematic, proponents of interviewing choose to assert the value of having a human interviewer, who they argue has the capacity to be “…a
marvellously smart, adaptable, flexible instrument who can respond to situations with skill, tact, and understanding” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 107). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that rather than using the term ‘validity’, researchers should be interrogating the dependability, confirmability, transferability and credibility of interview data. This is the approach adopted in the present research.

Validity refers to whether, as the researcher “you are observing, identifying, or ‘measuring’ what you say you are” (Mason, 1996, p. 21 cited in Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 410). The concept may be divided into internal validity, where strong links are observed between theory and the researcher’s observations and external validity, which refers to the degree to which findings can be generalised to other research settings (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The researcher assembled a reasonable sample of respondents across gender, race, class, age, seniority and work sector, although the sample size was not sufficiently high to render the survey entirely externally valid, given the geographical specificity of research conducted solely in Cape Town, South Africa (Bryman & Bell, 2007). As such, it will take further studies to ascertain whether the findings are transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While the study aimed to uncover “rich accounts of the details of a culture” (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 413), these were rooted in only one location.

Reliability may “be estimated through the coding of the original data. The evaluation of the reliability of the research…thus consists in ensuring and verifying that the different coding operations will be able to be repeated with the same results obtained” (Delattre, Ocler, Moulette, & Rymeyko, 2009, p. 35). The researcher adhered to this definition of reliability by ensuring that all interviews were personally transcribed verbatim, and verified by a third party and that analysis was done through a CAQDAS system that has been verified by past researchers as consistent and reliable (Kelle, 2007, p. 442), namely Atlas/ti.

The researcher also ensured reliability and dependability by adhering to the chain of evidence model outlined above (April, 2004), meaning “complete records are kept of all phases of the research process” and “proper procedures are being and have been followed” (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 414). All documentation was saved in multiple locations, both in hard and electronic formats.
While ultimately it is for the reader to judge, the researcher attempted to ensure confirmability - whereby personal values did not “sway the conduct of the research and findings deriving from it” (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 414) - by remaining neutral and cognisant of the particular idiosyncrasies inherent in both interviewing and participant observation.

Given that the field of inquiry is one where the understanding of ambiguity and uncertainty is so central, questions of interpretation and subjectivity may actually be desirable. Geertz (1973) sees texts as ‘fiction’ in that they are a textual product that draws from the style of literary antecedents, based on the author’s (or authority’s) interpretations and meanings. However, this may suit qualitative research findings: “If you want that certainty, and if wobbling around in the water bothers you, then you should go into chemistry, not anthropology- and, I have a feeling, not into rhetoric and composition either” (Geertz, 1973, cited in Olson, 2006, p. 1).

The strength of this research lies partly in the quality of the researcher’s narrative style, which seeks to reproduce “...the authorial omniscience characteristic of many examples of narrative fiction” (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, p. 256). Important to remember is not to fall into the trap of many narcissistic researchers, who confuse ethnography with autobiography (Gans, 1999). In this spirit, the researcher adopted a ‘dialogic’ voice (April & Blass, 2010) that represents a multitude of ‘voices’, but does not claim to speak for them.

**Research findings, analysis and discussion**

**Description of the research process**

This section briefly outlines how the research was conducted, more specifically what the improvisation session entailed, the chosen games and details of specific sessions. It draws heavily on field notes that were made directly after each session.

The research involved forty-one participants across five sessions, conducted at separate venues. Session one comprised fourteen MBA students and was held at a room on a university campus. Session two was held at a private venue and participants included seven currency traders from a private investment management firm. The third session comprised a
group of seven senior academics and was again held at a neutral venue. The fourth session was held in the offices of a consumer media publishing company and comprised five participants, aged between twenty-three and thirty-five. Lastly, the fifth session was conducted at a construction firm amongst a group of eight of its administrative and secretarial staff. This was an all-female session and comprised participants from working class and less educated backgrounds as compared to the previous four sessions. Some participants in this last session also did not speak English as a first language. In each case, the session was run by an improvisation specialist, with the researcher present and participating. Of the forty-one individuals who took part, thirty were women and thirty-four were personally interviewed no later than three days after having taken part.

Description of games played

An explanation of process is taken from the field notes: “Each session started with a few warm-up games, deliberately designed to be silly and to take people out of their comfort zones and across their edges. They were also intended to get people to focus more as a group and get them used to participating.” The names of games used below are the researcher’s own as they appear in the field notes and so may be known differently elsewhere:

‘The funky chicken’: a warm-up game where participants were asked to shake out each of their limbs to a count of 16, then 8, then 4 and then having concluded do the ‘funky chicken’, an overt gesture and movement imitating a chicken.

‘Go, stop’: participants were invited to walk around the room and stop when the facilitator said ‘stop’ and go when the facilitator said ‘go’. First the facilitator confused the order of ‘go’ and ‘stop’ so the group did not know what to expect. Next, the meaning of ‘go’ and ‘stop’ were reversed so the link with language was broken and participants were forced to listen particularly hard to understand the instruction.

‘Silly noise and movement game’: one person was asked to start with a deliberately ridiculous vocal sound and an action until they made eye contact with another person in the group. Once they had made eye contact the other person would do their silly voice and movement until they had made eye contact with someone else and passed on the responsibility.
‘Zoom-screech’: participants stood in a circle and passed a verbal ‘zoom’ around. They had one of two choices. They could continue to ‘zoom’ to the next person or they could say ‘screech’ and reverse the direction of the flow. They were encouraged to speed up the flow as the game continued. The game introduces themes around focus and choice. When it is the individual participant’s moment, they have the power to do one of two simple things, ‘zoom’ or ‘screech’. Participants can change the dynamic of the group: positively, negatively or arbitrarily.

‘It’s my fault’: participants walked around the room and were asked to pass a half full water bottle to one another. Participants made eye contact and ‘agreed’ that one would pass and the other would catch. If the bottle fell to the floor both the thrower and prospective catcher were asked to fall to the floor and shout out loudly ‘it’s my fault’. Participants were gradually asked to go faster and encourage more mistakes. There was frequently a point at which the game changed after the first ‘admission of guilt’, when everyone stopped being polite, passing it nicely to one another and started taking more risks. In session one the researcher noted: “After the first drop the group realised it was ‘OK’ to drop it and the stakes were raised with more outrageous passing and throwing and general laughter. It was explained to participants that generally there is a great deal of blame attached to getting things right or wrong, so we are conditioned to avoid risk taking. When that blame was lifted and participants realised there were no consequences to it, they took more risks.”

‘The lying game’: Participants were each asked to introduce themselves to the group, and tell a lie about themselves. The game was debriefed by explaining that these are lies designed not to deceive but to open up possibility and creativity. It should be noted with particular reference to this game, that in sessions one, three and four, participants were not entirely familiar with all members of the group, whereas sessions two and five comprised much tighter-knit teams.

‘What are you doing?’: Someone started by miming an action. The person next to them asked them ‘what are you doing?’ The person who had been miming told a lie and effectively gave them something they were not doing. The person who asked then had to take the lie on and act it out while the next person in line asked: ‘what are you doing?’ In the debriefing segment that followed, the essence of the game was explained by the facilitator: “what
participants are doing is saying ‘I am doing xyz’ but what they are effectively doing is giving
the next person an instruction.”

‘Jaffle iron’: an item was placed in the centre of the room and participants were invited to
step into the centre of the room and do something with the object that was not its actual or
intended purpose. In this case participants were asked to use a jaffle iron, a South African
mechanism for making toasted sandwiches on a barbecue.

‘Mirror game’: a soundless game where two participants stood in pairs and were asked to
mirror one another’s actions be they facial expressions, hand gestures or any other physical
movement. However, the instruction was neither to lead nor follow. Group members were
asked to find the point where it was a common decision to move, where it felt like both
people were doing it. They were told that it did not matter if the game was successful or not:
“just see what happens. Try to keep your minds open without judgement or making
decisions.”

‘Yes, and’: This game was played in pairs and as a whole group. The field notes stated:
“There was a sense that this game illustrated how often individuals do not want to say ‘yes’
and it showed what happens when we do give in to the “yes.” Two participants told a story
one sentence at a time. One person started the story ‘Once upon a time…” and then the next
person responded by saying “yes, and…”. The facilitator explained the common pitfalls of
this game: “that it turns into a first-person ‘bitching session’; the temptation to say ‘yes, but’
which gets group members into a negative spiral and finally the temptation to hang on to
one’s own agenda. She explained that the other person has no idea what a participant is
thinking so it is very important for both parties to be present in the moment and hear what
they are being given so they can work with it.” The story needed to be told in the third
person. The facilitator gave the pairs a made-up name for the story and the pairs were told to
start somewhere else: “…do what the guru of improvisation Keith Johnstone says, if you get
a suggestion for a murder, start with two grannies knitting. The third piece of advice is not to
get stuck in your own agenda and at all costs refuse to listen to what the other person says
and refuse to use it.” Participants were encouraged to try to co-create the story and move on
from what the other person said. For example, in session four participants were instructed to
tell a story called ‘the demented hairdresser’: “There was spontaneous applause after this
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

game. The game was then played as one large group, using the learning from the first running of the story.’

‘I am the cheese’: A three-person story-telling game, where one person was the beginning, the next person the middle and the third person the conclusion, for example, “I am the cheese, I am the knife, I am the chef”. The object was to have a unifying story in three sentences, created by three separate participants.

‘Gibberish’: The field notes provide a useful description of these games: “Gibberish games were designed to introduce participants to the world of ‘intention’. To get over their nerves, participants were invited to speak to the person standing opposite them saying, ‘hello, how are you, I haven’t seen you for a long time’ in gibberish. Next, in a circle each participant had to insult the person next to them with a physical gesture as well as vocally in gibberish. The game continued again with the same people complementing the person next to them. Finally, each person was asked to say a gibberish sentence to the whole group and the person next to them was asked to translate that sentence for the group. Finally, the group was asked to play a game called ‘dictionary’ where one person gave a gibberish word and the next person had to give a made-up dictionary definition for that word.”

‘Three sentence scene’: this game was designed to introduce the group to the concept of endowments. Group members made an offer for somebody else, telling the person who they ‘were’ in the first sentence. The second person had then to accept the endowment: “You have to say ‘yes’ to whoever the person next to you makes you be.” Finally, the originator played the third sentence out. A simple example from session two: “1. ‘Good afternoon Mrs Murray, I’ve brought all my library books back’; 2. Taking on the role of Mrs Murray the librarian: ‘Hello Mr Jones, you do realise they’re overdue’, 3. ‘Yes, I know. I have brought my fine money’.”

‘Chairs’: Two participants were placed in chairs while another two participants knelt behind them and threaded their arms around the seated person’s body. The exercise required one seated person to be an interviewer and the other to be an interviewee. Seated participants were responsible for providing the words to a scene while the kneeling participants provided the hand gestures.
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

‘Statues’: Participants were invited to step out in front of the group and adopt a stationary pose. Another volunteer would then step forward and explain to the group who or what this stationary pose represented. The person who provided the explanation would then be responsible for adopting the next pose to be interpreted by another individual.

Research findings

Introduction

The thirty-four interviews were transcribed and through a process of open coding the researcher identified seventy-seven sub-codes, and ten ‘family’ codes outlined in Table 2 below. Seven of the ‘family’ codes align with previously discussed constructs, while three were areas newly discovered by the researcher. These anomalous, though valuable, data emerged due to the “serendipity pattern” (Merton, 1949, p. 98) allowed by the research method employed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Being present</th>
<th>Originality</th>
<th>Listening</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being present</td>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>Tie with language or familiar vernacular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>Spontaneity vs. creativity</td>
<td>Seeing possibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposing learned patterns of behaviour</td>
<td>Personal capabilities and education</td>
<td>Altered perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Curiosity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical energy</td>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td>Freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneity</td>
<td>Compliance and rebellion</td>
<td>Fun</td>
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<td>Facilitation</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Imagination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contracting</td>
<td>Difficulty</td>
<td>Laughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitation skills</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Positivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalised anxiety</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Seeing possibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group dynamics</td>
<td>Individual talent</td>
<td>Silliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process challenges</td>
<td>Personal idiosyncrasies</td>
<td>Truth and lies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>Personal mood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules, boundaries and containment</td>
<td>Personality type</td>
<td>Avoiding blame and the fear of failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team-building</td>
<td>Self-consciousness</td>
<td>Blame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Self-revelation</td>
<td>Competitiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validation</td>
<td>Resourcefulness and responsiveness</td>
<td>Failure and mistakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>Judgement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living with uncertainty and ambiguity</strong></td>
<td>Making do</td>
<td>Performance anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort zone</td>
<td>Planning and information gathering</td>
<td>Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing change</td>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>Safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal anxiety</td>
<td>Resourcefulness</td>
<td>Standard of performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxation into the session</td>
<td>Dialogue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty</td>
<td>Altered perspective</td>
<td>Applicability and pragmatism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty in life</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Continued practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty regarding the session</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Having something at stake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Creativity</strong></td>
<td>Enhancing other peoples' ideas</td>
<td>Real life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Letting go of your agenda</td>
<td>Usefulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necessary environment</td>
<td>Limited time</td>
<td>Work vs. home life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Family codes and sub-codes
In terms of the relative weighting of these codes Table 3 below outlines the frequency with which each of these codes appeared in the transcripts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneity</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxation into the session</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgement</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blame</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure and mistakes</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance anxiety</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resourcefulness</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard of performance</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continued practice</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitation skills</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being present</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altered perspective</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty regarding the session</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seeing possibility</td>
<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Imagination</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real life</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and information gathering</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tie with language or familiar vernacular</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>--------------------------------</td>
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<td>Physical energy</td>
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<td>Necessary environment</td>
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<td>Team-building</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exposing learned patterns of behaviour</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uncertainty in life</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>Self-consciousness</td>
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<td>Preparation</td>
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<td>Safety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Letting go of your agenda</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Group dynamics</td>
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<td>Personal anxiety</td>
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<td>Trust</td>
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<td>Truth and lies</td>
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### Table 3: Code frequency

The following sections present the responses, clustered and analysed in respect of the research areas identified and discussed. The analysis derives from the full sample although...
direct quotes are drawn from the more analytic and reflective respondents interviewed. Nevertheless, they often articulated sentiments that other less articulate participants expressed with somewhat less eloquence. That said, the inclusion of a group of MBA students and a group of academics biased the sample towards high achievers, schooled in reflection, caution and deliberation. Although this poses obvious limitations to the analysis it also allows for interesting reflections on the differential value of improvisation as a technique for cultivating leadership among different administrative, professional and academic communities, and their respective propensities for spontaneity, risk-taking and creativity.

For convenience and ease of understanding the findings below appear initially in summarised form. Should the reader then wish to ascertain how and why the researcher has reached certain conclusions, the data upon which the analysis is drawn is elaborated upon fully below under each subheading.
Being Present

The majority of respondents felt that improvisation increased their capacity to be present. It did so by requiring spontaneity and not allowing participants to prepare their responses in advance. The exercises were designed to require participation by all and engaged the group physically, meaning that largely their minds were not allowed to wander. In this sense, improvisation represented a compulsion to be present, some of this based on anxiety. The exercises gave participants choices about how they could respond and therefore engaged their concentration. Participants referred to “flow” (Goleman, 1998, p. 108) as well as elements of the five A’s: attention, accepting, appreciation, affection and allowing (Richo, 2008). Interestingly, the research revealed that a state of presence exposed participants to forms of behaviour that they typically displayed but of which they were hitherto unaware.

Being present

 Thirty-seven references were made to being present. While some were not conscious of it at the time, when asked to reflect on being present, participants realised that the session had forced them to concentrate, focus and attend to the present moment in a way that was enhanced compared to their everyday experience. For example, P6 observed: “if you’d said what are the learning points I don’t know if I would have said being present is one of them.
However on reflection I do think so yes, because it does make you more conscious of where you are, what you’re doing, how you’re engaging with other people, how you’re appearing to other people, so yes, I would say yes it does.”

Various respondents had different ways of describing their states of presence. P10 said: “I was a bit more open than usual.” P12 explained: “no preparation was required, other than just being alert and paying attention. That was what I quite enjoyed.” P13 talked in terms of having no distractions: “You don’t think about anything else. So that’s a good thing.” P5 mentioned: “my mind tends to wander… So this morning, the way you guys presented it. It is like there wasn’t a moment where my mind wandered.” P20 equated presence with time passing quickly. He said: “…it flew by. After we were done it was an hour and a half; it didn’t feel like it took an hour and a half out of my day. To me that means [being] present.” P7 stated simply: “I was here.”

Being present was equated with a lack of self-consciousness by P26 who said: “you sort of stop thinking or wondering what you would think of me if I say this; or maybe I shouldn’t say that; because I am going to hear about it from this guy afterwards… You just stop thinking; you are literally in the moment: ‘oh I see that; it makes me think of flowers; oh I’ll say something about flowers’. It’s really a cut and dry exercise. I think it is a great way to make people feel present.”

P25 talked about presence in terms of having a clear mind and not over-preparing. She commented: “…it made me more present to know… sometimes I just need to be and not think – over-think something; just be… I think what I learnt from it: engagement; just being… to some extent it made me feel more aware that I’m there… I am here; I am doing something finally that didn’t have any repercussions; I can just be; yes, so I liked that.”

P16 indicated that the difficulty of the tasks necessitated presence: “You are so focused on trying to concentrate on thinking something – thinking up an activity, or what to do with that toasting iron thing, or whatever, nothing outside that room intruded. It is a very interesting observation.” P22 mentioned something similar with regard to enforced participation: “it was quite hard for me to be distracted… it was expecting us to participate you know. It wasn’t like listening to a lecture and your mind can wander.”
One participant mentioned not being able to stay focused for the entire session. P9, who attended session five (the only session to have a break in the middle) said: “…when we started, I felt like I started okay and it was fine; but somewhere along the break; and the gibberish; and then I just wasn’t able to come back; and stay focused.” P21 also struggled at times. Speaking of her need to concentrate, she stated: “I don’t think as much as I should have because I was paying attention to other people…I think you are supposed to be present.”

P4 identified that anxiety and group dynamics affect one’s ability to be present: “…if you’re not worried about the dynamics in the group and you’re just putting what you think out there then you can be a lot more present.”

Other participants spoke about struggling with the demand to be present. P14 said: “I wasn’t like in the moment and I was trying to plan how I was going to execute doing what I was going to do; as opposed to if I had simply performed it on the spot.” However, when P14 was able to focus he found tremendous benefit in doing so: “It was actually great because my proper personality came out in that instance… normally I plan things in advance and I don’t really enjoy the moment when it happens; and because of that I think I lose out on a lot in life.”

Concentration and focus were themes picked up by a number of respondents. P21 observed: “You had to concentrate… we went faster and faster it felt. And I think that they ended just as somebody was about to say ‘screech’ to me and I almost didn’t know what to do because we were going so fast and which way do you go?” P28 mentioned too that: “It forces you to focus. You can’t drift off because then you are going to look like a [expletive] at the end because you haven’t kept up with what you are meant to be doing; so it does make you focus and you’ve got to stay right there. You can’t let your mind wander, or you can’t even think ahead because if you are standing in a circle and there is something working its way around to you, you can’t plan what you are going to do until you know what’s happened immediately before it’s your turn to go, if that makes sense. It forces you to stay there… It forces you to be present. It makes you be right there because you’ve got to make decisions really quickly. You can’t prepare yourself, so you’ve got to be there. You’ve got to be on your toes the whole time to leap in any direction.”
P29 commented on how the practice might be useful in a wider context: “I think it’s personally very useful to be – to go somewhere else – to be in the moment; and to try and forget about one’s hang-ups; vulnerabilities; one’s inhibitions. I think we are very inhibited.”

Lastly, P32 spoke about improvisation as being completely absorbing due to the anxiety it provoked in her: “…it certainly engaged all one’s attention. I mean one had to keep focused to kind of respond to things quite quickly; so certainly my mind wasn’t wandering at all during that. I was very much focused on what was going on; and with a little bit of anxiety as to what was going to happen next, you know.”

**Choice**

Several participants spoke about choice, particularly with regard to the game ‘zoom, screech’, which gave the participants the opportunity to do one of those two things and affect the flow of the game. P6 explained: “It was a very strange example of how such a simple thing can lead you to, or led me to thinking well, what should I do? Should I keep it going or should I change the direction. You know, it wasn’t a major thing and it’s not a big decision but yet a decisive action was required and there was a choice of two options as to what you offered.”

P14 described his choices in the game as follows: “I was really into the game… because I could feel it, I could do it easily; so when someone said ‘zoom’, straight away I turned and I could zoom in the same direction; and if someone said ‘screech’, I didn’t feel the inclination to say anything, because they went [in] the opposite direction.” P26 also made pre-determined choices: “Sometimes; like in the [zoom] screech I sort of said to myself: I’m not going to screech once; I just didn’t want to do that for some reason.”

P15 suggested that participants could also choose their own level of engagement in the session: “If you didn’t feel like being too active, you would kind of let the zoom go right past you; but it was good, I mean, I enjoyed it; it was fun. Definitely had a fun aspect of it; especially when it was bouncing between two or three people.” Although this was not a view shared by P30 at the start of her session: “It’s not that I don’t want to draw attention to myself because I do that plenty all by myself; but it is different when the spotlight is put on me than when I turn the spotlight on myself, sort of thing.”
‘What are you doing?’ also provided participants with the choice to give the person next to them a ‘kind’ or ‘unkind’ action. P8 observed that the choice came with consequences, because one’s actions could equally revisit one later in the session: “I think we were being nice, which [the facilitator] said. We didn’t give the person something really embarrassing to do because I don’t know if we even thought about it, I didn’t think about it then. But I’m not sure if people thought ‘what if somebody gives me a really bad thing?’ I will really be nice to the person before me because if I’m cruel, what if it comes back to me? So I’m not sure if that’s what we felt, but I think we were quite nice.”

Finally, choice was also a theme in participants’ own willingness to attend. While all participants attended of their own volition, it was clear that some were more willing than others. For example, P32 described improvisation as: “not something I would choose to do under normal circumstances, let me put it that way.”

**Exposing learned patterns of behaviour**

Twenty-two comments suggested that respondents had noticed something during the improvisation workshop that revealed to them a pattern in their own behaviour about which they had not been previously aware. This was not a deliberate experience but can be likened to what Barrett (1998) refers to as “provocative competence: deliberate efforts to interrupt habit patterns”.

P12 explained: “…it made me think about some things. You know how you kind of get into a rut of not noticing the way you react to things. In that sense I think it was helpful as a kind of alert to looking at what your underlying approach is to life… it was like a self-awareness exercise; like noticing how you are; and my next thought was whether you can change; it’s like all these things; can you change the way that you’ve developed over years by just noticing it? Or is it enough? I don’t know. Maybe if you notice it enough, you would notice it when you are doing it in other context and try and not do it. It is possible… I’m not sure though. I think you fall back into habits when you get into situations of pressure; a lot of pressure and performance anxiety and so on. That is always going to push you back into your old habits I think.”
P33 made a very personal admission following the session: “I’ve changed a whole lot and I discovered it this morning only. I have three children and I am actually a very sour person… and I never used to be like that. I used to be an extrovert. I’m still an extrovert, but to a [smaller] extent I think; and very imaginative and now I’m not, you know. I’m not that spontaneous anymore… I’m sure it is to do with your work, definitely. You have to… always be realistic; your approach to everything; the decisions you make; you’ve got to be realistic; and that cast out the – there is no space to be imaginative; especially in the accounting field; you cannot be imaginative with figures.”

Referring to the changed meanings of words in the ‘go, stop’ game, P14 said: “that was very difficult for me. I couldn’t get it right; even after a while it was – I think I couldn’t change the learning or the thoughts in my head; so when I hear the word ‘go’, I will walk; I can’t stop… I think that it makes you realise that it’s not easy to unlearn what you’ve learnt.”

P16 found improvisation useful in realising her own tendency to say ‘no’: “Well personally I thought it was great; because it just makes you consciously think about how often one’s negative; and how blocking that is to your creativity; so I was fascinated by how difficult a number of people found it to say; ‘yes, and’; and they got themselves to say ‘yes’ rather than ‘no’ but ‘yes, but’; and I think that, in discussing it with people afterwards, that was one of the things that a lot of people commented on.”

Referring to spontaneity, P22 acknowledged that the exercise revealed his own lack of training: “I think being spontaneous is quite – thinking up things you know; just out of the blue; quite difficult. It is not something I’m trained to do; and it’s not something I practise.” P25 however, thought that she was spontaneous and the exercises made her revisit this assumption: “I thought I was spontaneous – I thought I could think on my feet; but I think I have lost it somehow; so it made me wake up to that – it made me more present to know like okay sometimes I just need to be and not think – over-think something.”

Improvisation did not solely reveal participants’ weaknesses. It also played a positive role in affirming some peoples’ competencies. P15 for example, stated: “I found it useful in the sense that it made me realise that I’ve actually come quite a far way this year in terms of improvisation.”
P19 referred to improvisation as a time for reflection: “It wasn’t all fun; but you know, it was an opportunity just to reflect on some of the things we just, you know, do everyday without much thought… I always find opportunities where you know, I have time to actually reflect on how I do things, you know, to be very valuable; and in the work environment that I am in there is hardly any time for that.”

Self-revelation for P23 was more personal: “you learn a lot about yourself… I mustn’t be afraid; or shy; or scared to do certain things. I must just let go and enjoy myself.”

P27 found that the session exposed her lack of creativity, although one questions whether this was merely self-deprecation: “It pointed out maybe how narrow-minded my little mind is; as opposed to how open-minded other people are for creative ideas. Perhaps my creativity is very stunted; as opposed other people; other people come up with the most ‘wow’ ideas and I think: ‘wow’ – I can’t think of things like that; so maybe just recognising in others how great they are in say spontaneous situations.”

P30 did not have specific or major revelations, although the session reminded her of her anxiety around performance: “No I wouldn’t say anything – no epiphanies or anything like that; except just a reminder again that I need to work on this spotlight thing; but no, nothing really specific.”

Finally, P31 attributed her revelations to the open-mindedness inspired during the session: “I just think it opens your mind – for me, while we were playing it I thought to myself: you know, there is a lot of times when something goes wrong and you don’t really – you get where there is something you did wrong; but you don’t really want to take the blame because the way you’ve done it is the way you’ve learnt to do it – stuff like that. So you really step in and take the blame; and instead of just going and saying: I’m to blame; it’s me, I made a mistake; and it just opened my eyes to that. It is actually so easy to do; it just saying: yes, ‘it’s my fault’, sort of thing.”

**Participation**

Improvisation sessions required participation from every group member. There was no option to sit out an exercise or to leave. Participation was commented upon on fifty-four occasions. P9 said: “I think it was nice that everybody interacted.” P6 mentioned that
improvisation highlighted the benefits of participating in groups: “the point was that they had the opportunity to partake, they all did partake or we all did partake and I think that’s important… I think the exercises on the whole highlighted the idea that there is no point in not participating.”

P6 suggested that the value in an exercise such as improvisation is in getting people who are normally inhibited about participation to enjoy it: “I think this gives an outlet for a different kind of participation... I guess my take on that is, if in doubt just stay out... So if I don’t know how to participate or… necessarily what to say or if I’m concerned about what I might have to offer I would probably tend not to take part so for me it’s a particularly valuable tool for trying to engage people who are like me who might battle with a similar thing.”

Referring to a number of the circular games P6 described the flow of the game as follows: “it was very quick and to an extent relatively unpredictable in that if the person next to you changed the direction it was right back to you so it was a very much an awareness highlighting opportunity and it did by default engage everyone in the group because it was completely circular so there was no opportunity not to take part, which I think was valuable in that exercise too... you needed to participate because it was going around in a circle. I can’t say whether I would have participated had that been voluntary; in other words had it been a randomly self-selected participation I may not have taken part in that.”

P9 said that she used participation as a way of conquering her anxieties: “…more and more I, not force myself, but allow myself to participate in activities. Maybe all of the time I don’t enjoy what I am doing; but just to prove to myself that I can do certain things. So ja, I would definitely do it again.”

P11 mentioned that one could participate at different levels dependent on one’s enthusiasm or anxiety levels. For example, in ‘zoom, screech’, she said: “I was pretty conservative in that game as well... I would have felt put on the spot there; but I was quiet in my little zooms.”

P11 felt a sense of obligation to participate: “I felt somewhat obliged; but it was nice to know no one was going to force me; and that made me want to do it more... I felt it would be good to contribute. That was it. So I had that feeling more in that game that it would be a good thing to contribute and that it would be appreciated.”
P11 equated participation with taking pressure off other group members: “…you are almost giving it to everybody else… there were those long silences in between; you were almost giving everybody else a break by going in… and particularly when other people go and it is just a little bit lame, you feel like: let me step in and make this less lame; I don’t know. So there was more compassion.”

P13 also mentioned that she would have felt bad had she not participated in the ‘jaffle iron’ game: “…you were still aware of the fact that if you haven’t gone and everyone else has, you need to go… I would have felt like: ja, everyone else did and I didn’t… that’s social pressure. That’s just how it is, you know like you want to be as involved as everyone else and you also don’t want to be the one who hogs it completely. You are aware of who hasn’t been in and who has.”

There was only one game that didn’t require participation from every member of the group: the ‘jaffle iron’ game. Individuals in this game were invited to step into the circle if and when they had an idea for what the item could be used for. As P6 mentioned, some did not take this opportunity: “I was one of the participants that didn’t participate in the jaffle iron one. I can tell you why I didn’t. I was quite conscious of… not having something funny or not having something too innovative. So that was the only one I’d say maybe was a little bit more difficult for me to partake in and I think a lot of that had to do with the fact that it wasn’t sequential. I think the sequential exercises, for me were, it was a way of almost inclusion without having to prove anything, in my opinion. So when you had to voluntarily go and there wasn’t a particular order I found that more difficult to take part.”

P14 put his enjoyment of the session down to the fact that he wanted to take part: “I was open at the time, so I enjoyed the experience when I got there. I was willing to participate.”

P16 expressed regret at not having participated more: “I would like to have thrown myself into it more. I would like to have had more imagination. I thought afterwards of things I could have said that would have been more creative; or whatever; but I wouldn’t beat myself up for that.”

P17 saw participation as so important he felt that ‘it’s my fault’ was not a good game because it didn’t provide sufficient time for everybody to take part: “That’s probably the game I like
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

least come to think of it; but not because of what we were asked to do; I just felt that in the amount of time we were given, not everybody had the opportunity to you know, drop down and say ‘it’s my fault’. It would have been nice – I personally didn’t experience that. I didn’t have an opportunity to do that. Obviously a couple of other people didn’t as well; whereas if you contrast that to… the game where we went round in circles with gibberish… everybody else was involved. So my thought on that game was it would have been nice if it went on for a bit longer because I didn’t really experience the full value of it… in the games where only one or two people got a chance to experience the point of the game; like the ‘it’s my fault’ game; it would be useful if it was extended so that everybody could have an opportunity.”

P20 remarked on being disappointed during a game where the flow kept changing and it never came round to her in the circle: “Always you prepare yourself before for what is going to happen; and then it turns around; and then it is sort of: ‘oh I also want a turn’… it took forever to get to me and then like: ‘ah I want to play along’; and you almost got left out.”

Describing an incident in which she froze, P24 mentioned that there was an element of judgement from the group around participation: “maybe it is a bit of a judgement that they would think I was being stuck up or not participating… whereas it was more my own lack of confidence I guess that made it happen.”

P24 mentioned that not participating in the improvisation session would have been a mistake or somehow letting the group down: “I think it would interrupt the flow of whatever the group is doing and I think again, I think it was this thing of letting the group down; you know I thought that if I don’t participate in it fully then the rest of the group is like giving it all they’ve got and I’m the one who is sort of saying: ‘oh hang on this isn’t good enough for me and I’m actually not prepared to go there with you people’; and it is almost like an insult…”

She also did not blame the facilitator for enforcing her participation: “I thought the facilitator handled that very well… I never felt like I wanted to get out of here, but I also kind of had this feeling of if I say something stupid now it is really going to let the group down and if I don’t participate then it sort of ruins things for everyone. So I tried really hard, but… it was difficult.”

P20 also described non-participation as failure. When asked what a mistake in improvisation could be, she replied: “I don’t know. Maybe not participating; but even that is just sort of
choosing what you want to do or not. I would say not participating then.” P16 continued the theme: “A mistake would be stopping the process; either because you are unable to think of what to do next; or unwilling to. There was a point where I was unable to think of anything else and so I would say: that was a mistake; because I stopped the flow; but in my case, it was just because I ran out of ideas at that particular point.” P7 said: “The only mistake we could make would be to sort of just not participate. If you are going to be there, you might as well participate.”

A number of respondents commented on the voluntary nature of the sessions and how that aided participation. P25 said: “I came willingly so I knew I was coming into something – to some degree I knew I was coming into something I had no control over; especially when she came and said we just have to say ‘yes’ to everything; so that’s fine with me.” P24 observed: “I think because everybody was there because they wanted to be, it changed the group ... but it really did. Some people were a lot more responsive than the previous things like that I’ve done and that made it a lot easier for me; as much as I generally don’t like these things, I felt like I could generally just relax and I didn’t necessarily have to do everything, you know.” P6 said: “It was comforting because the people taking part had voluntarily put themselves in those roles.” P27 asserted that improvisation could only work if participation is voluntary: “if they are willing to participate it’s good; the problem might be that people might not be willing to participate through a situation.”

P29 suggested participation may have been as a result of some kind of group compassion or obligation to assist: “I think people wanted to help.” P25 echoed this sentiment: “I don’t like to be the person who let’s down the group.” Participation was seen by some respondents as the ‘right thing to do’. P23 for example suggested: “I think because everybody wanted to participate and make sure that they did the right thing.”

P30 mentioned being anxious about being forced to participate, particularly in the ‘gibberish’ exercise: “It is just that I know myself already with this sort of thing; putting myself into a situation where I have to be silly; and I don’t want to do that. We had another course that we did here at one stage... it was nothing like this; but at one point it was also just like an ice breaker thing or something that we had to do; and we all had to – I think there was also a gibberish thing where we all had to be talking gibberish to each other; and I just stood there
looking at the guy that was talking to me. I was like: ‘I am not doing this’. This gibberish thing; it always comes up in these things. That’s the only kind of thing that would make me nervous. The rest of the games and stuff I really don’t have a problem with.”

**Physical energy**

Twenty-four respondents mentioned the physicality of the session, particularly with regard to the energy it created within the group. P6 described a different, more active form of engagement that increased as the session progressed: “…in the beginning I sensed there was a lot more reserve whereas again as we got more into [it]… the activities, it might be my imagination, became almost more active… I do think that the activities that required a lot of movement got people more engaged… It got people moving, it got you making eye contact and engaging with people… It got the blood moving, it got you actually aware of ‘oh I’m not… it’s not just my head here in the session. It’s my whole body. I’m moving’. It was a very useful strategy I would say because it got people physically involved with what might have been only linked to verbal or mental communication in some of the other exercises.”

Certain respondents found improvisation to be energising. For example, P5 said: “I just shared with my colleague when I got back to the office… I said there was lots of energy there this morning. I think it was a good session.” P17 stated: “It was very energising.” P16 referred to a physical exercise as follows: “I loved that one because it was energetic and I don’t quite know why we were doing it.”

Some respondents found movement enjoyable while others were more daunted. P11 explained: “It got us moving… and also introduced some giggles where people would flop or fail; or get something wrong; and it was just funny; but it was okay; and everyone was getting it wrong too.” However, P16 said: “I was very daunted at the thought of having to move around and do things with a group of people.”

Others experienced physical tiredness, particularly towards the end of the session. P9 explained: “Like I said, my experience was I felt I ran out of steam; but I think everybody else managed to continue quite nicely and it was fun.” P16 suggested a number of reasons for feeling tired towards the end: “That last quarter of an hour I was thinking: enough now. I don’t know if that’s because I was just very tired at the end of a very long day; or whether it
was anything to do with the exercises… it could just have been physical tiredness; or it could have been more than that. I could have been – it was challenging and there is only so much you can do on a first go.” P19 attributed finding difficulty in doing the gibberish game to perhaps feeling tired: “That was the most difficult one for me. Maybe it is because I was just tired. I mean, gibberish is difficult enough as it is; and I just found it so difficult.”

P11 explained that tiredness may have resulted from doing something outside of what one is normally used to: “…the elements of physical theatre; and using your voice; and sort of painting a picture with your body and your voice – those are skills I don’t use often; and it puts me in a new way of – a different way of thinking – or a different frame of mind. So that was – I don’t usually think with my body and my voice. I sit in a room on my own and that’s where I do my thinking.”

P22 acknowledged that while physicality was a different form of engagement, it still required conceptual thought, much like language: “We were quite physical too, but to me even a physical act is – you have to think about it first. That’s what I mean by conceptual. You have to decide what it is you are going to do. You have to dream it up you know… it wouldn’t be that different from thinking about language.”

Several respondents referred to how physicality affected communication. P20 remarked: “It was quite interesting how much you can read into peoples’ body language; but I think it also takes quite a lot from you to actually say something without words; than actually say something with words.” P25 emphasised physicality as a way to approach problems differently: “…just taking a step back and then communicating the idea in a different way… It really helped; and I think improvisation would help problem-solving in that way; especially the communication aspect; and then bringing something maybe to life; like maybe acting it out; or the role plays that we were doing.” P31 also mentioned physical communication: “…because we were acting as well with your whole body, your arms and everything. Where normally a lot of people don’t use their hands and stuff to talk; you just sit and talk; and then maybe that comes over also a bit.”

Speaking about the potential benefits of improvisation, P23 suggested it might help one in: “becoming a more enthusiastic person and you know, the tone in your voice; the excitement; and interacting with other people; I think it would help.”
P23 struggled with being spontaneous but found it more easy to access through physicality: “Right at the end when we were doing the last gibberish thing and we had to say something silly with an action, you know, I cobbled together some bizarre phrase from Spanish and put on a weird accent and did some weird hand movements; and the body language was completely spontaneous. I don’t even know what I did. It was some stupid thing with my arms, you know and that was actually easy.”

**Spontaneity**

Spontaneity was one of the more dominant themes of the interviews, yielding fifty-six mentions. Spontaneity was required predominantly in the story-telling games because participants had to build upon the contributions of others, without necessarily knowing what those contributions would be. P9 explained: “one of those games that we played; everybody kind of – the story changed all the time- so you couldn’t stand there and think: okay, this is what I am going to say… so it is just in the moment – very quickly you’ve got to come up with something that is still continuing in the story; and allow the other person also the opportunity to build on that.” P23 explained: “It is something new. You are always given tasks and stuff to do and you have a long time to think about it; but here you have to be on your feet; you have to think quickly; you have to act quickly.”

There were a large number of comments about the requirement the session placed on spontaneity. P6 said: “there was a lot of engagement that was required off the cuff. I think what made it more comfortable for me was the fact that it was so random… on the first few spontaneous requests I felt very conscious of thinking I hope I’m not first. ‘Do you want to volunteer to go first? Definitely not. I hope it’s not coming this direction’. So I was very conscious of the time I had to prepare my offering if you like. As it got more, as we got more into it and there was more spontaneous engagement from the group I felt a lot less concerned about that time and I was less able to predict or less keen to predict exactly what I was doing. I felt a lot more open to just go with it.”

Some, like P7, were confident about this requirement: “You just have to think up some nonsense on the spot… it wasn’t sort of very difficult.” Whereas others, like P9 struggled more: “… because I am not that spontaneous a person – I had to like think about what I was
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

going to do. So I think for other people it probably comes a little easier; but for me, I definitely felt like: ‘oh gosh, now I’ve got to like come up with something’.”

Several respondents commented on their general approach to spontaneity. P24 stated: “…if I’m comfortable with people I can do the witty repartee thing quite comfortably; but generally no, I don’t like things sprung on me at the last minute. I like to be given time to prepare… I don’t like sort of being thrown into a meeting not knowing what is going on; because I feel like I need information… and kind of process what’s going on before I get into a situation. So no, quite sad; I always thought I’m quite a spontaneous fun person.” P26 waxed lyrical about the joy of spontaneity in his experience: “I think some of the greatest things in my life have come from being spontaneous. It’s – I think when things are too calculated and you over think things it just gets a little diluted and expectations become too big and it ultimately can’t live up to whatever in your mind you want it to be; so spontaneity is a great thing about being human.”

There was a view amongst certain participants that they generally preferred to have time to prepare. P4 explained: “I do normally like to have time to think about things. Different things… I’m normally okay with an off-the-cuff answer if you need a one-liner from me but if you need some analysis I normally like to go off and think about this in a quiet space.” P7 stated: “I’m not terribly good at doing things quickly; like if something requires preparation, it generally takes a bit of time.” P19 also highlighted a preference for having time: “Some of it was quite unnerving because personally I like to take some time to think about something and so although sometimes one does act instantaneously; but I like to take some time; and so it felt a bit uncomfortable to come up with something and do it now, now.” P20 said: “I usually need time to think a bit before I speak; I don’t usually speak as I think.”

The theme of preparation was taken up again by P21, who mentioned: “I would try and prepare for it and I wouldn’t have anything, so for many of the things it just popped out… I think at times it feels uncomfortable because you don’t have time to prepare. And I hate being unprepared for things. But there is a certain point where you have to just let go and accept the fact that this is supposed to be spontaneous and how it is how it is and that everybody else in the group accepts your spontaneity even if it’s stupid.”
Mention was made of how what might have been spontaneous, was actually not, because respondents had prepared their responses to a degree. P17 recounted his experience as follows: “There were one or two situations where I was about to – it was about to be my turn to do whatever was instructed; and the person before me said what I was thinking of; and then I had to be really spontaneous because I didn’t have a chance to think about what I was going to say; but again I guess it was a matter of going back and thinking for a few seconds what I was going to do next; but there wasn’t really any anxiety.” P6 observed: “I didn’t necessarily predict what I was going to say. You know, with something like that that’s not pure language you can’t really predict it, so it is by default quite spontaneous.”

P11 described having to be spontaneous saying: “It was like exercise… It wasn’t frightening; but I did feel like I was working out. I was working on something that I want to be better; but it is hard work.” P12 found it: “difficult; challenging; quite uncomfortable some of the time.” Others however, enjoyed the challenge. P13 commented: “I like a challenge; and I like to think on my feet.” P25 was another more positive respondent: “I love being spontaneous. For me I believe – where I thought it just comes easily – but I like – of course I prefer a certain amount of certainty; or a certain amount of uncertainty; but I like just going with the flow. I like anything – let’s just do it.”

P14, an MBA student, spoke of improvisation as a way in which one can learn to be spontaneous: “you learn to think on the spot to be able to listen when someone speaks to you; because you’ve got to improvise back. So you have got to be able to participate.” He also equated spontaneity with authenticity: “A lot of the time, as I said, I plan before I say something in an MBA class; or in a presentation at work. What I should rather do is possibly think more on the spot; so it comes across as being more authentic.”

Several respondents mentioned either being or not being a spontaneous person. P16 described herself as: “very shy and very self conscious; and I’m not spontaneous, unless I know people really, really well; and even as a teacher, where I put myself in front of a group quite often; or where I have to present to a meeting, it takes me ages to get to know a group and feel comfortable. So I don’t do spontaneity very well in groups of people that I don’t know very well.” Whereas others like P17 were more confident: “Again that [spontaneity] I also found pretty – I guess it came naturally to me. I wasn’t at all anxious about it.” P32
remarked: “I like to get plenty of warning; and I like to be prepared for whatever I have to do… I mean, you are asked to be totally spontaneous and think on your feet. I mean I really think I’m not great at thinking on my feet; whereas other people often are.”

P30 described the fact that she was spontaneous in some situations but not in others: “Fine; but I mean, I am spontaneous with certain things like that. In my group of friends I am the entertaining one; so I will do silly things and say silly things; or whatever; but then as I say I am drawing attention to myself, which is fine.”

P20 also suggested that spontaneity could be practised: “I am not that comfortable with it; because I don’t do it often.” P22 concurred that a lack of practice had hampered his spontaneity: “that’s another whole thing which I find quite difficult… I think being spontaneous is quite – thinking up things you know; just out of the blue; quite difficult. It is not something I’m trained to do; and it’s not something I practise.” More pithily, P28 said: “… it is not something that I’m used to.”

P22 was particularly sceptical that spontaneity should be encouraged or that it was valuable in all contexts, suggesting, for example that it did not necessarily apply to the academic context, he is worth citing at some length:

*It is improvising but it is not the same thing; improvising within the context of a discipline of a history of thought; and of techniques; and applications. It involves creativity; but it is not really – it is not the sort of instantaneous, spontaneous kind of a thing – it is not that sort of creativity. It is quite a different context I suppose; that requires different kinds of skills... I think it needs to be put in context. I always take it back to my job, you know; working with colleagues; and working with students; and stuff like that. I think for me I’ve got a bit of a problem being creative because we teach, for example... an academic discipline and the whole point of learning a discipline is that you learn to think and act in a particular kind of world of ideas and of knowledge; and so being completely spontaneous is bonkers; because you can’t go out and pretend you are going to reinvent the wheel; because you are not, you know. Like if you were a nuclear physicist and you decided: ‘no I don’t believe in this theory’ – the atom bomb -and you start from scratch; you do the theory and research and start something new. That is pointless, because that is not what nuclear physicists do. That’s what crazy people do you know. You have got to start with what you’ve got and try and improve it; or criticise it; or do something with it. So being imaginative you know; and thinking; and being spontaneous about new ideas; and new ways of thinking about things must be done in the right sort of context. One of the main problems I’ve got with students is that they often think of things to say and do which have no relationship to the context of what one is talking about; and that’s the hard part. What you think about has got to make sense in terms of an existing body of knowledge; otherwise it is just out there and doesn’t go anywhere; it’s got no roots.*
For another MBA student P24, the major learning point from the session was the requirement to be more ‘off the cuff’. She explained: “I think it was the whole thing about needing to be spontaneous, you know. It is funny because during the MBA I have sort of overcome my fear of speaking in public and giving presentations and that kind of thing; but I think it is because I am well prepared for them. I know what I’m going to say and I’ve got confidence in that and [during improvisation] it’s with this the fear of: oh my God I’m just going to say something stupid and you know, I froze a lot of the time. The movements and stuff... but to just speak in front of a group of people – I don’t know. I got stage fright I think.”

P31 explained how life’s experiences made her a less spontaneous person: “I used to be a lot more spontaneous; but things in life... pull you back and you are more like: ‘okay I just can’t carry on and just say what I think and just carry on like that’... I would be the first one that will come up with something; and a lot of times I started backing up a bit because eventually it felt like nobody ever says a word, sort of thing, and then you back up a little bit; but I realised down the line that’s who you are; so be what you are.”

P32 distinguished between different forms of spontaneity. She felt that in aspects of her life she was spontaneous, but that she didn’t necessarily have experience in the realm of games playing. Referring to herself, she said: “Well reasonably spontaneous; but I mean I suppose I don’t play games much. I suppose I probably did a lot more of that when my kids were young and you get into that sort of thing a lot more with your kids you know, where you... act things out and play games; and, you know, try to amuse them; and that sort of thing; but my kids are grown up now; so I suppose for quite some time I haven’t been called on to be spontaneous in those sorts of ways.”
Personal capabilities and education

Respondents felt that a wide-ranging series of individual differentiators determined one’s ability to improvise, whether talent, age, competence, mood, personality or educational and social background. This finding echoes the view that socially-constructed differentiators have been shown to influence data collected through interviews (Cannell & Kahn, 1957). Furthermore, they suggested that as well as an arsenal of competencies, individuals either brought with them a willingness to participate or an unwillingness that manifested itself in rebellion, self-consciousness and a fear of self-revelation. Interestingly respondents largely saw the group as comprising self-sustaining and self-managing individuals rather than as an entity in itself. This runs contrary to the notion of group psyche explained as follows:

...when a collection of individuals come together as a group, they in fact become part of something which has alternatively been called the ‘group mind’, the ‘collective mind’, of the group psyche. In practice, this means that in a group, one is no longer dealing with a collection of individuals and their psychological processes, but is in fact dealing with an ‘n’th entity, a new being, with its own conscious and unconscious processes. The group behaves as a single psychological unit and ‘uses’ the individual members to play out the different parts of the group mind (Smit, 2009, p. 61).

It is interesting to note in the context of leadership how often individual characteristics and attributes were mentioned, rather than an approach that relates more to the group context and encounter. Future studies may consider the extent to which individual explanations are engrained in respondents’ psyches.

Thirteen pertinent response codes fell outside the remit of already identified constructs and referred to the very personal manner in which individuals experienced improvisation based on factors such as age, education (taken here to include background), mood, confidence, competence and other such individual idiosyncrasies. The interview design did not take any of these themes into account and they arose organically during conversation. Nevertheless, they are worthy of reflection, not least because they speak to some of the broader contextual dimensions reflected upon in relation to research methodology, such as age, gender, class and education that may have a bearing on “power differentials” within a group (University of Toronto Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board, 2005, p. 2).
Age

Twenty-six respondents, an astonishingly high proportion, mentioned age during the course of our discussions. The responses followed two broad patterns. Firstly, respondents felt that improvisation returned them to a child-like state or reminded them of the games they played as children. Secondly, some respondents felt that the inhibitions they displayed during the session were as a result of age and experience.

P8 mentioned: “the creativity that came was almost childlike.” P14 elaborated: “it actually made me – after the session, it made me feel like a kid; where I could do whatever I wanted and you know, kids improvise all the time; and they just enjoy life; and that’s how it felt in that session.” P29 suggested: “it took me back to games you know, when I was between 9 and 13, or 12 you know, sort of pre-pubescent games – party games.” Talking of children P23 mentioned: “I think they are the ones that [are] more imaginative; as you become older you don’t think of these things.”

Age as an inhibitor of spontaneity and imagination was mentioned a number of times. P14 suggested: “It definitely made me a lot more imaginative and I felt as if I was going back into my childhood again. You know, you can dream up all different things as a child; but it’s strange how, when you are an adult, you become so much more limited in your thinking; and
that exercise definitely helped bring out more imagination in me.” P33 explained quite wistfully: “I’ve changed a whole lot and I discovered it this morning only. I have three children and I am actually a very sour person.”

P34 provided a useful summary in defence of age and experience: “I think the habits become more ingrained; it takes a greater effort to do things differently. Ja, I think it may just be a simple matter of energy and how we have less energy as we get older; and we use it therefore more economically; and so we do things that work, which means that we are less inclined to do things that might work and might work very well; just because the old stuff – if it’s not broken, don’t fix it, kind of approach. I also think that as we get older the desire for newness gets less… So my own sense is that as one gets older, one’s strengths are sounder judgement; [we are] less likely to do something really rash; although I give myself the exception on that; and on the other hand, the downside is that you become a boring old fart.”

P27 however, felt that older age allowed one to return to a state of uninhibited enjoyment: “I’m learning in my old age that it’s great. I think I was far too – I don’t know the word I’m looking for – I was too held back in my younger days… I also had a lot of other things in my life that I was dealing with at the time and so those things would have got in the way for me to have been spontaneous; whereas I feel that today I’m fine and feeling like I might be in a good place; I’m getting older.”

P34 believed that experience provided a useful counterpoint to youthful exuberance in an academic setting: “It’s not to do with chronological age; it is to do with experiential age; it’s just that most situations I encounter now as an academic I’ve encountered before in some guise so I fall back on an experiential bank… I think next year I will have been an academic for thirty years; so I’ve been doing it a long time; and I would say it’s only in the last five years that you know, I’m comfortable.”

Another theme that came out with regard to age was the need to force oneself out of the inhibited state that accompanies growing older by adopting a more childish outlook: “I think I would do it again, um for me, the older I get… the more I try to prove to myself; usually I am quite shy; quiet; my own kind of person; but the older I get, the more – and for the sake of my children as well – I realise that I’ve got to do [this] stuff”. P31 made a similar point: “you
just have to do it. It is part of being that child again that we as [adults learn]... not to be anymore.”

Finally, several respondents said that the improvisation session reminded them of the times when they played with their own children. P32 said: “I don’t play games much. I suppose I probably did a lot more of that when my kids were young and you get into that sort of thing a lot more with your kids you know, where you… act things out and play games; and you know try to amuse them; and that sort of thing; but my kids are grown up now; so I suppose for quite some time I haven’t been called on to be spontaneous in those sorts of ways.”

The emphasis on age was surprising and of considerable interest in terms of cultivating new forms of leadership. Also notable was the extent to which participants echoed each other’s nostalgia for the abandon of childhood games, wistfulness at the loss of such creativity and spontaneity, as well as resignation in relation to the curbs on these attributes as a result of work responsibilities and the expectations that come with seniority.

**Authenticity, compliance and rebellion**

While performance based on role-playing encourages participants to ‘be’ someone or something that they are not, improvisation was seen by two participants as being more authentic. This echoes Hodgson and Richards’ (1966) assertion that improvisation encourages honest and authentic responses from participants.

P8 explained that improvisation: “didn’t make you feel that you needed to be something other than what you are.” P26 when talking about individual participants’ contributions remarked: “I think that if it comes from like an authentic place, it’s probably a good thing. Improv is an unbelievable example of that.”

Six comments were made by these individuals relating to issues of compliance and rebellion, interesting in that Hebdige (2001, p. 346) suggests improvisers often “disregard” existing rules and prescriptions. For example, P17 said: “I was really keen on giving the instructor exactly what she was trying to get out of us… but there were one or two individuals who weren’t quite obeying instructions… I certainly wanted to please the group, which I guess in a way might be a sub-conscious fear of judgement… I did my best to do exactly what the instructor was asking of us.” Another person for whom compliance was very important was
P18 who said: “If somebody comes here and he tells you that he wants this to be done now, then you must know that it must be done now… I will do it now.”

Improvisation requires participation and provides a rules-based environment in which to operate. The level of compliance in a group and the ability of participants to bring ‘themselves’ to the practice affects the success of each session. Therefore, rebellion as outlined above may be considered a process challenges or even a defence mechanism on the part of the participant.

**Confidence and Difficulty**

It was clear that individual participants’ varying levels of self-confidence had a bearing on how they experienced the session. A self-admittedly confident individual, P15, had this to say: “[improvisation] kind of reiterates that confidence within you that you don’t necessarily realise you have until you start improvising, if that make sense.” Later she referred to a game that required spontaneity: “I was fine with that because I knew something always pops into my head… Whatever you need to do, it’s gonna work out; something is going to come up.”

Other individuals had far less confidence in their own abilities. For example, P24 said: “I think it has always been my problem at work [and] in my life in general. You know, I feel like I never belong and everyone thinks I’m an idiot and they don’t like me, you know, that kind of thing. So I think for me to do more of that [improvisation]… would improve my confidence hugely for one thing.”

Nine comments were made about how difficult participants found the session. Some compared it to exercise while others emphasised the novelty of the practice as the reason for its difficulty. P19 stated: “gibberish is difficult enough as it is… I just found it so difficult. Compared to the efforts made by colleagues there… Maybe it is because I was just tired. I mean, gibberish is difficult enough as it is; and I just found it so difficult.” P11 explained that to her it felt like “exercise” while P20 also spoke of the effort, saying: “I think it also takes quite a lot from you to actually say something without words; than actually say something with words.”

P24 described her battle: “I tried really hard… It is very difficult to improvise… I think with more practice it would have improved.” P29 described the source of difficulty as residing in
the unfamiliarity of improvisation: “it goes against the grain, you know. It’s kind of form of dissimulation… not a comfortable or easy process; an interesting process. You know, it requires thought.”

Some exercises provided more difficulty than others based on people’s competency in that area. For example, P28 claimed to be verbally agile but found improvising with an object far harder: “I think what was the most creative and challenging things for me was when she brought out the jaffle iron; because all of a sudden we were dealing with an object that was a prop in the room; which comes with its own limitations, so that felt – I suppose because a lot of the other exercises were fairly verbal, where that one you had to be more visual and had to be more about action than about words, it might have been creatively at least the most challenging.” Another respondent found difficulty in having to be dishonest. P31 remarked: “it was difficult for me; especially the lying thing.”

P29 noticed how other people found difficulty in the session where he himself did not: “I thought [P22] particularly found that quite hard; and I was interested, because I think [P19] found it pretty hard too, in particular ways; and I was intrigued by that; whereas I think [P16] found it pretty easy, I mean, I think she really got into it.”

It is interesting to note in the context of leadership that individuals who found improvisation difficult (for example, P16) were perceived by others as finding it easy. The perceived confidence or ease of others was compared starkly against the internal insecurities of individuals. Confidence and difficulty are largely self-ascribed states and point to the diversity of individual leadership responses that improvisation can elicit. This may present challenges to the kind of leadership improvisation facilitates, particularly in diverse and differentiated contexts.

**Gender**

The majority of participants in all the five sessions were women but only one mentioned the issue of gender and that was one of the male participants. Thirty out of a total of forty-one participants across the five sessions were women, skewing the sample in favour of women. P29 - a male - noticed this saying: “there weren’t many men; there [were] just three of us; you me and [P22]; and [P22]’s a good friend of mine… men are notoriously bad at showing
vulnerability. I mean, in the health research men don’t generally seek emotional support or health opinions; and therefore they commit suicide more; and they get cancer in more advanced stages; they don’t test for HIV; they don’t take ARVs and so forth and so on. There is this big literature; and you can see it manifested in particular kinds of defended public behaviour… I thought [P22] particularly found that quite hard.”

It is interesting in relation to leadership that in a context in which women constituted a majority that it was a man who discussed the issue of vulnerability, although a number of the women talked about their lack of confidence.

**Individual talent, mood, personality type and personal idiosyncrasies**

Various respondents analysed what happened in each group session in terms of the ‘individual’, ascribing what happened in the group either to individual talent, personality, mood or personal idiosyncrasies. Twelve respondents put the success of certain exercises or the capacity of some individuals to improvise down to their individual talent. For example P12 said: “it might have been just a sort of fit with individuals… I think the story telling worked quite easily and quite well in the group [of academics].” Talent or perceived talent also placed certain expectations on participants, as explained by P29: “it is part of our job to have a facility with language; so you don’t want to screw up; so you want to – and particularly those sequencing – the one two three… sequencing requires some wit; some agility; and so I think some people who got tongue-tied were aware of that; and it put pressure on them.” Individual talent is also associated with judgement (discussed below), as illustrated by P32 who said: “I noticed one person in the group really couldn’t talk gibberish and I remember noticing that and thinking that’s strange because I can make up gibberish without too much problem; but clearly there was one other person there who absolutely couldn’t and I remember thinking: that’s silly; I wonder why?”

Participants registered which of the other group members had a talent for improvisation as well as those who did not. P12 noted: “I think there were a lot of people in the group who were not naturally comfortable with that style.”

P17 put his success and ease in the session down to “a combination of my family upbringing and my sort of public speaking experience.” P21 attributed the ease of the workshop to the
fact that “many of them are good communicators… I think there were definitely creative people in the room.” On the other hand, P22 mentioned difficulties in the session because “there weren’t people who were very good, apart from [non-interviewed participant]; none of us were really sharp; and witty; and on the ball; and inventing wonderful things. There wasn’t an obvious divide between those who were fantastic and those who were just terrible… improvising and thinking of things.”

Personal competence was also linked to how much participants enjoyed the exercises. This is typified by P30, who remarked: “I mean really the only thing I didn’t enjoy was the gibberish thing; but that comes up in any of these sorts of things that we do; that is just not something that I’m good at.” P12 had a similar reaction: “it depends a lot for me on whether I was relying on skills; or areas that I was comfortable with; in areas where I wasn’t there was a lot of anxiety. So some of the games – like I really loved the ‘yes, and’ game; because I am fairly comfortable in a verbal context and that kind of stuff you know, it’s fine; but some of those other games like the gibberish games; and I don’t know, like picking up – the one that you had the jaffle iron – I couldn’t think of anything; and I actually didn’t really want to.”

Seven mentions were made of the personal mood in which participants found themselves when they engaged in the session. P7 suggested: “I wasn’t really in the mood for such a workshop; but I figured I might as well just go along with it. It wouldn’t have been very polite to pull out. And yeah, by the end of it I felt a bit more relaxed and sort of mildly entertained… I don’t know – I don’t really like interacting heavily with people when I’m very tired.”

P8 also explained how personal mood affects one’s enjoyment of improvisation, but phrased it in a positive fashion: “I think for me it’s a state of mind, it’s like going to watch a comedy or something. You have to be open to that. If it’s going to be funny, let’s just be funny. And sometimes, I think I adapt to the situation more.”

P4 explained that one’s mood has a bearing on how anxious improvisation can make one feel: “if you are in completely happy mood you might be willing to just say ‘whatever’ and you don’t care what the group has to say.” P5 also mentioned mood in describing whether or not an improvisation session could be valuable: “It all depends on the mood, I would say.”
P14 mentioned that enjoyment played a part in his further engagement in the session: “I managed to do that quite easily actually. I think it is because I enjoyed it and I felt passion in doing it; so I was really into the game; so, because I could feel it, I could do it easily.”

One individual in particular based many of his justifications for his confidence in the session on his personality type and background. P17 said: “I come from a very vocal family; so we have you know – it is a very loud Greek family; we have passionate discussion every time we have dinner together. And also my parents have raised us to be very open about our feelings; so we are quite relaxed; we are quite confident; we being myself and my brother; and also growing up I did a lot of debating; so I am very comfortable sharing my ideas in front of people.”

Nine participants made reference to individual personality foibles or idiosyncrasies to explain their engagement in improvisation exercises. P4 provided an insight into his particular analytical bent: “On all those Myers-Briggs type things I respond quite strongly on the more analytical side rather than the experiential side, which is a dichotomy you may or may not recognise in what you’re doing.”

Speaking of ‘yes, and’ P12 said: “I realised that it was a very comfortable exercise for me because I’m not a controlling person by nature; so I’m very happy to listen and add on. You know it wasn’t an alien experience for me... So I had really quite strongly different reactions to the games... I don’t know why. Maybe it is about one’s own comfort zones.” P33 confirmed that some games were more suited to her character, while others left her feeling more vulnerable: “if they do games that [are] out of your character, then you [will] be more sensitive to feedback; or laughs; or remarks.”

P13 described herself as having been very shy in younger life: “I used to find [improvisation] very stressful; but that’s because I was very shy; but I am not shy really anymore; so it didn’t bother me.” P5 explained that improvisation is suited to both extroverted and introverted personality types: “even introverts there could partake and just explore the talk and be somebody else.”
P9 struggled because in her view, she is “not that spontaneous a person – I had to like think about what I was going to do. So I think for other people it probably comes a little easier; but for me, I definitely felt like: ‘oh gosh, now I’ve got to like come up with something’.”

There was also one mention of a personality clash. P24 highlighted an incident where in a particular pairing, she and the other participant did not interact well together: “We were having a good old laugh and it wasn’t like everyone was looking and watching, you know. I mean the story was outlandish. I just think we didn’t quite connect.”

**Self-consciousness**

Twenty mentions were made of self-consciousness, predominantly with respect to the earlier part of the session. This arose despite the assertion that self-consciousness runs contrary to the notion of being present (Hebdige, 2001). P6 explained: “initially, on the first few spontaneous requests I felt very conscious of thinking I hope I’m not first. ‘Do you want to volunteer to go first? Definitely not. I hope it’s not coming [in] this direction’. So I was very conscious of the time I had to prepare my offering if you like.” P22 said: “I’m fairly self-conscious about making mistakes in public; expressing myself badly; or not having something to say.”

P29 mentioned that despite the fact that anxiety levels lowered during the session, a degree of self-consciousness remained: “one’s level of surveillance – self-surveillance is probably less; so you don’t mind if you are told to switch and no means yes; and go means stop; or whatever and one carries on. Nevertheless one is trying to conform.”

P17 noticed how another participant “was very… self-conscious and shy at first and then gradually towards the end she started opening up; and then she took part in the gibberish; and that was a wonderful transformation to see.”

P18 suggested that she preferred the games where less attention was drawn to her: “I like to speak; but I don’t like being in the spotlight.”

P30 made an interesting distinction between consciousness when it is deliberately and voluntarily self-imposed and that attention which is involuntary: “It’s not that I don’t want to
draw attention to myself because I do that plenty all by myself; but it is different when the spotlight is put on me than when I turn the spotlight on myself.”

P31 explained that her self-consciousness was heightened by having to participate with colleagues: “I’m used to doing it at home with my child; and I used to do it a lot myself – so I can; but like again that self-conscious thing comes in and you have to say to yourself: look, it’s just a game; just carry on; and don’t think about what the other people think.” P29 made a similar comment: “people were aware; or possibly hyper-aware that these are colleagues… I knew all but one person there. So let me project and say you know, my fear is: do these people think I’m a total [expletive]?”

**Self-revelation**

The researcher noted three incidents where participants mentioned their potential unwillingness to reveal aspects of themselves during the session. Speaking of ‘Zoom, Screech’ P4 remarked: “You could make very easy decisions but it didn’t require you to expose anything of yourself apart from the inadvertent thing of whether you had wanted to reverse the flow and deprive all the people down there of the rapture of getting to go ‘zoom’.” Later he spoke of the usefulness of the exercise, which he felt was: “to get people engaging and starting to trust the group but in a way that they don’t have to put themselves forward.”

The game in which participants were asked to tell a lie about themselves revealed participants willingness to share information about themselves. Some told aspirational lies, others told implausible and outlandish ones, while others told lies that if one took the reverse of what they said, were pieces of information about themselves offered to the group. P29 recounted an incident where a participant had lied saying “Hi I’m [non-interviewed participant] and I’m incredibly good looking” – an overt statement that in her eyes she was not. P29 said: “I found [non-interviewed participant]’s lie really excruciating. I found it incredibly painful to hear I’m beautiful for obvious – people are beautiful actually; it is not just about looks; so for me that – that hurt me actually; but it is – that’s maybe a slightly different point. I think there is a level of exposure maybe – I’m putting it maybe better when I say - all these games involve levels of exposure; and our willingness to show yourself; and to the extent that the more one does that, the greater is the reward; but of course when one exposes oneself, one is exposing vulnerability and frailty, which one wouldn’t ordinarily do.”
Facilitation

The interview process revealed a range of opinions amongst participants about the manner in which the sessions were facilitated. The researcher had not anticipated these responses when conducting the literature review and undertaking the research design. The data analysis process revealed twelve separate codes that could be grouped under a new and broader heading of facilitation.

The issue of facilitation speaks to the question raised in the literature review, of whether leadership can be taught and learned (Doh, 2003). The research revealed that improvisation needs to be facilitated properly in order for any learning to take place, and therefore the leadership benefits that accrue are also affected by facilitation. A skilled facilitator is required to understand group psycho-dynamics, the process of contracting with a group, providing containment, understanding issues of rank, building group trust, maintaining neutrality and dealing with process challenges that occur along the way. Failure to do so will increase anxiety amongst participants and prevent learning either of improvisation itself, or of the intended leadership lessons that accompany the practice. Successful facilitation however, will result in a successful team building exercise and the effective learning of improvisational practice.
Facilitation skills

Thirty-eight comments were made about the way in which the session was facilitated. There were generally positive comments about the facilitator herself. P15 said: “She definitely had a way to – she had a way of engaging us all; I mean she definitely had the attention of the group without a doubt.” P16 mentioned: “I felt safe from blame because the facilitator was very good.” P17 concurred: “the flow of communication from the instructor was fantastic.”

P4 felt that the facilitator failed to maintain neutrality: “I think if somebody’s running an exercise like that I feel that they should be quite neutral. I’m not entirely sure that she did particularly well to stay neutral.” P4 made a few process challenges during the session one of which the researcher outlined in the field notes: “There was an engagement between the facilitator and P4 who had arrived late, when the rules for ‘it’s my fault’ were being explained, P4 suggested to the facilitator that instead of playing her game, the group should rather play ‘donkey’. The facilitator misheard and asked P4 to repeat his suggestion. It was a direct process challenge to the facilitator who was torn between continuing with her agenda and her desire not to say ‘no’ to anyone. In the end she had to say ‘no’ to P4 and continue with ‘it’s my fault’.”
P4 explained his interpretation of this as follows: “I thought I would just point out that [‘it’s my fault’] was quite similar to donkey. I felt that she got defensive and attacked around that or at least made me feel uncomfortable because of that and that made me far less want to contribute or in fact given that I actually did drop the bottle… it was a terrible pass [smiling]… on one of the first rounds I didn’t want to accept blame because I was being very defensive at that point. I think conversely a bit later on she would highlight where people had mostly done things well, which is obviously the more positive. But by inference she’s then saying the people that she’s not saying did a good job… you know she’s showing favour and by favour she’s casting the people that she didn’t show favour to in a poor light.” P17 made reference to the interaction between P4 and the facilitator: “I notice that people at first were also resistant to – what’s her name, I can’t remember the name of the lady that was running it? A couple of people were resistant; and then they also gradually learnt to drop their guard; but personally I was loving it from the start.”

P6 pointed to the fact that the facilitator structured the session order in such a way as to ease the group’s anxiety and prepare individuals for improvisation: “there were clear reasons I would think why the facilitator… used what she did when she did… I think the creativity that could come out of a group is probably directly linked to the skill or the capacity of the facilitator to engage the group… I think that the way the exercise flowed was clever in that it got everybody to engage. I like the fact that the insult that was offered was offered to the same person as then the positive comment, I thought that was clever.” P20 also mentioned the structure of the session: “I think it was cool in the way that she structured it very well; so you know exactly what you are going to have to do when; and that freed you up.”

P6 also mentioned that her ‘outsider’ status gave the facilitator an advantage: “had it been a peer within the group or one of the actual group members engaging us. I think the fact that it was an outsider, that it was stated as something silly, I think that helped.”

It was pointed out by a number of respondents how much positive affirmation the facilitator provided. P8 mentioned: “if I did go wrong there was a gentle positive affirmation about what you did.” P11 echoed this but also pointed to the group’s contribution in providing affirmation: “every profile ever done on me says I need praise; and I think I got praise from
the group for what I did; so I got the positive feedback for something that I really just threw against the wall.”

While encouraging, P19 mentioned that the facilitator would also make mention of peoples’ errors: “The facilitator was quite affirming... a couple of times a couple of us fell into the trap of saying negative things when we should have been saying positive things. So she put that right.” P21 explained: “I think we did make a couple of mistakes but it was handled in a way it was fine to make a mistake and you can learn from it and try again. Hopefully the second or third time you do it better.”

P11 mentioned that having her mistakes pointed out contributed to her anxiety: “I was nervous about the people who she said brought up some of the elements that we needed to ban; such as volunteering someone else for something they didn’t want to do. I was worried that I would say something that she would then take as an example of things not to do, in which case my confidence might never have recovered. So that kind of contributed to my conservative approach.”

P20 mentioned that the facilitator relieved her anxiety by demonstrating some of the exercises: “I think the facilitator did it the first time just to I think break the ice, which was good.” However, she noted that the facilitator neglected to explain the meaning of one of the games sufficiently: “Well a really practical thing that I thought of afterwards that I should have told her: I wasn’t sure what gibberish meant; so I didn’t know is it like using words; but not in sentences; or is it making that ‘p’ language where you put a ‘p’ in front of all the words? So it took me a while to actually understand what she wanted me to do; so it is just a practical thing.”

The field notes describe another incident, which occurred during session one: “during the gibberish game it came to the turn of P24 who completely froze when it was her turn to make a contribution. The facilitator would not let her pass, despite her protestations that ‘I can’t do this’. She insisted for some time and there was a growing sense of tension in the room as the group’s attention became increasingly focused on P24. She eventually came up with something and the game continued.” P10 provided his perspective on the incident: “I don’t think the facilitator could have done anything different. You know, I just thought it was a silly situation; but that’s how people are. After a while I started... I guess some people are
really uncomfortable with that. I thought maybe it was a religious thing, or something; I
wasn’t sure what the heck could be going on there. Someone could have just brought out a
couple of sounds.” P20’s take on this incident was as follows: “what would have made me
very uncomfortable is in the gibberish game where the one girl didn’t want to have a go at
one of the things; and that facilitator almost pushed her into doing something; and if that was
me, I would have felt very uncomfortable; because if you are really not doing it, it means you
are uncomfortable with it; and then there is just more attention being focused on it; on the
fact that you don’t want to do it. So I’m lucky I wasn’t that one.” P24, who was the
participant in question explained her experience as follows: “I thought the facilitator handled
that very well you know. I never felt like I wanted to get out of there, but I also kind of had
this feeling of if I say something stupid now it is really going to let the group down and if I
don’t participate then it sort of ruins things for everyone. So I tried really hard, but ja. It was
difficult… the fact that I stayed for the whole session means that it was handled very well;
because normally these things really make me feel uncomfortable and um I mean I was just
doing it also because I knew you needed somebody – you needed the numbers; but if I had
really felt uncomfortable and I really hated it, I would have left and ja, I think she handled it
very well and I think the group was very comfortable, you know.” On the counter side of this
example, P9 commented: “I don’t think it was like we were forced to do things.”

P21 described the facilitator’s skills as follows: “I think that [the facilitator] had a lot to do
with it because she’s a very good facilitator and you could see that she thought things
through, she had experience and she can mediate almost so when we were going off path or
being negative instead of positive she could step in but not in an offensive way, or if nobody
wanted to step up and she could see that was going to happen she would immediately sense
it.”

The field notes again describe an incident during session one: “Participants were engaged in
the ‘what are you doing?’ game and the exercise had progressed once round the circle and
just as it was going round again the question was asked: ‘what are you doing?’ and the
response came, ‘I’m going to the toilet’. The facilitator immediately stopped the game and
said ‘I’m so glad you said that’. She proceeded to explain to the group that what the game is
really about is passing an instruction on to the next person. Group members have the power
in that moment to ‘give’ the next person something difficult, embarrassing, affirming or
anything at all. By giving a potentially embarrassing instruction to the next person, the participant in question was not working within the contract of improvisation and so the facilitator intervened.”

P20, who was the recipient of the ‘instruction’, described her feelings as follows: “It was funny because I was standing next to – who was I standing next to? The guy that said he was going to the toilet; and she immediately interrupted it; so before – that was that little session. I was given going to the toilet; and that’s where she talked a little bit about what you – you are actually offering the next person something to make something with. I mean, I wasn’t quick enough; or confident enough; to actually pick it up and just make something fun out of it, which you could have done, if you are very comfortable in that kind of situation; but I also thought she sort of interrupted quick enough. I mean, I wasn’t uncomfortable in it; I just think I wasn’t quick enough on my feet to make more of it. So it was an interesting thing to actually offer something; and also to think about what you are going to offer the next one.”

Lastly, P29 pointed out the ease that was created through a combination of the process, the group, the researcher and actions of the facilitator: “I don’t like drama in the sense of I don’t particularly like watching theatre; and so to participate and to find it useful is an achievement on your part; and the part of my colleagues; and particularly the facilitator… I think people were quite well disposed towards the process; towards the facilitator; towards you; you’ve got a very nice style, Charlie. You make people feel at ease.”

Smit explains that “the linguistic root of facilitation is the Latin word ‘facilis’ which means easy. Facilitation means ‘to make easier’; it is concerned with making a group’s task (whatever that may be) easier… the facilitator is not a leader who sets direction, but rather someone who uses a range of skills and techniques to help the group achieve or even find its own direction” (Smit, 2009, p. 17-18). The findings illustrate how important facilitation skills are in a group exercise like improvisation, for establishing the conditions in which the group can operate successfully.

**Group dynamics**

Group dynamics were referred to on sixteen occasions. P4, for whom group functioning was a particularly strong theme suggested that improvisation exercises are: “good for groups
because they build the group spirit and by spirit I mean the environment the group can interact healthily and without reserve and I think that in itself will lead on to get all the things you would think of in a well-functioning team.” He continued: “And I think groups are really good for that. If you can get to the point where you can think openly in a group in a way that you’re focused on the task at hand and there’s not all these other hidden agendas floating about, so if you’re not worried about the dynamics in the group and you’re just putting what you think out there then you can be a lot more present, so I guess from that perspective improvisation would have helped that because of the trust levels that we got.”

P6 believed improvisation exercises provide: “the group the opportunity to come up with different ideas and to possibly engage group members that may not participate in a different forum or may participate in a different way in another forum.”

P13 experienced group dynamics by comparing her actions in response to those of others in the group: “you gauge what everyone else is doing. It’s a group dynamic. It’s like in a restaurant when you know, [you] don’t order something much more expensive than other people… it’s the same thing. It is just you being aware of everyone else is giving them kind of reasonable things to do. Then people start to think out of the box; you start thinking out of the box; or if you do happen to do one; then other people will. It’s a group dynamic.” P20 noted something similar: “it is interesting to see how the group supported each other; how people very soon almost went into certain roles; things like rescuing other people.”

P15 also detected compassion within the group: “Everyone was very open and forthcoming; very much so; and encouraging to the members of the group that maybe weren’t feeling so comfortable in talking; and I think that was really lovely.”

P16 suggested that improvisation prevented groups being dominated or blocked in their functioning by certain individuals: “I don’t know the psychology of… the organisational psychology of it – but I know enough from having been in groups, particularly in a work context to know that one person can dominate them; can shut other people up; you can get bilaterals going on that exclude or include; that block; and I am very sensitive and attuned to blocking techniques; and what this did was to prevent any blocking techniques that anyone might have tried to employ to prevent creativity from emerging.”
Other respondents explained the group dynamics in terms of the composition of individual group members. P21 said: “I think though that an important contributor was the group of people. I suspect that the environment might have been different if some of the other people who were supposed to be here were actually here… they have their own personalities or very dominating personalities that changes the environment whereas I think all of us did know each other although we don’t work with each other. So I think the group had a good dynamic.”

P24 articulated a point that was a recurring one, that the group’s success or creativity had less to do with the talents and skills of individual members, but rather healthy interaction within the group itself: “I think it’s got less to do with your own ability to improvise and your own spontaneity and more to do with what your ability to get into some kind of – I don’t know how to explain this – get into some kind of group flow… I think because everybody was there because they wanted to be, it changed the group... Some people were a lot more responsive than the previous things like that I’ve done and that made it a lot easier for me; as much as I generally don’t like these things, I felt like I could generally just relax and I didn’t necessarily have to do everything, you know.” Interestingly, this observation is in contradiction to the sections above that emphasise individual talent and proclivities. References to group dynamics also point to the gradual emergence of a group identity for individuals, explained as follows: “The group will overtly identify with the explicit context and task of the group, but there will also be an emergent identity based on the psychological development of the group and the psychological needs that the group meets for the individuals” (Smit, 2009, p. 67).

**Contracting and Trust**

Eight mentions were made of the need for the facilitator to establish a contract with the group, as to what would be required of them in the session. The following extract from the researcher’s field notes provides an example of the type of contract that a facilitator makes with a novice group of improvisers: “The session began with a welcome, during which the researcher explained who he was, the purpose of the session and how long it was likely to run for, all examples of hard containment (Smit, 2009) designed to reduce the level of anxiety in the room. Thereafter, he provided some background information about the context for the
research: he explained to the group that the research is seeking to test whether improvisation can be learned or practised and what value it can bring to leaders and organisations. He challenged them to remain open-minded about the process and remember what feelings if any it evoked in them. He then handed over to the improvisation facilitator who sought to establish a ‘contract’ (Smit, 2009) with the group by outlining the ground rules for the session while at the same time acknowledging peoples’ tension. Her introduction was as follows:

‘It’s easy to pick up that there is a certain amount of fear, hesitation, concern and discomfort. At no point are you going to be required to perform magnificently. This isn’t an hour and a half session to train you how to be improvising actors. What this really is, is an introduction to the skills and techniques and some of the basic rules of improvisation which when put into practice can be extraordinarily useful in problem solving, successful communicating, working as a team, co-creating, sharing of ideas. And mostly it’s about positive reinforcement.’

Thereafter, she established the boundaries or ‘rules’ for the session. She was very clear about process, suggesting that there were three rules. Rule one states that participants have to say ‘yes’ to everything. She explained this concept using one group member, asking them to say ‘no’ to the first question that was asked of them. She then asked P12 to respond in the negative to the question: ‘did you hear that the president is coming to the session today?’ P12 responded ‘no’. She then asked the group to explain what had happened. P16 responded ‘the conversation ends’, which is precisely what had happened. The facilitator explained how a ‘no’ is a block, how a ‘no’ puts an end to possibility and how it implicitly criticises another group member’s basic idea. To further illustrate the point she then asked P12 to respond ‘yes’ and asked the same question again:

‘Did you hear that the president is coming to the session today?’; ‘Yes’; ‘Shall we make him a cup of tea?’; ‘Yes’; ‘Are you good at baking?’; ‘Yes’; ‘Will you make those famous cupcakes of yours?’; ‘Yes.’

Using this simple example, she set up a contract with the group to say ‘yes’ for the rest of the session by showing how doing so can open the door to possibility, in a non-threatening way and aid in the improvisation process: ‘Just for this hour and a half there will be no ‘no’s’. The answer to everything will be ‘yes’ and we’re going to pointedly shout out and recognise all those ‘no’s’ and turn them into ‘yes’s’.
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

The facilitator then established two other ground rules for ‘containment’ (Smit, 2009):

‘Rule number 2: Don’t force anybody to do something without telling them what you need them to do first…. Rule number 3: don’t get into a fight. Because we’re improvising, what we’re doing is focusing on resolution. Instead of creating conflict we’re always looking for the solution, we’re always problem solving, we’re always wanting to save, we’re always wanting to improve on each others’ ideas and we always want to make each other look and feel fantastic’. Interestingly, [non-interviewed participant] then responded: ‘Can we take you home?’ to which of course given the rules the facilitator had outlined she had to reply ‘the answer is yes’.

Returning to the interview data, most respondents felt that the anxiety that was felt at the beginning of the session was reduced by the contracting process undertaken by the facilitator. P6 said: “I think the anxiety was definitely linked to the beginning of the session… the facilitator was a new face as far as I know, she certainly was for me. So ja, I do think that there was more engagement as it went on. I think the fact that it was an outsider, that it was stated as something silly, I think that helped, I think that it set the tone for just being able to look at things slightly differently. I think that was a very important.”

P17 described an incident in which P4 arrived late and thereby missed the contracting period: “the person I am thinking of came late and the very… first instruction was we had to say ‘yes’ to everything; and then when we did the chicken dance, which really like helped loosen everyone up; and the person I am thinking of, who was interrupting the communication flow once or twice, missed those two crucial parts of the improv session; so I wouldn’t say it was because of their personalities, or anything like that, I think it is purely because of circumstances.”

P4 who was pinpointed by P17 described the incident thus: “So when I first arrived I was conscious of being a bit late, so I felt slightly guilty about that and maybe slightly defensive about that.”

In session five it became clear that participants had not been informed by the organisation’s representatives precisely about the nature of the session, so contracting at the beginning of this workshop was essential. P9, who had been the researcher’s point of contact, said: “The
people that asked me; the people that I invited now; I specifically never told them that it – or those that never asked – I never offered to give them that information; that it was about improvisation; or theatre; or anything like that; because I think when you start talking acting, people feel now they have got to go and do a presentation; or be on the spot; or that type of thing; so I think only one or two people were a little bit anxious – myself included.” This point was confirmed by P27, who said: “We were not well informed as to what we were going into. I heard a word yesterday that said theatrical something… but I was not sure what I was expecting.” The researcher ensured that in this instance participants were made clear of the research intentions before continuing with the interview process and obtained informed consent from all participants.

The process of contracting is important for building trust because it means “clarifying and preferably documenting the exact nature of the intervention required between the facilitator and the facilitated group” (Smit, 2009, p. 158).

Trust was an important issue for some group members and came up sixteen times during the interviews. The research also confirmed Wheatley’s (1995) assertion described above, that trust provides the basis for creativity. P4 felt that as the session went on: “you started to feel that you had the ability to go out on a limb a little bit and trust people that they would be okay with that… when you get that comfort of the trust then I was quite excited to see what would go round, and some kinda interesting comments were being made.” P4 also mentioned that he felt trust played a part in people being present in the session: “if you’re not worried about the dynamics in the group and you’re just putting what you think out there then you can be a lot more present, so I guess from that perspective improvisation would have helped that because of the trust levels that we got… Because it’s a group thing… what improvisation does is build very nicely that trust within a group and as soon as you start to be open and honest and trusting in a group then you become less defensive and more open and more willing to step out through that door…”

P6 referred to the trust-building process as one that occurred with time and familiarity: “I think initially it was a bit more subdued; everyone was sussing each other out, it wasn’t a group of people who necessarily all know each other or the less familiarity between some than others.”
P11 described some of her anxiety as residing in a lack of trust: “I had stage fright that I hadn’t expected right at the start… quite a few people, most of whom I know and sort of quasi trust; some who I don’t really know; and I think that was more the problem… there were my trust issues that were tackled. I mean, I really didn’t want to get into it. I had judged a whole lot of other people as being grandstanders who were going to take over and irritate me; and they didn’t; and I was threatened by people who I assumed would have a hostile stance towards me; and they didn’t. So it got rid of a whole lot of those anxieties very quickly.”

P16 added to this theme when she said, apropos of nothing: “Well the other thing I haven’t brought up; but which was one of the factors for me was trust. A lot of the exercises are built on the assumption that you need to create an environment of trust in order to do it; but also you need to trust your neighbour; and I think this kind of thing could be used in trust building within groups and organisations quite effectively.”

The benefits of trust were illustrated in this example by P26, who when referring to the ‘chairs’ game said: “both the people in the chairs sort of had this trust that you could sort of feel come off of them after a few minutes when they realised: alright, this is going to go really well; we are sort of a team here, even though we can’t see each other.”

Therefore, it is clear that without a contract between participants and facilitator, trust cannot be achieved and the process of improvisation cannot begin. The contract is the first phase in overcoming anxiety and building trust.

**Rules, boundaries, containment**

Six mentions were made of containment in the session: “Containment is the process whereby the facilitator employs a range of metaskills to create an atmosphere of relative safety, so that defences diminish and the important issues are discussed” (Smit, 2009, p. 167). Referring to the rules and boundaries that had been established at the beginning of the session, P6 explained: “I think that the group may well have been less creative had that not been set up in a similar way.”

P20 made a similar point: “I think the facilitator did quite a good job of actually sort of easing us into it, which I think is a very good way of doing it; and she also contained the games. I
completely felt comfortable that there are boundaries within [which] we are playing this. There were like unwritten rules within the game so that you can pick up on.”

P26 referred to the rules as: “like a controlled chaos.” P4 described the simple rules of ‘zoom, screech’ as follows: “That gives an element of containment to it… There’s no thinking you have to do.”

P29 described an interesting dynamic whereby the strict rules established in improvisation, actually provide the framework in which participants could be creative. He suggested that there is an interplay between rules and freedom: “…one is trying to conform. I mean, there is an interesting mix of conforming and non-conforming. So part of the message of the whole workshop seems to me is to think outside of the box; whereas another part in those games are to pay careful attention to what people are saying; the word is going to be given a different meaning now; so you have got to attend. It’s not – that’s also requiring conformity, as well as it’s invoking; or trying to induce spontaneity. It is an interesting mix.”

Taking up a different theme, P33 mentioned that she found rules to be restrictive in both her work and home life: “Because of your rules at work; you tend to set rules – strict rules at home as well; and I think it causes a lot of barriers as well on a personal level.”

**Rank**

There were eight comments made about rank, either the lack of it or its continued prevalence within an improvisation setting. P6 felt that improvisation counteracted rank issues in the group: “It’s one thing that appealed to me about the concept of improv and why it interests me because it does open a forum where everyone irrespective, it sounds contrived, but everyone is on the same level and I think that’s very important because it’s hard to get that in a work setting.” P8 echoed this sentiment by explaining that the flow of conversation is easier when participants are of an equal rank, or where rank is irrelevant: “So if I said and, she would say this, and then I would say that. If it was a master servant kind of thing, you’d be apprehensive to give an answer because you’re not sure if it’s going to suit the boss.”

P13 suggested that improvisation: “makes people relaxed and it levels everybody… everyone’s kind of equal. P16 suggested that improvisation was an equaliser, but more in terms of participants’ skill levels. She also indicated that in some games those who were
more eloquent and gifted in the use of language and public speaking had skills that gave them more rank in the context of what they were being asked to do in this session: “At one level it was great because everyone starts from the same level of nothingness. So it is kind of an equaliser… with the gibberish exercise; even that; even language; or your level of articulateness; all those sorts of things were stripped from you. So I would say the first response I would have is that it was a positive equaliser.”

P8 suggested there might be a practical application for business environments in which rank pervades: “in business structures you’ll find that when people start leaving a company you would need to get in there to basically say there’s probably a master-servant relationship in the company and there’s no kind of cohesive working together and you’re working towards a common goal.”

P29 remarked that affirmation from the facilitator conferred artificial rank onto some group members: “There was the inclination to say: good; and as soon as you say: good, it is both affirming; but it is also comparatively a statement about how other people may be better or worse… It’s about ranking and hierarchies. So I think those exercises are really good; but I think you probably need to do quite a lot of them before you lose that inhibition.”

The researcher also detected more subtle examples of rank interplay. The following is taken from field notes written up after session four: “During the gibberish game, [P19] was asked to give an insult to [non-interviewed participant], her direct report at work who immediately said “Oh no, I have a performance appraisal with you next week”. There was much laughter in the group, but it reminded everyone of the power [P19] held over [non-interviewed participant].

An interesting example of cultural rank occurred during the playing of “I am the cheese”. This game went very smoothly apart from a story that started: “I am the walrus”, the next person adding “I am the Beatles” and the third person, P19 who is African, not understanding the western and generational musical reference, which the other two white group members of the appropriate age did. It became an interesting learning point for the group, in the fact that not all people have the same reference points or access to information. The facilitator saw this as an element of rank interplay in the group and had to explain that it is better to use more universal references to avoid covert rank issues playing themselves out – in a sense this
intervention was a form of psycho-education for the group. It also provided good feedback for the participants, which is “useful when it is regular, well thought out, specific, accurate and given with compassion and humility” (Smit, 2009, p. 138).”

Validation

The field notes state that: “the facilitator made an effort in all sessions to validate the responses of participants by providing positive affirmation and encouragement.” This was remarked upon by several participants including P15 who also mentioned that she got validation from the group in the form of laughter: “…that got everyone laughing; so I knew it was an alright thing to say.”

Volunteering

Participants’ involvement in the session was entirely voluntary and this was mentioned by P27, who said: “We were nominated; but I think if we had said we were too busy to come – because I was not told in advance what it was about – if I had known what it was about, I would not have changed my mind; in fact when I heard what it was about I thought: oh great, here’s some fun; but somebody else might hear what it is about and pull out; and I think somebody else who pulled out did do it more for the reason of what it was about and not so much for the reason of: oh no, I’m too busy.” This indicates a potentially skewed sample which is dealt with under research limitations.

Process challenges

P17 pointed out a number of occasions where participants challenged the process as outlined by the facilitator: “there were one or two individuals who weren’t quite obeying instructions, or weren’t seeing the fun in it; and they were trying to sort of – attack the instructor – I’m not sure what to conclude from that; but in terms of the communication flow; I felt that those one or two incidents interrupted what the instructor was trying to do; or interrupted the flow of energy, if you will; and at times distracted the group from listening; or appreciating what the instructor was trying to you know, convey.”
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

Anxiety

Participants spoke of anxiety in a number of forms, including nine references to generalised anxiety. P11 mentioned: “I was more avoidant than usual. I am avoidant in the first place; but this was a special effort on my part; being extra, extra avoidant.” P12 said: “parts of it I did find quite uncomfortable”

P26 detected anxiety in other group members: “I thought it was interesting because I have done a small amount of improv and I know most of the people hadn’t done any and so it was interesting for me to see a little bit of the nervousness on faces and sort of like nervous energy in some of the other people.” P29 explained: “I think everybody was anxious. I mean, maybe discounting you and the facilitator… and some more so than others.”

P4 described a particular incident: “I think the group in that particular example, the last one, got very still. I think there was a large… obviously I can’t speak for everyone but I do get the feeling that everyone was thinking ‘well what is it we’re alluding to here?’… but nobody was willing to cross across and actually say it.”

For others, anxiety was more of a personal response and this came up sixteen times during the interviews. Personal anxiety was heightened at the start of the session. Some participants, like P14 were not anxious at all: “I didn’t personally have any anxiety. I felt very comfortable in the room” and P27, who said: “I was not perturbed.”

While others like P24 felt the opposite: “Well it made me feel quite uncomfortable… definitely self-imposed. I am not so good in big groups. They make me feel uncomfortable and I feel very self-conscious and I kind of freeze up, you know. I have just always been that way.” P28 was also anxious to begin with: “Yes, especially when [the facilitator] took her shoes off; I thought: oh [expletive]; how – exactly how much are we going to have to do here? So I was anxious and generally things like improvisation scare the [expletive] out of me; so I was anxious anyway; but I am bound to be one of those people for those things are kind of scary.” P32 described the session as “excruciating” in terms of her own anxiety: “that is the sort of thing I usually run away from doing; being silly, you know, I mean, being kind of you know, acting things out.”
P25 also described how her anxiety made her adopt avoidance as a defensive strategy: “I was like dodging eye contact from the beginning. I was also not comfortable with the group at that point.”

In the context of this research anxiety is seen largely as an inhibitor to a fully-functioning group, because “groups will find psychological defence mechanisms in order to deal with anxiety” (Smit, 2009, p. 84). Without successful facilitation participants may unwillingly have engaged in defensive strategies, inhibiting successful improvisation practice, by “obscuring, hiding or ignoring the source of the anxiety” (Smit, 2009, p. 83). As such, it is essential that efforts designed to build containment are built into improvisation practice.

**Team building**

Twenty-three references were made to how good improvisation is at facilitating team building. P13 explained: “I think it is a very good way to kind of get people to know each other better and especially in a company; especially teams; [it] kind of helps them work together and find out things they didn’t know about each other. It makes people relaxed and it levels everybody.” P28 mentioned how improvisation helped integrate disparate members of the organisation: “I thought that it would be really helpful – a kind of helpful team building tool. I couldn’t quite figure out how it would help on the sort of creativity and ideas side, other than motivating better cooperation; but team building wise it really seemed very cool… we were all from different departments so we know each other but not that well, as we got to know each other better, we were kind of playing up to each other’s strengths. It was interesting to see how you start to do things that you know will work for the other person.”

P9 explained that merely going through the exercise as a group brought the team closer together: “I find that when we do exercises like that, whether it is a different group of people, or people in one department; you take away something; as that group of people now, the next couple of days, we will be on a high and we will be able – we have that in common now. So I think specifically with this kind of thing for team builds as well; when we do something like this… everybody knows you are like on the same kind of wave length for a while.”

P10 postulated that improvisation could be used as a team building exercise in organisations: “I mean, even in the session itself I think; if the team that did that was working together it
would come back into the workplace.” A number of participants referred to the manner in which it helps you get to know people better and see a different side of colleagues. P28 said: “I think you do learn a little bit about the other people that are in the session with you, even if it is just the kind of personality that they have maybe; their kind of sense of humour; or anything like that. So I think it does bring you a little closer maybe to people that you are in the session with; but ja, also as a team building thing I think that it would work well.”

P17 referred to “camaraderie” while P11 explained how the exercise had created a team feeling amongst a group of strangers: “By the time we disbanded, I felt the level of comfort and enjoyment and pleasure in their company that I would not have imagined possible from the beginning.” She suggested how continued practice might have even further benefit, particularly with regard to inclusiveness: “I think this would give you a long series of running jokes and camaraderie in the group; which we never had; because of a variety of backgrounds and education; and so it was – that would have worked very well. I also think it would take the place of what I don’t think of as very socialising at all; which is at the pub when everybody has a little too much to drink, they all bond. It’s a bit sad for those of us who don’t drink at all; but that bonding opportunity is lost. I think the bonding happens because of the lack of inhibitions; and the interesting things that you do and discuss. This gives you a chance to do that without all getting wasted.”

P16 said team building was the most practical application she could see for improvisation: “Thinking about how I would use it at work; as I say, team building with a particular kind of group of people, I think it would work. I would love to see some of the very negative energy departments that report to me do something like that as a way of dislodging; and getting them to think about what negative energy they have. I can’t imagine my own peer group at work doing it; because they are very cerebral; very sceptical academics who would do everything to prevent themselves being in a situation where they ever had to do that. And so I don’t think you get past first base; but I do believe that if you did get them past first base, they would benefit from it.”

P20 explained how improvisation helps in “getting to know [others] a little bit better; seeing another side of somebody; [getting] a better understanding of people; of groups… I think it
will be good in terms of really just team building and getting to know people on another level.”
Avoiding Blame and the Fear of Failure

By providing a context in which the notion of blame was anathema, improvisation reduced the level of judgement to which individuals were exposed. While participants generally had a negative orientation towards failure in their lives (Subramanian & Kumar, 2009), the sessions made them feel like it was not possible to make a mistake. Participants described an experience of liberation and freedom in this process. There was however, enduring evidence of judgement, both positive and negative, in how participants assessed their own and other group members’ performances. Various interviewees commented on the relative competence of others, ascribing ‘good’ and ‘bad’ value judgements (Zander & Zander, 2000). Respondents referred in a number of ways to a benchmark or standard that it was necessary to reach in order to be successful. This contributed to a persistent anxiety about the standard and quality of performance required in the session. Furthermore, anxiety around failure was exacerbated to some extent by the realisation that other group members had the power to put individuals in a difficult position.

There was evidence that improvisation improved some respondents’ “reactive orientation” (Senge, 1994), allowing them to be happy to fail, because in doing so there were no repercussions, only opportunities to learn. Whilst present and continuous, the level and severity of judgement in the session was deemed to be lower than in participants’ everyday interactions, because improvisation provided a degree of safety in which to operate. Therefore, while blame and the fear of failure were not avoided altogether, they were significantly curtailed.
Blame

**Blame** featured on a prominent forty-seven occasions during the interview phase of the research. One game in particular - ‘it’s my fault’ – sought deliberately to address the question of blame. P5 said “That little game that we played with the bottle… ‘it is my fault’; I think it is good sometimes in life to admit that it is your fault and learn from it and carry on… there’s no wrong and right way.”

P21 described the general approach to blame in which this game was played: “I think people find it very difficult to say that ‘it’s my fault’. And taking it one step further to apologise for it. I’m not one of those people… if I think I’m wrong I’m more than happy to apologise. And I think today, particularly in the business place, people attach blame and this heavy weight to saying ‘it’s my fault’ or being in fault. Whereas I believe in ‘OK fine it was my fault or your fault’ but now let’s acknowledge that for a second and then let’s work at minimising the damage so we can move on and learn from this rather than swearing or shouting.”

P7 on the other hand, suggested that most people do not have a problem with having to apologise: “I think it was trying to get away from an idea that is not really there – the whole idea of saying; ‘it’s my fault’. I mean people do that naturally. I don’t think we were really
fighting any kind of natural impulse. People in polite society are naturally kind of apologetic about things we are trying to impart.”

P8 mused as to why this game was chosen and the potential benefits: “…it was okay to make a mistake… and I think that was the intention to make you feel comfortable and safe… I think even watching the game, I think it initially started like you didn’t want to say it’s your fault, because that’s the way we are but as it was happening and it became… okay to say ‘it’s my fault’ and to take the blame… the consequences weren’t so big but if it were a major kind of thing, I’m not sure if anyone would say ‘it’s my fault’ because we don’t go that way initially but I think if it can start with that game in whichever way you do it and people learn that way and say okay yes it was my fault it can change a lot of dynamics with people and relations…”

P16 commented: “I think there was one exercise where we were throwing the bottle and I didn’t have my glasses on and I was convinced that I was going to drop it; because even with my glasses on, I am not a great catcher of things… So in that game, yes I suppose calling it: ‘it’s my fault’; did make a joke out of the fact that you might feel blamed; or blame yourself for dropping a ball or something. So it was kind of symbolic in that way.”

P20 noted how ingrained individual participants’ tendency to blame had become: “I think what was interesting once again where there was one where – right at the beginning where the bottle dropped – and people almost – you don’t want to acknowledge that it’s yours that dropped. I think the facilitator did it the first time just to… break the ice, which was good. And then somebody went… ‘but it wasn’t my fault – it was your fault’; so it is an automatic reaction.”

Several respondents drew a distinction between blame in other contexts, and the lack of it within improvisation. P23 commented: “You know there [are] times when you are scared of being blamed; but here you didn’t mind being blamed… there is no harm; you just felt free.” P21 stated: “I didn’t think blame was an issue because what are the consequences?… the context doesn’t exactly put a lot of weight on blame.” P15 suggested: “I don’t mind being blamed; not in that environment.”
P13 suggested however, that this may have been to do with the fact that improvisation was being played as a game: “I mean that’s the law of the game, so it is different to saying it’s your fault in general… saying ‘it’s my fault’ is kind of a taboo I suppose. So [the benefit is] being able to say it and not think about – not seeing it as such a bad thing.”

P19 drew a direct parallel with blame and leadership, using an example from a university context: “‘it’s my fault’: that one was good because I think for people in leadership positions it’s very difficult for people to admit to mistakes, especially in front of junior people; subordinates; even amongst colleagues; because people think that if you have made a mistake then you have failed; and people judge you and criticise and so on… but I have an example of one of our former DVCs here who once had; there was this crisis where the student representative council wanted to take management to task and so he was the management spokesperson; and he was also used to reporting to him when he was DVC for student affairs. So he – there were times when he would confront him and say: but you didn’t do that; and then he would say: yes, I think we were wrong there; we shouldn’t have done that; but let’s sit down and talk about this, that and the other; we are willing to sit down and talk; and it completely unnerved the students because they didn’t expect a deputy vice chancellor to admit he had been wrong; or that management had been wrong for not including students in certain discussions; but he said: no, we were wrong; I admit that; and I am sorry; but let’s sit down and talk… It just completely disarmed them; it killed the hostility that they had and so on; and made for easy bargaining; or conflict resolution; and all of those things suddenly became so much easier because the students felt they could talk to him… So it was a mutual respect thing, which worked very well; and we managed to avert so many potential student strikes as a result of that kind of openness.”

P9 on the other hand tried her hardest in the game not to drop the bottle because: “I don’t like being blamed for stuff.” However, when she noticed another person dropping the bottle and being forced to say ‘it’s my fault’ she said: “…it created the opportunity - for when we continued - that person admitted and accepted. So it’s fine; it is okay to continue.” P11 referred to a similar feeling when others said ‘it’s my fault’: “I thought they were great sports to do it. I was pretty sure that I would lie down as quickly and quietly as possible and mutter: ‘it’s my fault’ to myself; and then get up as fast as possible; hoping that no one had seen. So I was trying to avoid that.”
P25 described how the fact that she had not relaxed into the session yet made it harder to participate in ‘it’s my fault’: “I don’t want it to be my fault – I didn’t want it to be my fault. I think it was the fact that it was one of the first games in the beginning and there was still some tension in the beginning; like okay: what are we expected to do?... and then we go to ‘it’s my fault’ game; and ja it just shows – I don’t like it being my fault.” On the other hand, P14 had relaxed sufficiently: “I don’t think I would have had a problem with it though because I was quite open by then in the session to just shout it.”

For P12 her anxiety resided in a fear of failure, rather than blame: “I didn’t feel any – I didn’t feel anxiety about being blamed; but I still felt anxiety about not wanting to make mistakes because I didn’t want to look stupid; you know it is a different thing from being blamed; but rather just being seen and shown up in a way that was strange.”

A number of participants said that having to say ‘it’s my fault’ was not a problem for them. P12 remarked: “I don’t know – it was very easy for me to do that. I don’t have a problem with confessing to fault.” P32 explained: “I didn’t sort of find it shocking to throw a bottle and somebody else didn’t catch it and to have to claim fault… I took that up as part of the game... it didn’t really worry me.” P15 highlighted how the session contained no blame for her: “I wasn’t worried about what people were going to be saying.” P14 was equally ambivalent, but suggested it may have been due to his own personal confidence: “I didn’t even care if I was judged or blamed because people judge you all the time and possibly blame me for doing things; but I feel like I am my own person and if I – you know it is their prerogative whether they want to judge me or blame me. So I didn’t really care.”

P26 described the liberating feeling that accompanies taking responsibility: “…it felt really good for some reason. I mean aside from enjoying the fact that I could roll around and scream ‘it’s my fault’ and look like an idiot, which is oddly freeing when as an adult you are really not supposed to do that; it is sort of like acknowledging with someone else that: oh it wasn’t just me; or just you – hey. Let’s both do this together, you know and we sort of looked at each other – I said to... let’s just roll around and you know what? It was cool.” P10 too, said: “I wanted to actually get the chance to say ‘it’s my fault’, but it never happened.”

P28 explained that her anxiety was due to performance, rather than blame: “It wasn’t so much the ‘it’s my fault’ thing, because I think that we – I suppose in this environment, or maybe it
is just me – there is quite a strong culture of accountability; a personal accountability; so learning to say ‘it’s my fault’… had less of an impact to me actually than the fact that we had to be shouting and emoting in front of each other.” P6 had a similar feeling: “I don’t know if it’s so much because I didn’t want to acknowledge ‘it’s my fault’, I think in some circumstances I’m probably too quick to do that actually. I think it was more just the concept of lying on the floor and making a big scene. I was far happier to be under the radar with that one.”

P8 alluded to a caring group environment that negated blame: “if somebody wasn’t able to do these kinds of things the atmosphere created was like even if I just tried, so what? Even if I didn’t do it properly, so what? And if I did go wrong there was a gentle positive affirmation about what you did, so I think that was quite cool.” P11 observed something similar: “I thought there was gratitude in the group in that particular session that validated anything that I was willing to give. So that dropped the bar somehow.” P13 mentioned group members’ equality: “…everyone’s kind of equal… I didn’t feel like I would be blamed for anything.”

P8 noted that the environment was not simply an ‘anything goes’ space, because the facilitator would still point out inappropriate practice. However, the manner in which it was done was not blameful: “I think we were all allowed to make mistakes. Even if we were corrected it was because we all felt or all have been in a certain way of thinking, like especially with the ‘yes, and’… we tend to be blame-oriented or we don’t want to accept responsibility for our own mistakes when we do things. So this allowed us basically to see if you make a mistake, this is how you approach it.”

P26 alluded to a group spirit in which nothing could go wrong. Speaking about other group members performing in the ‘chairs’ game he said: “…they were sort of in the improv spirit; like they didn’t feel as though there was any wrong answer; and even if something silly happened it’s okay; everyone will understand; and it is sort of a safe place and it really underscored the values of improv really really well.” P31 explained: “I think everybody was laughing together; everybody was doing the fun thing together. I don’t think anybody could say: ‘oh, look at her what she did’… I didn’t at all feel like you were being judged; or blamed; or anything for what you did… a lot of times when something goes wrong… you don’t really want to take the blame because the way you’ve done it is the way you’ve learnt
to do it… So you rarely step in and take the blame; and instead of just going and saying: ‘I’m to blame; it’s me, I made a mistake’… it just opened my eyes to that. It is actually so easy to do; it just saying: ‘yes, it’s my fault’, sort of thing.”

P22 also found freedom in the ‘it’s my fault’ exercise and mused about its applicability: “I think it could be very liberating as an exercise if people could translate it into real life. Very disarming. It was a nice game to play because it didn’t – it was very stressless you know. You didn’t have – the formula was – it didn’t involve too much thinking on one’s feet. You just had to catch the bottle.”

**Competitiveness**

Despite Hodgson and Richards (1966) assertion that improvisation requires non-competition, cooperation and attention, two remarks were made about how improvisation brought out a competitive streak in participants. P8 stated: “I think there was a positive competitiveness also, where we wanted to say the better thing but we also wanted to say it in the sense that nobody is really going to win because there aren’t any prizes, there’s no salary attached to it. There’s just a free-flowing flow of ideas, which could result in something being extremely fun.”

P28, who attended the same session commented: “I don’t know whether it is in any environment or in this environment, but there is always competition; so you sort of didn’t want to be the one to make an [expletive] of yourself but to be the one to be the most original; or who did what [the facilitator] wanted… what I brought in was a competitive streak.”

**Failure and mistakes**

Respondents were asked about their orientation towards failure and whether it might be possible in the context of improvisation to make a mistake. Forty-seven comments were made in this regard.

A large majority of interviewees did not think it was possible to make a mistake in improvisation, though a number did suggest that breaking the contract of the session would constitute a mistake. P27 said: “I don’t think a mistake would ever be a mistake in a session like that. I don’t think it’s possible to spot a mistake; because nobody is wrong. There is no
wrong situation; so in my opinion there won’t be mistakes in there.” P6 explained: “I don’t know if it’s possible to make a mistake in that context, which is what makes it so potentially valuable. That would be my take home from it. I think the only thing I could say is possibly a mistake or an error in the whole thing is your own contract with yourself and the group to participate or not participate so if you turn around and say ‘no’, I’m not doing it or as [the facilitator] mentioned the whole concept of ‘no’ it’s not really a mistake but I do think that would limit the flow. But no, can you make a mistake? I don’t really think so and I think that’s the beauty of it.” P7 commented: “I can’t remember making mistakes in something like that… you can lack in imagination; but that’s not really a mistake, is it?... The only mistake we could make would be to sort of just not participate. If you are going to be there, you might as well participate.” P10 suggested that a mistake would be saying: “something really nasty to somebody; or something really foul… even though it wasn’t true. You know there was one where we had to lie... I mean, within reason you could say almost anything.”

P14 distinguished between there being consequences in the business environment, and there not being any in improvisation: “I don’t think you can make a mistake when you improvise. It depends in what setting. In a business setting if you have to improvise and you make a mistake, then it does have repercussions; but if you are in a social setting… as long as you’ve got friends that care about you and that enjoy your personality, it is fine to make mistakes and be authentic.”

P11 commented that improvisation provided a setting: “to make mistakes a funny and gentle thing, rather than a criminal punishment… I guess a mistake would be absolutely nobody knows what you are talking about; or it would be offending everyone. That would be a kind of disaster on a Hiroshima level; if you were offensive; or you did one of the big no no’s, as defined.”

She remarked also that improvisation does not place a different value on success or failure: “…so it is almost like failure is assured; no one can give a fantastic performance; no one is going to belt out King Lear! So, it’s just about how creative can you make your failure? And I love that situation, absolutely; because it takes away winning and losing.” P22 stated: “No, you couldn’t really make mistakes, I mean it wasn’t like that; but I suppose one could have more or less witty responses; and more strong or weak performances; but I don’t think one
can mistakes, no... it’s not done in a technical sense, but you could be wrong in a sense that it
doesn’t really help the game, especially the – there could be a better or worse response to the
exercise.” P32 observed: “I don’t know if there was such a thing as mistakes. I mean, there
was clearly no right or wrong in any of that. So no, I wasn’t – I never thought: oh dear, I did
that wrong; I should have done it the other way; because it was a sort of anything goes; so the
sense of mistake didn’t come into it at all.”

P21 observed that mistakes were only made in the context of the rules established by the
facilitator, so she was the only person who could correct participants: “But who would judge
if it’s a mistake? [The facilitator]? Or the people participating… [I] think we did make a
couple of mistakes but it was handled in a way [in which] it was fine to make a mistake and
you can learn from it and try again. Hopefully the second or third time you do it better… so
for instance in the ‘yes, and’ some people would say ‘but’ or interpret it incorrectly or I think
the topic was something about a traveller or I can’t remember but we were vying off the track
of the topic.” P28 also mentioned the facilitator: “…the more sort of affirmation that we got
with what we did, the more I realised that mistakes didn’t really fit the definition of what we
were doing.”

In this vein P27 suggested that she and her partner had perhaps erred in the rules of the ‘yes,
and’ game: “We got caught up in the wrong things; so it was conversation of lists of things
instead of being more of a story telling; and in the beginning it was a little bit awkward;
because we weren’t quite sure where we were going or what we were doing.” P31 noted that
it was not so much a mistake as simply not being used to the exercises: “…playing the games
and not being used to it, is there really a mistake that you could have done? I don’t know. I
hadn’t thought about that. No, I don’t think so. No.”

P24 seemed to suggest that she had an obligation towards the group and a mistake would be
not meeting that obligation: “…mistake? I don’t think there are really. I think it would
interrupt the flow of whatever the group is doing… I think it was this thing of letting the
group down; you know I thought that if I don’t participate in it fully then the rest of the group
is like giving it all they’ve got and I’m the one who is sort of saying: oh hang on this isn’t
good enough for me and I’m actually not prepared to go there with you people; and it is
almost like an insult maybe… when I say there are no mistakes I think the biggest mistake
you can make is to stop; to stop the flow; and to kind of – like for example with the bottle thing; if I had to have caught the bottle and then thrown it to someone else, it’s almost insulting to the people who were brave enough to… lie on the floor and scream, you know.”

P16 commented that a mistake would be not participating: “I don’t think I did anything wrong. I would like to have thrown myself into it more. I would like to have had more imagination. I thought afterwards of things I could have said that would have been more creative; or whatever; but I wouldn’t beat myself up for that… A mistake would be stopping the process; either because you are unable to think of what to do next; or unwilling to. There was a point where I was unable to think of anything else and so I would say: that was a mistake; because I stopped the flow; but in my case, it was just because I ran out of ideas at that particular point… I felt very light at the end of the session… because I couldn’t fail; and maybe that’s a different way of explaining that lightness I felt.” P20 also cited not participating as a mistake: “I don’t know. Maybe not participating; but even that is just sort of choosing what you want to do or not. I would say not participating then.”

P17 also noticed a freedom that came with improvisation: “The first thing that came to mind was: could I have made mistakes? So I didn’t feel like I had made any mistakes, certainly not. And I wasn’t aware of anyone making any mistakes. I was having a lot of fun. Right at the end when I was doing the – when you and I were sitting down on chairs – well you were doing the hands – there were one or two moments where I noticed I wasn’t collaborating more with my partner; but it was funny; it wasn’t really something that I would criticise as a mistake. It was more on the spur of the moment and it was light-hearted fun; so I was laughing it off in a sense.”

P26 noted that judgement was an error in the improvisational context: “Probably passing judgement. And if it comes out, you know if you’re in a group and you pass judgement perhaps by saying no; you know like you can tell.”

These responses are contrasted against a much more negative attitude towards failure in respondents’ lives. P6 commented: “I have a huge aversion to failure. It’s very loaded for me. I feel very conscious in fact… in many ways I’m quite an introvert in that I would prefer not to participate if there’s a risk of my offering either not being accepted or possibly being judged in some way. So, for me that’s a huge element of something like this is that removing
that risk of failure engages me personally, because it is always such a big gap for me in
groups or in scenarios where there is a risk of being wrong.” P9 said: “I am very hard on
myself.”

P16 revealed: “I normally beat myself up terribly for failure. It’s devastating and I’ve always
been like that from the time I came home from my class one test for the first time with 98 out
of 100 instead of 100. I wept all afternoon. I thought that was the end of my school career.
You know, it was like there was a blot on this perfect white sheet of paper that I would never
be able to erase. So failure is like that for me. It something that is indelible; [it] will never
go away.”

P23 considered failure to be: “…scary; that is a scary topic. I always try not to fail because…it
is very scary. It’s not something anybody wants to happen to them.” P32 stated: “I don’t
like failure in any sense. I try and do everything I can to try and prevent failure. I’m a
planner. I plan ahead and think of all possible options and scenarios and plan for them. I
mean I’m a planner by profession; that’s what I mean. So I suppose that probably spills over
into my personal life a bit.”

P25 also: “I hate to fail. Oh God, I’m the worst failure; like I have this really, really strong
internal locus of control; I blame myself; so I am not a good failure.”

Others said that they deal with the prospect of failure by doing everything they possibly can
to avoid it. P13 said: “I don’t generally fail in my life. I tend to be a bit of an over-achiever;
but – I don’t know – I don’t like failing; I cope if I have to; but I tend to sort of – if it’s a
failure it’s a challenge to do better. I don’t give up if I fail; but I don’t fail very often; so I
can’t really say what I do if I fail or not.” P33 commented: “I don’t like failure, especially
with my studies. I [expletive] study; even if I don’t want to; even if it takes me longer; but at
least if I pass all the subjects, I will do it in a greater period, or longer period than do it in a
shorter period and fail. So I will definitely plan and make sure all the things I have control
over. I will not fail.”

Others on the other hand, chose to regard failure in a more positive light. P26 stated: “I’m
cool with it so long as I know that I did everything I could to not fail. You know, if I like –
like when I was a kid, all I wanted to do was play professional basketball; that’s it, I mean
there is no other thing I could have possibly wanted. I’d go outside in the freezing cold and I would shoot jump shots all day, you know; and then I got to be about eighth grade and realised I was never going to get much taller and everyone else was much taller and I wasn’t as athletically gifted as the other people; and I sort of failed my dream; but not really, because I loved it; I did what I could; and it didn’t work out and: oh well; you know and I don’t live with regret today because I quit basketball; it was just a fact of life; it wasn’t for me you know; it couldn’t have happened… it’s a part of life you just have to learn how to deal with it.” P14 too mentioned that he put failure in perspective: “I think I’ve changed in the past couple of years after doing the MBA; where at the moment I feel that failure is not a bad thing. I used to do everything I could not to fail; but now I am actually open to it and try out new things; learn from it; pick myself up; move forward; just make sure I don’t make the same mistake again.”

**Judgement**

The term judgement here is used to indicate negative or harsh judgement, and not the more neutral use of the word that might make it a simile of words such as ‘appraisal’ or ‘consideration’. Judgement was discussed on forty-six occasions. The predominant view was that improvisation provided an environment that was less judgemental than those to which participants were accustomed. P6 remarked: “Very little judgement could be made of what you were doing because it was either in the gibberish words, so you didn’t have to come up with a massive pearl of wisdom for example on a verbal scale and also the physical activity, it was almost something you couldn’t get wrong. You know. You didn’t have to be a fabulous actor, you didn’t have to have specific skills… I think the novel idea [about improvisation] I would say is really the opening up of a different way of engaging people, fairly actively, without judgement.”

P8 observed that: “no matter what we say and what we do here it kind of works, so let’s just go with that. So I felt freer and more playful in that atmosphere.” P17 added: “…it felt pretty relaxed to me… I didn’t think there was anyone judging me; or judging anybody else.”

P26 explained: “I in fact have never come across a skill or a thing or an activity that allows people to sort of look around and say: you know what, it’s alright to like speak my mind; or be free to not really worry about what someone thinks because you know, in the end it
doesn’t really matter too much… at no point would I have felt like the group was judging me; or blaming me for stopping the flow of the game; or none of that. I mean it was – in fact I think improv [sessions] are a safer place to operate [than] anything I have ever come across in my life, including therapy.”

In fact, P26 went on to suggest that the only way one could make a mistake in improvisation is by: “…passing judgement. And if it comes out, you know if you’re in a group and you pass… judgement perhaps by saying ‘no’; you know like you can tell. If someone says ‘no’ you can usually tell they think what the other person has proposed or presented is sort of a bad idea and that’s just silly; I mean there really are no bad ideas in improv; and a good improv mind can adapt to literally anything.” Even in this statement however, P26 used the terms ‘good’ and ‘bad’ revealing a subtext of judgement.

P18 commented: “It was a fun area that I was in. It wasn’t something – I didn’t think that they would judge me. In the beginning maybe, ja; because we didn’t know what is going on; but after as you started you know, it was more fun and games...”

P25 described how suspending judgement allowed her to view things from another person’s perspective: “…do not dismiss anything; suspending judgement; so I think it also helped – it also helped like build or cultivate – like suspending judgement… look at something from another point of view; or do not dismiss something. I used to have a problem with that. I used to dismiss things and go ‘no it will never work’… Take time.”

P5 suggested improvisation was an arena without judgement because you are allowed to make mistakes. P28 mentioned that the ability to make mistakes allowed her to cope better with uncertainty: “…as I realised that there was no judgement; and as I realised that it was a kind of anything goes… it became quite exciting not to know what was going to happen next; and not to know whether what I was doing was going to be received well or not.”

Even the feedback from the facilitator was described as non-judgemental. P6 said: “this gives a very non-judgemental way of highlighting that, without having to pinpoint anyone and say listen you’re not listening or you are listening particularly well… you’re highlighting that very subtly.”
However, that is not to say that there was no evidence of judgement existing. P10 for example, demonstrated his judgement in the interview: “I found when the one person had trouble speaking, I actually felt angry about that. I felt like: ‘just [expletive] say something!’ But I didn’t say anything out loud, obviously; but I was struck by my own reaction to it. I was really feeling intolerance to it. I just thought, you know: ‘[expletive] say something!’” And then when they passed and... she would say: “It’s okay to pass; I was like: ‘oh geeze!’”

When asked if she had experienced judgement, P12 remarked: “I don’t know. I felt there could have been… Obviously you always feel slightly aware of what people going to think of what you do; but ja I mean I think we are all doing crazy things; so it’s kind of everyone is in the same boat.” P13 thought there may have been judgement around participation: “Well you were still aware of the fact that if you haven’t gone and everyone else has, you need to go.”

There was evidence of self-judgement. P22 stated: “Oh I felt quite awkward I suppose and fairly incompetent. I didn’t really feel like I knew what to do.” P24 found it difficult to distinguish between whether the group was judging her for her inability to participate or whether the pressure was self-imposed. She observed: “I sort of felt everyone else is being brave enough to say silly things and act in a silly way and they don’t feel like they’re being judged. I didn’t feel like the group was judging me for being silly; so I felt bad that I just couldn’t get there... I guess I felt like ja, maybe it is a bit of a judgement that they would think I was being stuck up or not participating... whereas it was more my own lack of confidence I guess that made it happen.” For P24, part of the learning that came from the exercise was realising that the group was not judging her: “I just need to relax, you know; and I need to understand that when I am in a situation like that people are not necessarily out there to judge or criticise or put me down, you know.”

P28 found potential for judgement in the ‘gibberish’ exercise: “…that felt like the place where you could most be judged; because you had to invent a language all by yourself and I found that very… difficult to do.”

There was evidence that participants judged one another on the basis of quality. P4 said: “Was it a boring lie or an interesting lie. There’s an element of judgement that could come into play.” P31 remarked that it was very difficult, despite the non-judgemental attitude that
was cultivated in the session, to shed a lifetime’s worth of learning: “I think it is the way we are brought up… if you think everybody is judging you, you think immediately: everybody is going to laugh at me if I do that. People think I’m stupid if I do that sort of thing. That’s basically I think what it is that is holding us back.”

P20 mentioned how judgement was a hindrance in teams at her previous organisation: “I think we often did get stuck in difficulty in solving problems because we would immediately go into: okay but how can operations do that; talking about negative things; judging the idea before it actually even got legs to go with.”

It became clear that judgement comes in different forms. Even the following assessment of another colleague by P32 is a form of judgement, but it can hardly be said to be a negative indictment, more a form of noticing: “I noticed one person in group really couldn’t talk gibberish and I remember noticing that and thinking that’s strange because I can make up gibberish without too much problem; but clearly there was one other person there who absolutely couldn’t and I remember thinking: that’s silly; I wonder why.”

Even making a positive point, certain respondents passed judgement on stupid or bad ideas. This point is illustrated by P17’s statement: “…all these ideas come out; and a lot of them might be stupid ideas; but you know, out of ten stupid ideas, one of them is great.”

**Performance anxiety and standard**

A great number of respondents expressed concern about the perceived need to perform during improvisation. This is closely related to the category, self-consciousness, above but refers specifically to performance in the theatrical context. For many participants improvisation was associated with acting and public performance. For some this perception remained, and in others it was confounded by their experience in the session. Of the forty-seven comments about performance anxiety, many also displayed concern about the quality of the offering that they had or would be giving to the group. P29 described his initial trepidation about the prospect of performing: “I was expecting not to enjoy it. To me it felt like a bloody chore. You know, I didn’t particularly want to do anything that you know, required theatrical performance of any kind.”
P4 provided a description of performance anxiety: “I think this is the problem with... you’re being asked to put yourself out there. And sometimes it doesn’t feel okay. It feels like something filled with a lot of anxiety. So if you’re not accustomed to speaking in gibberish or acting... there’s some hesitance about whether you can do it you start to feel some anxiety and the anxiety will crush out all the ideas that might be waiting to pop out.”

Several respondents described a fear of being put in the spotlight. P11 said: “I was struck by severe stage fright and a need to avoid the spotlight at all costs and that lasted for a good ten/fifteen minutes... I felt like engaging would volunteer me for the spotlight and I didn’t want to be put there. So the moment that I became conscious that my interactions were going to be recorded and noted upon and might become the centre stage, I wanted to make them the most boring as possible. I did notice that I had my arms folded compulsively the entire time; I was gripping my upper arms and lots of other people were doing the same thing. When [non-interviewed participant] and I broke off into pairs, I was gripping my arms and they were crossed over; and so was she; and we were rocking from foot to foot in synch. I don’t know if we were mirroring behaviour; but we couldn’t stop changing our weight on our feet. My palms were sweating as well.” P30 explained: “there is another class that I do as well where we do like a man in the middle thing; and when I’m put there as well and everybody is around me looking at me, I can’t think what I need to do in that class either. So it’s an odd thing. Like I say, I don’t mind putting the spotlight on me; but when someone goes: Action! Then I’m like... I don’t know; it is very strange.”

P16 also mentioned being put under a spotlight during the ‘jaffle iron’ game: “That is the one I found most difficult; and I know exactly why I found it the most difficult; because you had to step out of the circle into the centre; and that made you centre of attraction; whereas all the others you were kind of going round in a circle; and although the attention was on you; [you were] a part of a chain of activities; whereas the flashlight was on you as you entered the centre; and then also because I don’t like being watched; being physical; having to do something with... and then thinking: oh God what do I think of next? So that was my most difficult game.”

For several participants performance anxiety could be equated with a fear of the unknown. P5 explained: “Nobody knew what to expect. There were a couple that asked: are you going
to ask me to act? I am not interested in that. What are they going to ask us?” This largely occurred because in session five the representative at the organisation, P9, did not give sufficient details to participants, as described above.

P32 explained: “I was a little bit anxious about how far you would push us, you know. I mean what we were actually going to be asked to do; whether we were going to make total fools of ourselves, you know. So there was – I mean I’m sure if you are saying: should it be there in improvisation? Yes, I’m sure. Was I happy about it being there on Tuesday evening? I was a little bit anxious about would anything go?” P26 added: “You can see the people sitting down having thinking: oh God with trepidation; is this guy going to make me look like an idiot?”

Allusions to a necessary quality of performance were made by other respondents. P4 referred to: “the slight anxiety about the quality of lie you were going to tell.” P11 also described her performance anxiety in terms of quality: “when you get given a task like that; it is a little bit like being asked to draw something; and you don’t know how to draw it; and then you screw it up, or something; except now you have to draw it in front of everyone.”

P15 did not like “yes, and” because she felt her creativity was not good enough: “I think because it requires a lot of creativity and thinking to come up with a story; and heaven forbid; I am going to be a terrible story teller when I have children one day. So that didn’t really grasp my attention. That was quite an effort to do.”

Various interviewees mentioned the focus of the group or being the centre of attention as sources of performance anxiety. P11 explained her experience of the ‘jaffle iron’ game: “…stepping into that circle was my giant leap over the edge. That was an entrepreneurial step.” P15 spoke of the group focus during the gibberish game: “It was far easier walking up to that jaffle maker and doing something silly; than it was to speak gibberish; and act something out. It takes more energy; because you know the group is focusing entirely on you; and not necessarily you and that object that you are using.”

For others, the fact that they knew other people in the room contributed to their desire to put on a good performance. P16 explained: “I was very daunted at the thought of having to move around and do things with a group of people I knew well; slightly, but not very well; some of
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

whom I knew very well; and some of whom I only knew slightly; and some of whom I work with.” P33 said: “[I felt] nervous. You work with the people here every day; you do different things at that moment, which they don’t know you like that; or what if you say something stupid; like I said – you know that space ship thing? … And I said something; and someone laughed and I felt a bit hurt.”

There appeared to be a pressure among some respondents to be entertaining. P6 described this feeling: “I was quite conscious of being maybe you know not having something funny or not having something too innovative.” P7 continued: “I’d had a late night the night before and the thought of standing in a room with a bunch of people trying to kind of think on the spot and be entertaining was a bit stressful.” He explained though that this pressure to be entertaining: “…might be more of a character trait than a symptom of the exercise.”

P17 also sensed a responsibility to be entertaining: “I was scared of being judged for doing something that wasn’t funny; but I certainly wanted to please the group, which I guess in a way might be a sub-conscious fear of judgement.” P20 too experienced pressure but found that it receded: “That story telling thing specifically highlighted it. I think initially it was still a bit of: oh no, I have to come up with something creative and make it up; but then afterwards it sort of got a life of its own.”

Another pressure that was mentioned by interviewees was the pressure to ‘get it right’. P12 for example said: “I didn’t feel any – I didn’t feel anxiety about being blamed; but I still felt anxiety about not wanting to make mistakes because I didn’t want to look stupid; you know it is a different thing from being blamed; but rather just being seen and shown up in a way that was strange”.

P11 was scared that an idea of hers would not be correct: “it was just very terrifying to step out and do that; because it was a bit outlandish in comparison. So I had to be sure that that one would fly; and I wasn’t one hundred per cent sure.”

P22 said that improvisation held certain pressures to do the right thing for the game: “Whatever one does, it’s not done in a technical sense, but you could be wrong in a sense that it doesn’t really help the game, especially the – there could be a better or worse response to the exercise. That might just be me; my anxiety; performing anxiety; speaking in public.”
Several respondents couched their performance anxiety in the language of self-consciousness. P6 stated: “I found that some of what we were required to do was a little bit more awkward. I felt a lot more conscious of what, how it would appear.” P4 also mentioned perceptions of one’s self: “It’s asking quite a lot of people on the spot, especially if they’re feeling a bit defensive about it then the ability to be creative becomes a lot harder. You spend more of your time worrying about how you’re being perceived and all that energy is being redirected away from the energy that you could spend thinking what would be fun and interesting.”

P24 was the respondent who experienced the most performance anxiety. These are a number of her observations: “I didn’t want to roll on the floor and scream… the fear of: oh my God I’m just going to say something stupid and you know, I froze a lot of the time... I got stage fright I think… I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t think of anything stupid to say. And I think it was also I just – even though everyone else was doing it, I just thought I am going to make such a fool of myself; whatever comes out of my mouth is just you know, going to be ridiculous and just silly because everyone else was there… it was like all of a sudden I had to think of something to do with it and I had a couple of ideas; and then I thought no that is a bit over the top, or no nobody will laugh at that… I think it is like being put on the spot because suddenly all this pressure to come up with something brilliant I suppose and I was amazed at what people did with – I mean there were some amazing stuff in that group and I just kept thinking: God I’m so inadequate, I can’t think of anything, you know.”

Allied to performance anxiety is the related theme of standard of performance, which was noted on forty-one occasions. Participants spoke of having to meet a requisite standard in their responses, and part of their anxiety at the start of the session resided in the benchmarking process around standards. Once a standard had been established, anxiety diminished.

P8 explained: “…we kind of sensed what the level of humour would be. And then once we found that okay somebody made that kind of joke then we kind of went in that direction and then we felt comfortable.” P11 described discomfort in not knowing how far to push her contributions at the beginning: “having to mime something that I don’t necessarily know how to mime. Someone said that they were swimming; and the person then just bent forward and wheeled their arms and I thought: [expletive], I wouldn’t have done that. I would have
thrown myself on the floor and done a little breast stroke, which would have clearly been overkill also. I was trying to gauge how much commitment was going to be… I think if others had acted out more, I might have been encouraged to act out more.” P26 commented: “I think in those games people sort of – that’s the formula; they see the first few things and then they just – you know, it goes from there; whereas if everyone had to do the first ‘what are you doing?’ on their own, I think it would have been much more jagged and unsure; people wouldn’t have been spontaneous.”

P4 explained how a lower standard of performance might have eased anxiety: “Probably what you need is for somebody to be quite bad at gibberish and to make a hash of it but still be supported by the group.”

Several respondents said they would have participated in a game having seen how it turned out, but not knowing the standard or the details prevented them from volunteering. Speaking about the ‘chairs’ game for example, P10 remarked: “That was hilarious. I was hoping we would do that more than once; that’s after I saw what we were going to do; I would have volunteered.”

Several participants mentioned bad practice. For example, P11 had an opinion of what was right and wrong to do in ‘zoom, screech’: “I felt it was combative to screech and it was an attention getting thing.”

A number of interviewees spoke about achieving laughter as a means of benchmarking the standard of one’s performance. P10 said: “Yeah, I think that was probably the most challenging part of trying to think of something original and different that would, you know, get a response and make people laugh. It actually was a little bit hard.” P11 stated: “I really felt for the one’s where people didn’t really laugh. I mean, essentially the entire exercise is comedic. So, I don’t know, when [P26] did his cell phone laptop thing, nobody got it; they didn’t hear it; and I felt really bad about that; because I would have dive bombed if that had happened to me.” P12 explained: “I felt there a bit of performance pressure. It could have been really funny and witty. I felt there was a bit of a – for me it felt like an expectation that you could think of something really creative; or you should be able to – the should… but that’s one of my dramas. Sometimes those things activate – and that one did and I don’t
know why; but it did.” P17 remarked: “I did feel a need to say something; or do something that was relatively funny.”

P13 elaborated on the benchmarking process: “…you gauge what everyone else is doing. It’s a group dynamic. It’s like in a restaurant when you know, don’t order something much more expensive than other people, you know, because you don’t want to look like the one who is you know, it’s the same thing. It is just you being aware of everyone else is giving them kind of reasonable things to do. Then people start to think out of the box; you start thinking out of the box; or if you do happen to do one; then other people will. It’s a group dynamic.”

Several respondents sought to evaluate the standard of their contributions. P14 said: “I don’t know if I came up with the best ideas; but I thought they were pretty good and I enjoyed them when I did them. Like, even just speaking gibberish; and bowing to the person; showing my appreciation was one example of a time that I thought was very good; and it inspired me to act.” P15 mentioned: “I just wasn’t coming up with things as much as I would have liked.”

There was also an element of rating others in evidence. P22 for example, said: “There weren’t people who were very good, apart from [non-interviewed participant]; none of us were really sharp; and witty; and on the ball; and inventing wonderful things. There wasn’t an obvious divide between those who were fantastic and those who were just terrible.” On the positive side P19 stated: “There were some really brilliant improvisations there that surprised all of us. So that was good.”

Despite the ratings P11 mentioned that one could always retreat into a lesser or milder contribution if necessary: “There was always a safe sort of default option there; and then there are people who can take it a long way; and that is where you get the most enjoyment… you can do the default; there is always a back stop; there’s something very simple that you … could explain it away as; why not take it to an alien planet; or do something really wild with it; or complicate it?” For her this realisation accompanied a process of becoming more confident in her own ability to improvise: “Once the stakes had lowered; and/or I had become a bit more comfortable in my own abilities – and I have to say relative abilities – then it wasn’t such problem.” P23 provided an example of the default option, saying: “there was one where I was like going to go on the catwalk; but I thought: no – let go. I don’t want to overdo stuff.”
Session four comprised a number of academics who reflected that there was an expected standard around the use of words. P29 explained: “The movement one of course, one is caught up in the actual movement; but particularly the word games; we… are all in our way wordsmiths; so it is part of our job to have a facility with language; so you don’t want to screw up… and particularly those sequencing – the one two three; and the one two sequencing requires some wit; some agility; and so I think some people who got tongue-tied were aware of that; and it put pressure on them… I think we are very inhibited. I mean academics specifically; with paying people more generally are employed because they are good at stuff; not because they are bad at stuff; and the fear is that you are going to be bad at it; so you try and conceal what you are bad at. I mean, it is a pretty natural response; but it does produce this very inward turning; cramped; crouched; approach.”

Finally, P28 mentioned that the facilitator had a hand in establishing the standard of performance that was or was not required: “I am very anxious with things like improv and I thought – I was thinking: well, if something goes – I was quite expecting things to go wrong; but it actually started to feel like anything – like [the facilitator] would accept anything, which was quite nice because it meant that we could do anything without being frightened of being looked at funny.”

**Power**

Four references were made to power. Respondents recognised that in the context of improvisation participants had the power to give challenging or affirming offers to others. P20 explained her experience outlined above about being ‘given’ the act of going to the toilet: “I think it was interesting… the whole thing about power.”

Power came up again in ‘zoom, screech’ with P24 noticing: “I thought it was quite interesting how people cottoned on quite quickly that you could – you could kind of force the person next to you to keep going, do you know what I mean? But there were a couple of places where people would kind of zoom and screech and screech each other… And they were sort of turning heads all the time like a little tennis match. I thought it was funny how people [found] out that they could change direction and they sort of played with that.”
P4 commented: “There are power dynamics that come into play with it but from a creative perspective you don’t have to put anything on the line. You just make an on the spot decision about ‘go, stop’.”

**Safety**

The concept of safety is similar to the theme of trust outlined above but refers to being in some way protected from judgement or criticism. Eighteen mentions were made of being or feeling safe in the session and how this helped participants to overcome the negative consequences of blame and the fear of failure.

P9 said: “I felt safe.” P12 observed: “it being a relatively safe environment.” P20 mentioned that improvisation provides: “…a safe environment and I think for that reason I don’t actually need anything else.” P21 commented: “I think the environment was a safe one.” P25 also stated: “…it was a safe environment so it was fine.”

P26 explained his feeling: “…it’s a little unnerving at first… but then that feeling passes when you know that you are in a safe place… I think improv is a safer place to operate as anything I have ever come across in my life, including therapy… there is nothing like feeling safe and at home.”

P28 pointed out that the group provided support and safety: “Yes, and the fact that we were all in this unfamiliar thing together, the more you supported each other, the safer you would be in that environment.” P8: “Even though we were pretending you got to a stage where it was okay to make a mistake… and I think that was the intention to make you feel comfortable and safe.” P16 suggested that the facilitator provided safety: “I felt safe from blame because the facilitator was very good… so it was a safe space.”

P15 however, tempered these responses with this comment: “no matter how safe you feel; I think there is always a bit of… a niggling feeling that: ‘oh what happens if I do mess up?’”
Dialogue

There were no specific references to the term dialogue, although the nature and quality of communication was discussed in some detail by participants. Firstly, it emerged that improvisation encouraged participants to take note of the manner in which they communicated their offers to others in order to be understood effectively and secondly, it brought into sharp relief the way in which they then listened to others, through various sensory mechanisms. The quality of listening was remarked upon – it was not a listening that included anticipating what the thoughts or message of the other person would be, but rather a focused concentration on what it was they were actually saying. The ‘responsibility’ of taking on another person’s offer became more a ‘response ability’. By not allowing them to do so, improvisation highlighted the manner in which many respondents pre-prepare what they say in their normal lives. It also revealed how beholden some respondents were to the vernacular in which they felt most comfortable communicating. In many cases, this was verbal language and more specifically their ‘mother tongue’. Focus, concentration and attention were all key themes that emerged during the interview process.

Improvisation challenged participants to take an altered perspective, to collaborate, to build upon what other people are saying rather than challenging it and to let go of one’s own agenda. The transformative power of collaboration (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998, p. 180) was referred to by a number of interviewees. For some participants, enhanced communication led to a deeper understanding of themselves and one another. However, it was noted that improvisation created a false time-based environment in which responses are required almost immediately, and so the opportunity to cogitate or reflect upon one’s offerings was not possible for participants who would have preferred to do so.
Communication

There were twenty-five references made to communication. The predominant view was that improvisation aided communication. P8 stated: “Improvisation skills taught us basic people skills, essentially. The way you speak to people, the way you approach people, your body language, what you’re saying, if somebody says a certain thing do you just completely cut them off without fully hearing what they have to say. I think improvisation is a well-rounded package to basically take us adults in the working industry back to basic communication skills. Because we’ve learned just to send an email without any emotions attached to it. We know how to write a proper email but face-to-face we can’t communicate. So I think that improvisation forces you in a relaxed environment to do that.”

P8 explained how the rules set up at the beginning of the session ensured a decent communication flow: “You can’t say no. You can’t say I don’t have an idea. Whatever idea comes out, even if it’s gibberish or even if it’s something backward or upside down, say it. Because at least it keeps the communication flowing so again, in the ‘yes, and’ game, it continued the conversation. You didn’t enforce an idea. It just kept a continual flow. So if communication barriers are broken down in business and people understand where everybody’s coming from there will be much better flow business-wise.”
P8 again stated: “You learn to communicate and speak properly and behave properly and treat each other with respect and to listen.” P11 described how she and her partner learned to communicate better during the course of the exercise: “I wasn’t interpreted correctly; but it was completely fair. I think they thought I was baking something; or doing a cooking show; and actually I was trying to teach economics; but that’s okay. I didn’t mind their interpretation. I have to say that the lady who was upstream from me; she had my undivided total focus for that period of time where she was delivering; total tunnel vision focus. I would have to respond; and I knew I had to interpret what she was trying to say to me. So had to look at her face and the tone of her voice; and everything that she did, trying to fit a story there. So she had undivided attention from me; a level of focus I usually can’t give.”

P12 highlighted the manner in which improvisation asked participants to consider their responses to one another: “the way you respond to people can really close down conversations; or open them up; and I think that is a kind of tool; or illustration that can be really helpfully demonstrated by this kind of exercise; and that even where you get more – how can I say – constrained situations where you have to come out with a particular outcome; where it is more goal directed; I still think that an approach; almost like an approached way you listen to people; and not go into defensive modes; or a combative state is probably a very helpful thing to demonstrate; and that if you can open up thinking and listen... you can get a better outcome. So in that sense I think it could be usefully applied.”

P9 saw the games as a way of breaking down the inhibitions that limit communication: “Sometimes people are afraid to say things to each other; but through games... you actually get the message across. So I think definitely it is a useful tool specifically for team building...”

P19 mentioned that having a relatively unstructured agenda aided communication: “when you allow the conversation to take whatever direction, it frees you up from the formal environment where conversation is highly structured; you must keep to the point; and not depart from this; and so on; and in fact in a free conversation like that you end up understanding each other… much better than when it is structured; and what it also does is that the listener gets beneath what the person thinks; or who the person is by what they say and how they say it; whereas when it is highly structured it is a posture that one adopts and
you have to speak in a certain way; and you have to take the conversation in a certain way; and so on; and you are not allowed to come back and forth; otherwise you are accused of not being focused.”

The theme of understanding one another better through improvisation was continued by P33, who explained: “I think I am a very good example of it; where people talk; or say you know at work; this person is telling you of a problem; you think you know what she is going to say; but you don’t – maybe it’s a different problem. So I think we are too quick to answer. We don’t listen and listen to the whole problem maybe so that we can be on the same line.”

A number of respondents also mentioned the non-verbal aspects of communication that were enhanced through doing physical exercises. P25 explained: “I think for me, I take in things more visually. I’m a visual person; so if I’m trying to think of something, I’ll rather play with my hands; or see; or act it out. Act it out; it makes the problem more real; and ja for me it helps; and also engagement as well. So people are not taking each other too seriously; everybody is involved with it; and communication is faster when you visually – you look at something.”

P11 explained how she enjoyed being heard during the course of the session: “It was great; because stuff that I dropped in stayed in; and that made me feel good.” P20 made a similar observation: “I did feel more listened to; maybe in terms of the gibberish game; that was quite funny to see what comes out if you say something without words. It was actually you being noticed. It is almost like what you are offering and what you are giving is received.”

The affirmation of attention was also important for P14 who said: “it made me feel good that other people were listening exactly to what I had to say when I had to say it.”

While the literature review emphasised the manner in which improvisation can encourage dialogue rather than debate P13 equated the storytelling exercises to a form of debate: “I like to kind of answer questions; and debate; and you know kind of battle of wits kind of situations... it could at least get people to think a bit… about how they respond and to listen more.”

P32 became conscious of the mutual obligation inherent in the task and that it was incumbent upon both parties to communicate better: “…one sort of gradually realised that a lot of what
was being asked of you was something transferred from somebody else who was also thinking off the top of their head; and maybe not framing things very clearly; so one had to both listen and then interpret… whatever was coming at you.”

As in all forms of communication there is still scope for misunderstanding in improvisation as evidenced by P25: “sometimes you misunderstand people; and sometimes you just need... to actually try and get the person to really explain where they are coming from; so that you don’t misunderstand them... the ‘yes, and’ thing really helped... by the time the person has spoken... you have complete clarity on what they were speaking about.”

P26 however, described a depth of conversation that is possible in improvisation far earlier than in his normal life: “I find it gets to a level or depth that is very human; and real; and important pretty quickly. You know, people can sort of be with each other for a long time and pretend that they had a real conversation; but they don’t feel much; but I think when people really listen, you can sort of access little tiny parts of people’s soul a little bit; and I think that’s when we make progress.”

**Listening**

The capacity to listen was something that emerged on fifty-six occasions during the interview process. Participants commented on the increased level of focus that many of the games required. P13: “…it just makes you focus really, which is good, you know. I don’t know if it enhanced the quality of my listening, but it did make me focus... everyone had to kind of work together; and listen to each other; and bounce off each other; which is good and it kind of forces you to communicate. Yeah I can see what you are saying that it does kind of get you – make you listen to what other people are saying in order to respond.”

P14 also spoke of the requirement to listen: “If I didn’t listen I wouldn’t have been able to perform the exercise properly and I wouldn’t have been able to participate properly with them; and to improvise to the best of my ability.” P25 noted: “…if you do not listen, you end up losing the plot; and then everybody is waiting for you; and there is no repeat what you have done; so that I can try and make up a story from what you’ve done; or repeat what you have done... active listening... if you don’t listen very carefully; you end up repeating what the person said before... makes you think and makes you listen. I think listening was the
most important thing in that game.” P32 explained: “...because what people next door to you were saying sort of you know, changed and got quite complex; you had to respond either in actions or in words; so yes, I think one – through the process one picked up that yes, you do have to listen quite carefully and make sure you are responding to what was asked of you. Whether that continued after the session, you know, probably not; but I think during the session... I’d say yes.”

P26 stressed how vital listening is in improvisation: “...you can’t do improv unless you are always listening because you will miss what someone is offering you; or you’ll miss sort of a key; or a little buzz word that can bring you or your scene to sort of a next level, yeah it would be impossible without your listening skills... It becomes pretty apparent when you are not listening and I think people pick up pretty quickly that if there’s anything they should be doing it’s that first, you know.”

P4 explained what the session asked of him: “I’m going to listen to what they say and I’m going to see how I could take what they’ve said and enhance it. I think certainly, if you look at psychology a lot of psychologists will reflect back, you say something and I say ‘so what I’m hearing is...’ and repackage it for the person, which is kind of the same thing. It’s instead of inputting my own opinion I’m more restating it in a way that might be quite helpful and then it encourages the other person to come back and pick it up from there and then you can move on. It certainly helps momentum.”

For P5, enhanced listening improved the flow of the session: “…they responded so automatically. I mean there was conversation that wasn’t planned and we were just told to carry on; and the one just automatically latched onto the other one.” P12 suggested this might be usefully applied outside of improvisation: “…almost like an approached way you listen to people; and not go into defensive modes; or a combative state is probably a very helpful thing to demonstrate; and that if you can open up thinking and listen; as opposed to always approach[ing]; you can get a better outcome. So in that sense I think it could be usefully applied.”

P6 explained that the need to listen was introduced gently to the group, in a non-confrontational fashion: “I do think from a group point of view being able to highlight the importance and necessity to listen is very important and again this gives a very non-
judgemental way of highlighting that, without having to pinpoint anyone and say listen you’re not listening or you are listening particularly well… you’re highlighting that very subtly. That would be my comment on those exercises because they weren’t again explicitly obviously doing that.”

P6 equated the need to listen with more than just auditory listening. It forced her to take in her colleagues messages visually too: “I think it was about listening or certainly what I noticed in the group, it highlighted the need to listen to more than just what was being said, so in other words to listen to the tone, to listen to the behavioural link or the action associated with what was being said, so yes I do think it was effective in highlighting listening.” P15 also mentioned the physical or visual aspect of listening: “It is amazing how words are so powerful; and to try and train our mind to do something different from what we are trained to do; it’s tough. I actually found I started watching people rather than listening... I was listening; but I also watched as like a double check.” As did P18, who said: “actually when I listen to somebody my mind needs to go on and just try to see the picture.”

P13 mentioned that the major benefit of improvisation was: “I would say to focus; and to get you to think quick, I think, and respond to each other a little bit more.” P14 stated: “I was more attentive... I was aware that my listening skills were very crucial in the session, so I put all my focus onto listening; where a lot of the time I don’t do that.” P7 found listening easier due to a lack of other stimuli: “There weren’t a helluva lot of things to distract us.”

Various respondents said that improvisation made them realise how their listening skills could be improved. P7 said that improvisation: “...caught me out a couple of times, despite sort of trying to concentrate on the reverse meanings.” Referring specifically to ‘yes, and’ P8 mentioned: “for me the ‘yes, and’ game was a major listening game and also we don’t really listen to what other people have to say. We hear what they have to say but we always have a counter idea. So I really like that because it makes you step back and wait for the good idea no matter whose idea that is.” P11 remarked: “No I don’t think I listened particularly well. I don’t think I got any better at listening. I think I should have; but I was too wrapped up in my own terror for most of it. Also, we didn’t have a lot of duals; you know where you had to respond on stage to someone.” However, when pressed on ‘yes, and’ in particular P11 said: “It went great places; and there I did have to listen. I also had to be okay – ja, you see
because I had elements that I wanted to put into that story and shoe-horning them in wouldn’t have been a good idea. So I had to let it go where it needed to go; and I listened. I did listen there.”

P8 described how often one formulates a message while another person is still talking, which was not possible in improvisation because it forced her to drop her agenda: “…a lot of times we’re always presumptuous. Because we think we know the way things are but with improvisation you don’t know what the person is going to say. So if they were to say the sky is purple and you need to agree with a ‘yes, and’ you need to know what they said so you can add onto it... whereas in life we come and say this is my way or this is the way I’ve always done it so let’s just continue this way. With improvisation you can’t do that.” P21 made a similar observation: “I don’t think anybody realistically is always heard or people have their own perceptions and filters that they use when they listen to you.”

P29 drew a parallel with listening in his professional context: “Sometimes, particularly in the sequencing; the word sequencing; the story stuff, where it’s in the round and everybody’s watching. I mean, it is exactly like it would be in the academic seminar. You are listening and thinking: if I was asked that, what would my answer be?” P30 commented: “I think that is a good exercise as well, just to remind you how to listen again without throwing in your two cents before they are finished.”

A large proportion of the interviewees mentioned the fact that they are already good listeners. P12 said: “Yes it did; but also I realised that it was a very comfortable exercise for me because I’m not a controlling person by nature; so I’m very happy to listen and add on. You know it wasn’t an alien experience for me. So I sort of observed in the exercise that some of the things were kind of what you do, would be more comfortable doing, than other things; and that was an example for me where I find that really quite a fun game and easy and light.”

P16 observed: “I pride myself as a good listener; but I know I am not as good as I think I am; and it was a nice reminder of how important it is and how good it feels to listen. So that was useful. It was useful in as much as it reminded me that I am not as good as I think I am at listening sometimes.”

P17 described himself as: “already being a fairly astute listener... I am a very comfortable listener; I tend to gravitate towards listening; as opposed to being vocal myself; and I didn’t
find my listening improving throughout the session. I think it was fairly consistent; and fairly good from the start.” P31 said that despite being a good listener, the total physical engagement of improvisation improved her listening skills: “I’m normally a very good listener, you know; so I don’t really think that there was anything else that I – how do you say? Listened more or better when doing it; but there was – I would say doing things like this; or stuff like we did now in certain instances maybe you can pick up something from somebody else where you normally wouldn’t have; because we were acting as well with your whole body, your arms and everything.”

P33 revealed: “I think I’m a good listener and maybe sometimes I’m ahead of myself... maybe I’m not a good listener; because sometimes I tend to, before you have finished your sentence, I in my mind I’m a bit – not prejudiced – I think I know what you are going to say type of thing. I think I’m not such a good listener. Okay there I said it.”

Describing another pair in her group P24 commented: “it was good how they really listened to one another and went with what the other person was saying; because I think I was trying to force the story and I wasn’t really listening to [P14]. So I felt a bit bad about that... [in improvisation] it’s about everybody else... you suspend judgement about yourself more than anything and you really… listen and you pick up on the energy of the group.”

P20 described the benefits of enhanced listening: “...because you’ve listened to the stories, you can actually just take it on and take it further... it probably does open me up a bit to notice potential opportunities if you actually do listen; you get more exciting stories out of it.

P28 suggested it was the unfamiliarity as much as anything that made her focus more: “I think the fact that we were all in a situation that was strange to us meant that we did kind of focus on each other a lot more and it does [make you] co-operate more I think with each other.”

P22 however, was the one participant who refuted the assumption that improvisation increased his capacity to listen: “No I wouldn’t say that it sharpened it. No I don’t think so. I wasn’t conscious of it, to be honest.”
Altered perspective

The interviews yielded thirty-six mentions of improvisation providing some kind of altered perspective or context in which to operate, outside of daily or ‘normal’ life. P4 stated: “it taught you to look at things in a different way. To reframe them such that you could see more potential in things where you couldn’t see if before.” P11 suggested: “it puts me in a new way of – a different way of thinking – or a different frame of mind.”

P6, an MBA student explained: “I think the novel idea [in improvisation] I would say is really the opening up of a different way of engaging people, fairly actively, without judgement... the business school environment for me, is a context that’s not very open to different ways of looking at things or problem solving always and I thought this was a really great opportunity within the context of a school environment with school colleagues to explore a new way of seeing how something can potentially be resolved.”

P30 described how improvisation provided a mental space that took her away from her problems and by doing so enabled her to solve them: “I think just doing something like this; it just releases your mind when you literally – I mean, I wasn’t thinking about work at all while I was there; and those are usually the times that that problem that has been bugging you; or that issue pops into your head at the end; or maybe even during; and you go: ah that’s what I can do about that; because you haven’t been thinking about it sort of thing.”

P15 emphasised how improvisation took her out of her day to day environment: “It was quite nice to forget about work for a few hours, or an hour and a half and just do something completely different.” P8 continued the theme that improvisation is something ‘different’: “what its intentions are and how to break you out of some sort of mould and being a certain way, I think it’s very good.” P9 equated the session with a break from her routine: “when you... just take a break out of your normal day to day work that you do, it just kind of lifts the spirits and it makes people just in a more relaxed manner just to interact with each other.”

Some respondents explained that this altered space allowed them to be or do things they would not otherwise be able to. For example, P23 explained: “everyone was very excited; everybody was – you know if you sit in the office you are just this boring old person; but
there it was just amazing; the spirit; the vibe; and all of that...It was amazing. I did things that I would never do.”

P7 suggested that improvisation could be used to create such alternate perspectives: “…you could certainly maybe use them to open up peoples’ mental space a bit. You know, to generate a general sort of creative vibe, rather than to apply it to a certain problem and then solve it.” Engaging an alternate cognitive capacity was a theme taken up P21 who said: “it’s like you’re tapping into other areas of your brain and utilising aspects or skills that you might not have before and I suppose it teaches you to think differently and be more spontaneous and embracing.” P32 was a little more sceptical about the cognitive benefits of improvisation: “improvisation is obviously training the mind to work in a different way; but in relation to things like, you know, animal noises; and I mean it is a whole set of stuff that wouldn’t necessarily start to affect everything else you did.”

P5 explained that it also made her view her colleagues in a different light: “...that they can act a little bit foolishly, or stupid; or whatever. I liaise quite a lot with [P9] and [P31]; and to see them in such a state, or mood, was different.” P25 mentioned something similar: “…it showed different sides of the participants that I hadn’t seen before; so I liked that as well.” P33 explained: “you definitely see them [colleagues] in a different light. You don’t see them so jolly; and so carefree; and so spontaneous.”

P17 suggested a potential benefit for breaking out of entrenched corporate culture: “…this would be a very useful exercise for big corporates that are tied down with bureaucracy and as I was saying earlier, a sense of having to take themselves very seriously all the time.” P20 echoed this thought: “…you very easily get into the process or a system and just do things the way it has always been done. So as soon as you want people to move out of that it can really help.”

P22, an academic, was the sole respondent who did not see the applicability of improvisation in providing alternative perspectives in academia: “It is a different kind of thing. It’s a different kind of training. I don’t know if you will appreciate this but what academics do is to teach our students to think, you know; and to think for themselves; and to think in original ways; that’s the ideal. So if they are confronted with a problem that has not been solved
before, they will sit down and solve it; but I don’t think it fits with your concept of improvising.”

Collaboration

Participants spoke about collaboration on twenty-nine occasions. Again, this topic was not prompted through questioning so arose organically. P13 describes the collaboration process as she experienced it in improvisation: “… feeding off the other person perhaps; and trying to think together; which is good for collaboration; and team work and that stuff; and funny and very entertaining.”

P4 spoke specifically about ‘yes, and’: “I like the principle of ‘yes, and’ because I think it speaks to collaboration rather than fighting against people. You can take what people are saying and then improve it or offer a suggestion that is helpful as opposed to one that [is not]”

For P8, improvisation emphasised group members’ co-dependence: “I think it was where we had to finish each other’s sentences off, we were dependent on one another and we also worked towards the goal of being positive.”

P9 noted the ability of all group members to contribute: “…it was interesting the way everybody had something else to add; and it is what you make of it. So it is not like everything is just black and white; you are able to colour it in…”

P11 observed an instance when a fellow group member helped her by playing to her strengths: “I was standing next to [non-interviewed participant], who I knew was quite conservative; and she really threw me a bone by saying: I am making dinner; which was a huge relief for me…” P13 explained what might have occurred in that interaction: “…you try not to give somebody the next person something too complicated to do for some reason.” Speaking about the ‘chairs’ game, P11 went on to recount: “That was great. I was really interested in the collaboration. The dialogue was awful; but the collaboration was fun. I think there’s immense insight on the part of the arms; to think about what to do next; and how to gesture something that has been mentioned. I think that kind of thinking – because you are not centre stage and you have to make things work; I think people should have that more often; a sort of support role.” Referring to the same exercise P17, who was playing the role of the hands mentioned: “Right at the end when I was doing the – when you and I were sitting
down on chairs – well you were doing the hands – there were one or two moments where I noticed I wasn’t collaborating more with my partner; but it was funny; it wasn’t really something that I would criticise as a mistake.”

The researcher in the aforementioned game took the part of the hands of one participant, P25. It was noted by P20 that there was good collaboration between both parties, although not the same connection between the other pair: “…it was interesting to see how I think you and [P25] worked together; and the other two… not right or wrong; but I think you guys maybe just seemed connected even more. You almost got the hands and words going; where on the other side the hands sort of got stuck in somewhere and the sentences got messed up.” P25 noted: “I liked the chair game because we were like four people trying to be two people.” P26 described the game from an audience perspective, and again spoke in terms of collaboration: “…both the people in the chairs sort of had this trust that you could sort of feel come off of them after a few minutes when they realised: alright, this is going to go really well; we are sort of a team here, even though we can’t see each other.”

While P13 didn’t necessarily agree that one could improvise in all contexts, it is clear that she saw improvisation and collaboration as inherently linked: “There are times when you have to agree with somebody; and there are times when you have to disagree with somebody in a real environment. You know you can’t always say ‘yes, and’. I mean you can help and collaborate and say ‘yes, and’ sometimes; but sometimes you need to say ‘no’ I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

P14 alluded to the fact that failing to collaborate reduced the effectiveness of the ‘yes, and’ experience: “I couldn’t force her to do anything; so our story didn’t end up very well. I think it was a bit of a pointless exercise for us… we didn’t feel good afterwards.”

P17 observed that individuals collaborated in the ‘gibberish’ exercise too: “What I really liked was when we were asked to translate what the person next to us was saying in gibberish; and it was quite nice to see the way people collaborated without obviously having a clue what the person was trying to communicate. I got a bigger sense of camaraderie out of the gibberish games than any other game in the improv session.”
This sense of a whole group of people adding to and improving an idea was picked up by P19: “people think that when you come up with an idea, then people must accept it in total; whereas good ideas usually are just the kernel of it and as they get shaped, other people contribute to it. By the end of the process it is not just your idea; it is other people’s as well; because they have contributed to shaping it; and so it works both ways that people who want to put forward ideas; and want the idea to remain pure, as it were, often get frustrated when their idea is changed; and shaped; and they recognise their original idea anymore; but the important thing is that they did come up with something which is worth it; and was developed; and will lead to something… People built on that. And so I think that one felt: okay somebody will take this further and everybody was contributing whatever they thought.”

**Enhancing other peoples’ ideas**

Thirteen references were made to participants either building upon or enhancing the opinions of others, particularly with reference to the ‘yes, and’ game. P28 provided a summary as follows: “‘yes, and’ was probably the game that I could see as the most direct translation towards something like a brainstorming session because it forces you not to contradict what someone is saying, or to depart from it. It forces you to build on what the other person is saying; so it makes you take an idea further than just what one person says. It makes – if everyone has to be ‘yes, and’ about an idea, the idea can get built out to its limit; so it seemed like that was the most directly translatable lesson into the kind of work that we do.” P4: “You can take what people are saying and then improve it or offer a suggestion that is helpful as opposed to one that is not.” P9 spoke of the need to “allow the other person also the opportunity to build on [what you have said]”.

P11 explained how improvisation gave her the opportunity to validate and improve upon the contribution of a shy group member: “[in] the translation gibberish game I felt confident that I would be able to come up with something interesting, regardless. The lady next to me was very, very, very shy; or at least she struggled hugely with making up gibberish; where I had already done well in gibberish. So I felt qualified… I was waiting for her to do something and I was going to do something great with it; and it would be great, you know, so I felt like I could almost help her”.

169
P28: “It was interesting to see how you start to do things that you know will work for the other person.” P4 highlighted the practical potential of such a communication tool: “I think it certainly can be a practice so you can go into a situation with the thought that I am not going to allow myself to contradict somebody. I’m going to listen to what they say and I’m going to see how I could take what they’ve said and enhance it”.

By way of contrast P8 suggested: “if you said ‘no, but’ you kind of kill the person’s idea and they didn’t want to express another idea because what if you’re going to try and better it or their idea isn’t good enough”.

Other respondents remarked how this process was generative in terms of the overall group conversation because the responsibility for coming up with an idea could be passed on and therefore the pressure to respond was removed. P19 said: “there wasn’t a predetermined response. So whatever you came up with led to something else. People built on that. And so I think that one felt: okay somebody will take this further and everybody was contributing whatever they thought.” P22 felt: “it was easier to add to something than think of something completely fresh. I quite liked that. The logic of it was very clear.”

P24 remarked how enhancing one another’s ideas led the group to achieve a greater sense of “flow” in its communication: “even when we were going round our little circle – the gibberish thing – I thought okay: just think of something; I’m sure you can cobble together some stupid phrase and an action and it was just really hard and yet other people were in the flow; and then somebody would do something and someone else would kind of feed off that... and I think it’s got less to do with your own ability to improvise and your own spontaneity and more to do with... your ability to get into some kind of – I don’t know how to explain this – get into some kind of group flow.”

**Letting go of one's own agenda**

There were seventeen mentions of participants either enforcing or having to let go of their own points of view. The sessions uncovered some participants’ tendency, particularly in the ‘yes, and’ story-telling game to drive home their own agendas. P8 stated: “Initially, I found it very difficult because... we were kind of trying to fix each other’s story every time”, while P14 said “I felt that my partner didn’t really want to make it fun; because I wanted to make
the story fun and go along with it; but it was difficult because my partner I don’t think was a fun type of a person; and when I said something a bit outlandish, she didn’t really want to go along with it very well... I couldn’t force her to do anything; so our story didn’t end up very well”. P14’s partner in the game P24 explained her experience thus: “[P14] and I kind of battled with our story. I think he had something in mind and so did I and we just never kind of got it together to make it flow. So at one point I said to him: ‘yes, and the one that is a vegetarian’ – like hello – can you not go with my story!... I think I was trying to force the story and I wasn’t really listening to [P14]. So I felt a bit bad about that... Like I would say something and think: okay this is quite an obvious thing that he can lead from; and then he chose something completely weird back at me and I was like... okay now I’ve got to change direction again and I’m not quite sure what to do”.

P4 also remarked on a divergence of agendas during the ‘yes, and’ game, but highlighted how letting go of one’s agenda created a better story: “We had a set of beavers that was certainly not part of my narrative and we had a dam wall that sprang out of it. There were these two separate strands to the story. There was a ‘to-ing’ and ‘fro-ing’ of the stories developing in tandem with neither person willing to completely let go of their strand but that only lasted about three or four rounds until we found a way of bringing it together in quite a cool way”.

This view was reiterated by P28, who stated: “That was interesting because part of the frustration is that you want the person to go in the direction that you are trying to take it; but then part of the excitement is if they keep taking it off somewhere else; and probably neither of you end up fulfilling your agenda; but you go somewhere that wasn’t expected at all”. P11: “It went great places; and there I did have to listen... I had elements that I wanted to put into that story and shoe-horning them in wouldn’t have been a good idea. So I had to let it go where it needed to go; and I listened. I did listen there.”

Two participants described having their ideas ‘taken’ by others including P14 in the ‘jaffle iron’ game: “I was going to do exactly what the person before me did; where she put it on her head; and then I was also going to put it on my head. I had a different way of interpreting it; because I was a jet fighter pilot and I used it as muffins whereas she did something else with it; but I felt like she stole my idea and because of that I didn’t really know if I should go up
and do it; but just did it anyway.” P20 explained: “my first idea was the water thing; and then that was the first idea that came up; and I couldn’t think of anything else”.

P4 remarked about how holding one’s own agenda can have negative consequences: “If you completely shut it off without exploring it you may end up building resentment and an environment where that person is not going to be willing to listen to your ideas in future. So it’s a bit of give and take”.

Participants who relinquished their own agenda spoke of achieving a better flow. P4 commented: “…instead of inputting my own opinion I’m more restating it in a way that might be quite helpful and then it encourages the other person to come back and pick it up from there and then you can move on. It certainly helps momentum.” P27 suggested: “…possibly the story that I might have envisaged might have come to a dead end, whereas the other story might have grown further.”

**Tie with language or familiar vernacular**

Much mention was made of participants’ reliance on language as their primary means of communication, and particularly how through physicality and gibberish, improvisation broke this down somewhat. This finding alludes to Crossan’s (1998, p. 595) assertion that “it is difficult to break out of familiar patterns of seeing things.” P12 explained: “I think I realised how much you rely on being able to say what you mean with words.” P21 speculated: “I think it’s like seventy-five per cent of communication is non-verbal, so you don’t always have to talk to communicate.” P28 found that she was more comfortable with the games that required language, such as the ‘dictionary’ game: “because there was some English involved and because it was about words, I actually felt quite comfortable.”

P6 described an enlightening moment for her, in which she uncovered her own ability to interact non-verbally with others: “…the weirdest had to have probably been the gibberish session because you’re not necessarily… as I said I didn’t necessarily predict what I was going to say. You know, with something like that that’s not pure language you can’t really predict it, so it is by default quite spontaneous and I think that surprised me the most about my participation because I… if someone was to say to me out of that context you know you’re going to be required to offer a piece of information that doesn’t make sense and you
know make sense of someone else’s offering I wouldn’t really have engaged with that I would’ve thought, well what is that, what are you talking about, you know whereas in the session I was able to do that, so that was the most weird thing for me… and it really highlighted that so often I think communication tends to be very verbal or one-dimensional and this highlighted that communication is actually about a whole lot more than that.”

P6 also noticed incongruence between verbal and physical forms of communication, particularly in the ‘chairs’ game: “I think it allowed again an integration of noticing whether or how action sometimes does and sometimes doesn’t follow what’s being said, so again it wasn’t just communication on one level. However, this time the person engaging in the conversation wasn’t the person responsible for the action so it was a very clear, very direct way of highlighting how important it is to be aware of whether action follows what’s actually being said. It was a physical reminder of that which I thought was very clever.”

P7 mentioned: “[improvisation] just draws into focus how much of language is inflection and gesture and yeah, again, it was a fairly sort of intuitive concept. It’s a good way to sort of draw that into focus.” P14 said: “…it makes you think that sometimes you don’t have to use words at all when you execute something.”

P8 described the importance of tone in the gibberish exercise, and how when stripped of words tone becomes vital: “even though we were speaking gibberish it was more the body language and it’s the way you say things that can determine whether you… you could be saying the right thing but how you say it could be wrong… even though we were speaking a language that we didn’t understand the way we said it basically determined the person’s response or how they would perceive us to be so even if we were saying something affirmative, if we were saying it abruptly it would come across as you being abrasive towards others.”

P12 found that removing language was quite disconcerting: “For some reason I didn’t like the gibberish one. I was reflecting… why afterwards. It’s easier to act; and easier to speak [and] express yourself in a way that you are familiar with; but to express in a way that’s – you know invisible – not invisible – it’s just not traditional. I find that really difficult.”
P13 also struggled with gibberish because of her day-to-day reliance on words: “It’s harder you know… we think in words and we try to sound eloquent, especially in this job; I’m a writer; I’m an editor; you know, so words are kind of my game. To suddenly use weird – like say random stuff sounds weird; so you are more aware of that you may look ridiculous… [it is] interesting in a sense that you can still convey a message; you know, body language; and general tone of voice; and stuff can convey a lot. So tone… helps… in the way you interact with people I suppose… it probably would help you to be more aware of how your body language is and your tone is.”

P15 found the reversal of the words ‘go’ and ‘stop’ to be a difficult break with traditional forms of language and meaning: “It is amazing how words are so powerful; and to try and train our mind to do something different from what we are trained to do; it’s tough. I actually found I started watching people rather than listening.” P20 made a similar observation: “it is interesting how it sort of messes with your brain… I think you always think it’s so easy to change over; like green lights… written red; and then you have to say the red thing; that whole thing – I can’t say anything deeper about it. It is also interesting how you just react on certain things. You are also taught to react to words that – as soon as you swap it around; even though you know that it is the other way round; you’ve been so programmed, that you just keep on doing what you think you should do.”

P15 found that ‘gibberish’ was the game most outside her set of skills and therefore, the least enjoyable: “I didn’t really like that gibberish one. I liked it more than I liked the story telling; but the gibberish – because that’s something you just never do.”

P21 also commented on ‘gibberish’: “…it was interesting in terms of… it’s not really a form of verbal communication because it’s not language… it was an interesting lesson about non-verbal communication. So your body language, your tone of voice and how we interpret it, those kind of things to actually come up with something… people would also listen for a sound or listen for a word or part of a word and use that in their interpretation… you kind of listened for a word within that gibberish or part of a word and then attach another meaning to it or something similar to that.”

P22 explained that physical communication required similar cognitive functioning to normal communication: “…we were quite physical too, but to me even a physical act is – you have to
think about it first. That’s what I mean by conceptual. You have to decide what it is you are going to do. You have to dream it up you know. It wouldn’t come – it wouldn’t be – it wouldn’t be that different from thinking about language.”

**Limited time**

Eight mentions were made of the limited time in which to communicate with one another and also how short the session was. Speaking about gibberish P18 suggested: “... your mind needs to... think quickly to let the next person answer what you doing... I just need time for my mind to think what I am going to do and let go... I’m not that good with when people throw stuff at me... I can give a better response when I have a bit more time.” P23 explained how improvisation inspired her to: “try and think quicker; you try and do things quicker.” P25 mentioned: “I thought I’m fast on my feet; or fast on my mind.”

Another respondent, P4, made reference to the fact that the session itself was quite short and so could not be expected to have a major impact on behaviour: “The problem with that is that you do it on a Friday afternoon for an hour [and a half] and it’s maybe a bite of something. If you were maybe to do it on more of a regular basis then you could start to see... you might start looking at the things around you as being [different].” Such mentions of limited time speak to the temporal definition of improvisation provided by Moorman and Miner (1998) and elaborated upon above.
Seeing Possibility

With the modern imperative for leaders to inspire innovation and new ways of imagining existing problems (Wheatley, 2005; Handy, 1990), respondents saw value in improvisation’s ability to open up possibility. This confirmed the assertion that in the improvisational space “anything is sayable” (Hebdige, 2001, p. 337). Seeing possibility was linked intrinsically to the improvisational requirement to ‘say yes’ (Crossan, 1998). It emerged that improvisation allowed participants to consider an alternative to more dominant forms of thinking that require rational scrutiny and interrogation. Instead, it placed them in a space that they equated with activities such as brainstorming, fun, laughter, silliness, curiosity and freedom.

Much comment was made about the seriousness of everyday working life, and the manner in which improvisation allowed one by comparison to be more playful. Respondents noted that their imaginative capacity was exercised significantly during the session. They argued that this was as much to do with the permission improvisation allowed for imagination as it was one’s inherent capacity to imagine.

However, there was a fair degree of reservation about the applicability of seeing possibility, with various participants suggesting it was not always advisable or desirable to seek the ‘yes, and’ answer to a problem. There was also some suggestion that improvisation created a hyper-positive environment, which allowed for possibility but was not necessarily replicable in the real world. Some participants too, struggled with the notion that seeing possibility also meant being comfortable with telling lies. Some respondents were bounded by a personal sense of reality and conditioning which required them to present the world as they saw it, rather than how it might be, which is what Cowan (2007) suggests good leaders and improvisers should be able to do.
Seeing possibility

Thirty-one respondents spoke about the notion of seeing possibility. They argued predominantly that the practice of saying ‘yes’ to everything was what enabled this perspective. P6 said: “saying ‘no’ is going to lead to... it’s completely not a desirable outcome because it stops the flow of conversation, energy, activity so I think what I learned from that is that it’s an interesting way of seeing it is that the only rule is that you can’t say ‘no’, so in other words, it’s engaging you on a level that makes what you are offering completely accepted and I think that’s important.”

P8’s definition of improvisation was to see the possibility in other peoples’ ideas: “If you kind of went with, if somebody said the sky’s purple and you went with it… that was improvisation. If you corrected the person and said ‘no, it’s actually blue’. That kind of killed it off. That’s why the ‘yes, and’ game… if you said ‘no’, but you kind of kill the person’s idea and they didn’t want to express another idea because what if you’re going to try and better it or their idea isn’t good enough.”

P9 put a cognitive spin on her interpretation: “…it allows you to think differently about things and become creative.” P10 mentioned that in most work environments, individuals are hamstrung by their own agendas. Improvisation on the other hand allows for greater
possibility: “I think in that space you can’t wait for anybody to try and throw it open. Whereas let’s say we are a team at work and there is a reason why we are all doing what we are doing, you can’t really go off topic too much.” He suggested that improvisation, and particularly ‘yes, and’ could be used to solve problems: “I think that could be used for a brainstorming session. I think you could definitely adapt something like that into a legitimate… something that actually is a deliverable.”

P11 also mentioned brainstorming: “I was in that space where you do brainstorming and you bounce ideas; and you talk excitedly and very quickly about things.” P28 commented: “’yes, and’ was probably the game that I could see as the most direct translation towards something like a brainstorming session because it forces you not to contradict what someone is saying, or to depart from it. It forces you to build on what the other person is saying; so it makes you take an idea further than just what one person says. It makes – if everyone has to be ‘yes, and’ about an idea, the idea can get built out to its limit; so it seemed like that was the most directly translatable lesson into the kind of work that we do.”

P28 continued by suggesting that improvisation could change work environments: “I imagine if we had to sit down after something like that and have a brainstorm for an issue of a magazine or something, that it might be more successful, firstly because it has broken the ice and also because it kind of puts you all on the same vibe, if I can say something so hippyish. Your energy starts to almost even out… it became quite exciting not to know what was going to happen next; and not to know whether what I was doing was going to be received well or not.”

P13 however, suggested that individuals either see possibility or they don’t: “…there are people who always believe tomorrow’s got possibility and that there is more happening; and that everything’s got potential; and there are people who believe the best has already happened; and it is sunset time; and nothing is going to work”, though she later suggested this could be worked upon: “the whole ‘yes, and’ kind of affirming other people; working with what they say; it’s a good way to think sometimes; good to be open.”

‘Yes, and’ was particularly resonant amongst senior managers, including P16 who related an example of where it might be applied in her work context: “That was the most powerful game for me. The ‘yes, and’; and the reason is that I chair committees day in and day out where
people say: ‘no’; or ‘yes, but’ all the time. If people could just imagine the ‘yes, and’; and I will give you an example: I have been doing a scenario planning exercise; strategic planning exercises with scenarios for my organisation; and we the same week had a workshop where we looked at the future; and what the world and the context would look like in ten years time; and then what the organisation would have to look like in ten years time; or it might look like; what its challenges would be; and then we did an exercise where we said: let’s do a back-casting. So we painted the ideal department; and then work backwards to now and say: in the time between now and ten years on, looking backwards, what would we have had to have done in order to be at this ideal point? And I would say there were about fifty to sixty people there, working in small groups around tables. I would say sixty or seventy percent of them threw themselves into that; but there was the thirty percent who just started with ‘no, but’ to the exercise; to the thinking of the future; talking in a very disparaging way about the scenario planner who’d painted the picture of the future; and what was interesting to me was that the majority of the negative people were older; in the last five or eight years of their career; are people who find it very difficult to accept change, even miniscule change; who are not particularly supportive of bringing up a new generation; not very good at succession planning; and so I thought about them and thought: I wonder if they were forced, in a non-threatening environment like the one you provided, to actually do the ‘yes, and’ exercise; what would they have come up with? And I think they would have enjoyed it if they’d ever allowed themselves to be there; but part of me thinks that it is just not worth it; rather work with the middle management; or the next generation of people who have the energy; the vision; and will be the leaders in ten years time.”

P19 continued this line of argument, though noted that it might not always be possible to say ‘yes’: “I think what that exercise revealed was the fact that we need to be doing more of that; and maybe because we are so busy; or for whatever reason, we tend to shut down any input that we get from other people… the ‘yes, and’ game was probably the best one for me because I think from the point of view of being in a leadership position where you’ve got lots of people working around you; people that you must affirm; the ‘yes, and’ is a positive way to continue a conversation. I don’t know how far you can take it though if obviously you need to take the conversation a different way; so you have to introduce a ‘yes, and’ somewhere; but I think ‘yes, and’ is a good concept to use when dealing with people; because a lot of the time when you say ‘yes, and’ you are bound to get a response back from the
person; either an acknowledgement; or a continuation of the conversation; but if you say ‘yes, but’, that’s it, you have killed it. For that time and maybe for the future: that one always, I can’t go to that person; or I can’t ask that person because they will say ‘no’. It takes a lot of courage to pick up a conversation with someone who is always negative.”

P22, an academic, stressed that seeing possibility is not always desirable or relevant and should be rooted in pre-existing thought: “…possibilities or ideas of what might be going on; or what might be a cause; or a new phenomenon; you can’t just dream them up. They need to be rooted from there. You could dream them up; but they have to be rooted in something; they have to somehow relate to something; so that the roots can take hold and they develop into something.”

P26, however, did not concur, stressing innovation in business as an example of where completely new thinking has been extremely effective: “…some of the greatest business decisions; or greatest inventions, or whatever, have come from quote unquote ‘stupid’ ideas; and that’s – I mean, who are we to be the sort of judge and say: oh well that’s a bad idea; that’s never going to work. You don’t know, I mean you gotta – there’s a big pool of possibility out there; and improv represents that. I mean, someone says to me: go ride a bike; or I’m on my bike there’s a million things I can pick up… and to limit myself to two things by saying or being negative, or whatever, I mean, what good does that do me?”

P17 agreed that improvisation was a good platform for sourcing ideas but not necessarily judging between them: “…if somebody suggests something, all these ideas come out; and a lot of them might be stupid ideas; but you know, out of ten stupid ideas, one of them is great; whereas in the highly formal, reserved environments, you won’t even hear one idea coming out, because people are so scared of sharing.”

P30 mentioned that further practice would inspire her to see greater and greater possibilities, though she stressed some individuals would have more of a capacity for it: “I wouldn’t say some ideas are better than others; I just think the more you do that the more creative you might get. You’ll start off being more ordinary with your lies; your ideas; and as you kind of go you can stretch your mind to think more of these impossible ideas; but not everybody thinks that way either; so not everybody is going to progress to that point. Some people are always going to be sort of – everything has to be the possible; even if it is a lie, it has got to
be a possible lie; aliens; elephants; that sort of thing - that’s not possible. Can’t bring an elephant to work; aliens are not going to come down sort of thing; so some people will always be in that – in that box; but even something like this would still rattle your mind a little bit; and maybe just stretch it slightly.”

P32 was unsure about the notion of seeing possibility, particularly as it applied to her job in planning. She said it would be very difficult to make people more imaginative and entrench the type of thinking that an improvisation session inspires: “…let’s come back to what I do; which is about planning and it’s about thinking into the future all the time; and thinking about options and possibilities; but I suppose a lot of professions do that; so I think my work demands that I do that quite a lot of the time in a much more structured way and in relation to you know, very specific things; but whether one could really take a group of people who didn’t usually think that way and turn their heads around; ja, I think you would need a lot of those kind of sessions. I think a one-off would not work. You’d need pretty intensive and frequently repeated sessions to get people’s heads to change; and then I think you would also have to make sure they didn’t compartmentalise that way of thinking from you know, if you are trying to get that attitude into people’s routines; it is very easy to compartmentalise it and not sort of pull it back to your everyday work; or everyday life. So how do you get people to connect back – it is very easy to think this is fun; this is a game… [it] doesn’t relate to anything else.”

Lastly, speaking of ‘yes, and’ P34 stated: “…of all the things in the workshop I’ve used that most in recounting what the workshop was about; because I think it’s – we juggle hindrance and obstacle a lot; and if we are inclined to bow to those external pressures; and I do think that it’s – that it’s very generative to say ‘yes, and’ rather than ‘no, but’. So I liked that; and so it’s the process that produces the possibility rather than – it doesn’t automatically – how can I say this? Once you’ve said ‘yes, and’, regardless of what follows, you have basically opened the blind; and who knows where it will go. So it opens onto possibility rather than creating possibility, if I can make that distinction.”

**Altered perspective**

This section has been elaborated upon under the family code dialogue but is intrinsically connected to the discussion about seeing possibility, notably due to P4’s statement: “it taught
you to look at things in a different way. To reframe them such that you could see more potential in things where you couldn’t see if before… people found that those games allowed them to look at things in a different way.”

**Curiosity**

P4 was one participant who mentioned curiosity as being a useful attribute to have in approaching improvisation. He also suggested that improvisation provided an environment that encouraged curiosity: “I think that as anxiety and defence mechanisms fall away that door becomes seemingly worthless and you can step out and wander freely in that uncertainty with more of a curiosity than an abject fear of what you might encounter. And then you’re more likely to find something really cool and that would sate the initial fear that you would have had.”

**Freedom**

Despite the fact that improvisation is a rule-based environment, fourteen interviewees spoke about freedom. P19 mentioned: “…it frees you up from the formal environment where conversation is highly structured… and in fact in a free conversation like that you end up understanding each other … much better than when it is structured.” P20 found that structure provided freedom: “I think it was cool in the way that she structured it very well; so you know exactly what you are going to have to do when; and that freed you up… You are not tied to anything, which is actually quite freeing.”

P8 commented: “It made me feel slightly freer in this atmosphere because there isn’t… there’s no bad side to it really because it was done in a positive… everything was done positively.” P5 said: “You could feel free to participate in everything.”

The instruction to speak gibberish freed P14 from the constraints of everyday language: “I thought it was letting myself go. It was a lot easier to let myself go speaking gibberish; and I had to actually concentrate more on my actions; and it makes you think that sometimes you don’t have to use words at all when you execute something… I was free to do whatever was going to happen.”
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

P14 also spoke of the need for participants to free themselves from their own inhibitions, rather than relying on the session itself: “I have a feeling if people did say ‘no’; we wouldn’t have been able to do them properly. I don’t think people would have enjoyed it as much and let themselves go.”

P26 equated freedom with a lack of consequences: “I definitely felt everyone was free to go in there and do what they had to do… it’s alright to like speak my mind; or be free to not really worry about what someone thinks because you know, in the end it doesn’t really matter too much.”

**Fun**

Forty-one comments confirmed that for most participants, the sessions were a great deal of fun. P31 remarked: “I enjoyed it thoroughly. It was fun.” P7 said: “I found it the most entertaining. Yeah, it was, you know, fun… Funny; childish, but funny.” P10 concurred: “It was a lot of fun. I was actually looking forward to it. You know, just to go out there and have a bit of fun.” P11 suggested: “I had a lot of fun; it was a break from my work schedule; and it was very sociable.” P27 also enjoyed the fun aspect: “I had a great time. I thought I was playing… in fact when I heard what it was about I thought: oh great, here’s some fun… I enjoyed it; I would be willing to participate again, okay; and if I’m learning anything out of it, that’s fantastic; that’s the cherry on top.”

P28 commented on how she had not expected to enjoy it as much as she did: “I was expecting to have to tough it out for an hour and then get back to my desk and breathe again; but it actually was – it was really fun; from quite early on as well; so it took me a few minutes to settle in and then it became fun.”

P23 said: “It just shows me that life does not have to be serious. I was actually sitting there in the exercises: okay I will go and do this with my daughter tonight and try and keep her into that habit as well.” P25 agreed: “I think sometimes we just take things too seriously.”

P8 argued that making challenging aspects of one’s work more fun gives them more of a chance of succeeding. He suggested that improvisation might allow this to happen: “There’s just a free-flowing flow of ideas, which could result in something being extremely fun… Same thing with improvisation… if the hard things of communication are difficult to do,
make it fun and then an aspect will work and you want to do it because it’s fun. And I think the improvisation for us became a fun activity even though the meaning and outcome of whatever the project is, you want it to be business-oriented, you want it to be serious, and this will help your business. The fun aspect is a lot of times, you think you can’t be serious if you’re having fun… I think when it comes to business you kind of sever between having fun, and it’s all about the bottom line. And if you’re having fun and making money I think that the best scenario for me anyway.”

P9 felt that creativity went hand in hand with fun: “I think when you are doing stuff like that it is not about the mistakes; the objective is to have fun and just enjoy yourself… I think they became more creative because everybody sensed that there wasn’t a lot of pressure and it was nice; light-hearted fun.”

P20 referred to fun as a source of tension relief: “I think it was fun; it was a good tension reliever in a way; just having fun exercises to go through”, while P16 referred to “catharsis”.

P20 suggested that elements of fun need to be injected into the workplace, particularly for those doing repetitive tasks: “…in terms of boring, boring processes… keep your own work exciting… I think especially in roles like that people get really frustrated because a lot of it [is] really repetitive; so if you can actually find ways of making [it] creative it would be more fun.”

The fun helped distract P12 from the more anxiety-provoking elements: “…parts of it I did find quite uncomfortable; but there was fun in it and it was definitely like an uplifting; a positive overall experience.”

Team-building and collaboration were linked with fun by several respondents. P13 mentioned: “I thought it was fun… which is good for collaboration; and team work and that stuff; and funny and very entertaining.”

Fun was used by P14 in the context of one of the games as a means of suggesting that the game had no utility or usefulness: “I thought that was just fun. P16 made a similar observation about a particular game: “I loved that one. I loved that one because it was energetic and I don’t quite know why we were doing it. That was just fun”
P17 suggested that the fun had in the session could be taken into the corporate environment and have a positive impact: “I think it was a lot of fun… you have a lot of companies that I have certainly dealt with where staff members are very conscious of how they come across to their peers; and they are always trying to be very serious and very professional; and often what happens is they become so reserved and they tend to hold back their creative ideas for fear of being criticised or judged; and they take themselves too seriously in a way; whereas I have noticed in other companies where people are really – are genuinely having a good time and no one is judging anyone; and it is very casual with an informal atmosphere; sort of like what we were experiencing at the improv session; and in those companies the creativity tends to flow.”

P19 tempered her reflections somewhat by suggesting: “It wasn’t all fun; but you know, it was an opportunity just to reflect on some of the things we just, you know, do every day without much thought.”

P24 described how her unwillingness to be spontaneous limited the fun she was able to have: “…instead of I think relaxing and just kind of seeing what everyone else is doing and just waiting for something to happen, I was just thinking: okay, what are you going to do; what are you going to say; what are you going to do? The next thing I knew it was my turn and I [had] come up with nothing, you know and I kind of missed out on a lot of the fun stuff that the other people in the group would come up with.”

P29 explained how fun ran alongside the fear of failure: “there is a fun element; but there is also a not wanting to make a mistake element.”

**Imagination**

Imagination was a theme that yielded thirty comments. P9 believed that improvisation: “allows you to just come up with anything”, while P24 felt that: “the imagination was fantastic and I was really impressed with what people did.”

P14 mentioned that he thought imagination was a requirement of improvisation: “To dream up things; to be able to act strongly, you have to have imagination; and also, it has its benefits when you need bluff; and lead people on a different path. I know it is not being authentic; but if you’ve got imagination basically your possibilities of doing anything are open; whether
it be authentic or not.” P29 also felt that improvisation required one to exercise one’s imagination: “I think one of the things that it was trying to do was to reward a willingness to be innovative; to be imaginative; to – I don’t like those expressions, you know – stepping outside one’s comfort zone – because actually we all strive for comfort; because if you don’t have comfort, our lives are pretty miserable; but nevertheless I mean, what I am trying to convey is that I think it was a useful exercise in getting people to move beyond themselves; to relate to people imaginatively; and I didn’t, by the way, expect when I went there that I would come to that conclusion. I was expecting not to enjoy it. To me it felt like a bloody chore. You know, I didn’t particularly want to do anything that you know, required theatrical performance of any kind. So these are all quite surprising findings.”

Describing ‘yes, and’ P4 said: “I like the idea of ‘yes, and’… We went very fantastical to start off and then tried to find ways to bring it back and then diverted off into more general ridiculousness… These exercises individually are quite fantastical so I’d be interested to see if they were done in the same style but with more serious content, would you have the same result?” P11 also became very imaginative in ‘yes, and’: “We had a lot of fun with the ‘yes, and’. That was me and [non-interviewed participant] again. We made up a story about a cow – no a butcher – no wait, a guy who loves his cow and then has to move with his cow, you know for the butcher; and he has to hide that fact from his beloved cow – that he is slaughtering all the other cows. It went great places.”

P7 reminisced about how imaginative the group had been during the ‘jaffle iron’ game: “Stoked a fire; sort of like used as bellows; clipped my toenails with it to everyone else’s disgust. Yeah, I thought the people were quite sort of fun; and inventive with that; and it inspired choice of object with - of all things - a jaffle iron.” Referring to the same game P21 said: “I liked the fact that we used our imagination with an object not just saying a lie or doing something like that.” P23 also had a comment about this game and imagination: “We had to think a lot. Like the one where we used the [the jaffle iron]… I would never have thought about the things that we thought about there. I never thought of a jaffle maker doing certain things like that. So ja you can become very imaginative with certain things.”

P11 pointed out that the level of imagination in peoples’ contributions varied, although the more imaginative one tried to be the more successful the games became: “the gibberish for
me was – I enjoyed the imaginative ways that some people came up with it; and how other people kind of got stuck at the just make noises with your mouth stage. So I took great pleasure in that. Then in interpreting the mime next to you; the gibberish with the mime next to you; the more imaginative you were, the more places that could go.”

P14 felt that improvisation improved his imagination: “It definitely made me a lot more imaginative and I felt as if I was going back into my childhood again. You know, you can dream up all different things as a child; but it’s strange how, when you are an adult, you become so much more limited in your thinking; and that exercise definitely helped bring out more imagination in me.” As did P16 who explained: “For me at a personal level, I’ve been trying to write a little story… for my granddaughter and finding myself quite blocked and thinking: oh, I’m not very good at creative writing; and I don’t have the kind of imagination you need; but after doing the ‘yes, and’ story, I realise that if you just do ‘yes, and’ you can be creative.”

P25 noticed a degree of difficulty in being imaginative: “I think in many of the games – especially where we were going round; and especially the lying part; and building up on a lie; or even when somebody acts something out and you are supposed to replay and say what they are acting out. That’s where imagination is needed. And I also fumbled the games; like also the thing where there was an item and you were supposed to make it anything you wanted it to be… you had to use a lot of your imagination; and ja, some of us – ours was stunted to some degree.”

P30 suggested that imagination and creativity were like muscles that strengthen with exercise and continued practice: “I just think the more you do that the more creative you might get. You’ll start off being more ordinary with your lies; your ideas; and as you kind of go you can stretch your mind to think more of these impossible ideas.”

P32 echoed this point, saying that imagination: “…can be encouraged and trained; but it’s probably got to happen [with] school kids – I think it’s got to happen sort of right the way through your life. Maybe you can take somebody who is entirely unimaginative as an adult and turn them into [an] imaginative human being – [I] think is much harder…I don’t really buy the argument that you are either born with it; or you don’t; but I think there’s a whole lot of things that happen to a person right the way through their childhood and school career that
helps them to become an imaginative person or not. You know, if you are in a stultifying home environment and school environment; and in work learning and that kind of thing; you are going to end up a pretty unimaginative person; but if you are exposed to different things all the way through, then I think you can; but it is hard to take somebody as an adult and then change the picture. I think that is much harder.”

P33 felt that her imagination had suffered as a result of working in a dull environment: “I’m sure it is to do with your work, definitely. You have to be always be realistic; your approach to everything; the decisions you make; you’ve got to be realistic… there is no space to be imaginative; especially in the accounting field; you cannot be imaginative with figures… you come to work; you are at work like 24/7 and you are used to realistic thinking… I think it is actually non-realistic to be imaginative, isn’t it?... and I think it’s a good thing because if you become like that you will be more innovative because you won’t be thinking in this little box type of thing; black is black; white is white and if you are imaginative you get… your brain to think a different way and that is very useful in the business.”

Laughter

Five mentions were made of the laughter that was present in each session. P6 said: “I thought it was very funny.” P16 remarked: “…there was lots of laughter; much looser body language; and interaction; very much less uptight… I felt very light at the end of the session. I think a combination of the laughter and maybe an element of catharsis – that’s how I explained the feeling light; but maybe I was feeling light because I couldn’t fail; and maybe that’s a different way of explaining that lightness I felt.”

P31 reminisced: “everybody was laughing together; everybody was doing the fun thing together. I don’t think anybody could say: oh, look at her what she did… No I didn’t at all feel like you were being judged; or blamed; or anything for what you did.”

P15 however, said there was a negative side to this as laughter was a form of validation and if she did not receive it, it felt like judgement.
Positivity

Fourteen mentions were made of the fact that the session was a very positive and affirming one. In fact P8 suggested that positivity was part of the contract: “we were almost forced not to be negative. We were forced to say look you know, whatever the challenge that is thrown to you there’s a solution. Or you have to see the positive out of it. You can’t say ‘no’. You can’t say I don’t have an idea... there’s no bad side to it really because it was done in a positive... everything was done positively. So even if your story wasn’t as good as the second or third person the fact that you said it and didn’t jump back was a positive for me. So it made me feel that no matter what we say and what we do here it kind of works, so let’s just go with that. So I felt freer and more playful in that atmosphere.”

Speaking of ‘yes, and’ P34 remarked: “I thought the ‘yes, and’ was more about positivity than possibility.” P22 concurred: “the main idea I got from it I think [was] the whole idea of actually learning how to give positive feedback to people as opposed to learning how to criticise what they are saying... [it] is quite a good strategy for co-operation… You know one should practice giving positive feedback and learning how to reinforce what people are saying; rather than negative; but it would come with practice really. I don’t know if I would do it well enough; that’s what struck me.” P32 agreed, saying: “I suppose just the notion of trying to think positively about things was quite useful; and trying not to block things by saying ‘no’. I think that was useful... I think that was the main thing I took away from it.”

P28 described how positive reinforcement helped her to enjoy the session more: “…it became kind of more and more stimulating. I think partly because we kept getting so much positive reinforcement. You start out… scared that you are going to screw up and then you realise that it is quite difficult to screw up because everything is encouraged.”

P16 described the benefits of improvisation as: “Definitely positive thinking. In fact I think I will use that exercise regularly; that ‘yes, and’; even if I just do it in the car, driving along on my way to work; do a thought sequence of ‘yes, and’. I think that is something I will take away and really use in the future.”

P19 found a great deal to take away from the affirmation and positivity that the session inspired, particularly with respect to her leadership position: “I think we all like the part
where, you know, we always feel it is always a ‘yes, but’; there is always a negative; the negative reaction to input that one gets is much easier than positive. I personally find that although I am still in that trap; but I find it quite positive in my own work when I affirm staff... It takes a lot of courage to pick up a conversation with someone who is always negative.”

**Silliness**

Twelve comments were made about silliness. Some of the games required participants to do purposefully ludicrous things that participants commented upon. P6 said: “It was silly as well.” P7 commented: “people were prepared to be mildly silly.” While P17 stated: “I was also allowing myself to be foolish and have fun being foolish. I’m not too sure why I found that so easy but maybe because I’ve got a very cheerful outlook on life, I guess and it was quite nice to express that.” P32 was less positive: “…that is the sort of thing I usually run away from doing; being silly, you know, I mean, being kind of you know, acting things out.”

Silliness was a major source of anxiety for several participants. P30 referred to it on five separate occasions, saying: “I don’t like doing things where I feel silly… I don’t like to feel silly so I can’t make myself do it… even the thing where we had to be statues and stuff; that is fine. It is really only when I’m feeling like I’m being silly that it becomes an issue for me… the other game we did that we had to make the funny noise? It is the same thing. I don’t feel comfortable doing it. I feel silly; ridiculous.”

Referring to a warm-up game in which participants were asked to do the ‘funky chicken’, P20 said: “I think right at the beginning when she said we were going to do the funky chicken I was worried that it was going to really, really be a silly game; but… you got into it so quickly that it almost got you through the edge without you even thinking about it. By the time you got to doing the funky chicken you were so into it.” P25 commented: “Ah the funky chicken was good. I think especially we liked the fact that she started off doing it on her own… to give an example… [it required] making a fool of yourself; but at the same time it was fun.”

**Truth and lies**

Part of the way in which participants were invited to see possibility was to tell lies about themselves and to make up things that were not true. Nine comments were made about
veracity. P8 was not perturbed by having to lie: “…the people knew who we were, so if you were lying some of our lies were really obvious in a sense because if you had to say I’m a violent person who just wants to kill people, people will go like no he’s not. So in a way it was like, there were positives from it in the sense that people know that you’re not that way and the lie you were making was not… if you were making the lie you were saying I’m not this kind of thing whereas sometimes there’s a thin line between lying and telling a white lie and telling the truth because sometimes you don’t focus on people’s feelings but then there’s lies to protect yourself and I think that the way that we lied was almost soft in a sense.”

Lying came naturally to a number of respondents, including P13 who stated: “I didn’t give it much thought. I think we do that anyway all the time. People lie about things they feel; things they do; or things they don’t do; and in this case you were supposed to lie; so it was kind of the game.” P14 spoke about how the session benefited him despite his concern about authenticity: “To dream up things; to be able to act strongly, you have to have imagination; and also, it has its benefits when you need to bluff; and lead people on a different path. I know it is not being authentic; but if you’ve got imagination basically your possibilities of doing anything are open; whether it be authentic or not.”

P25 mentioned: “It was so funny how every day; or more or less; I think we all do it; or I do it; lying is very easy; but when you are put in an environment where you are told to make up a lie; something you didn’t have to come with on your own; it takes quite a bit of while; but I liked it… when we had to lie [about] what somebody is doing – no I liked it; it was innovative; it was different… I have never come across a game like that before.”

Others felt less comfortable with lying. P15 for example, said: “I don’t like to lie; it is quite hard to tell a lie… it would have been easier to have said something about myself; it took longer to think of that.” However, she was more comfortable with lying physically rather than verbally. Referring to ‘what are you doing?’, she stated: ”I think that was probably easier in terms of saying lies; that was probably easier to kind of do that lie; because it was what you perceive that person to be doing; so anyone could have said anything different; so it would have been fine.” P31 commented: “it was difficult for me; especially the lying thing. I’m not – that to me was a bit difficult… I saw [P27] as well; ‘lying? I must tell a lie? I can’t lie’; it is just the way I am and it is difficult; but then in the end when you really realise it is actually
not that bad; it is not as if you are going to lie to somebody; it is just a game we are playing; and when I got that message through to myself it got easier to do it.”
Creativity

Improvisation enhanced the creativity of respondents during the time that they were participating and it was speculated that with increased practice improvisation might make them more creative in general. The primary reason cited was that sessions provided the necessary environment in which creativity could be achieved or accessed. This environment gave permission for new ideas, promoted originality, built an atmosphere of spontaneity and encouraged participation through persistent affirmation. Respondents largely suggested that the kind of creativity inspired by improvisation might be usefully applied in a problem solving context, predominantly by allowing alternative ways of viewing a problem.

Creativity was encouraged or even expected, which made people think in ways that they were not used to doing. This was often experienced as challenging or difficult.

Participants noted the different styles and expressions of creativity amongst different individuals and also rated other people’s creativity, leaving group members open to a degree of judgement. It was noted that more reflective and individualistic forms of creativity were less well catered for in a group setting where spontaneity was rewarded. Respondents also distinguished between spontaneity and creativity, suggesting that thinking something up on the spot was not necessarily the same as creativity.

The group perceived creativity as largely a facilitated and environmental phenomenon, and not merely the preserve of certain individuals, which led the researcher to the conclusion that improvisation provides one such group environment, but that other equally valid and encouraging environments might be attainable via other means. The research largely confirmed the contentions of Johnstone (1979) and others, which state that all people have the capacity to be creative; it must simply be encouraged, facilitated and practised.
Creativity

Creativity was a major theme and was covered by participants in all interviews. Overall it was discussed on forty-eight occasions. P10 suggested that in improvisation there is almost an “expectation to be creative.”

Many people observed that improvisation allowed them to think more creatively. P5 said improvisation helped: “To exercise your mind; to think a little bit more out of the box; or think a little bit more creatively.” P9 shared a similar view and also pointed to different forms of creativity: “it allows you to think differently about things and become creative… I think it is something that we all have within us. It is how we allow ourselves to express it that is different for every person.” P16 explained how the ‘yes, and’ unleashed creativity for her and her partner: “we both went quite wild with our imaginations in our story about a frog with highlights who started a hairdressing shop in Muizenberg. So realised, you know, it was a nice technique for being able to think creatively at a personal level.”

P13 described the type of creativity that was inspired in her: “I think it does kind of make you… think in a way that you don’t necessarily think everyday… I think that it does generate creative thought… more out the box kind of creativity. Definitely.”
Others distinguished between creative and non-creative people. P5 said “I never saw myself as a creative person; but I think in... sessions like this morning, you can discover there is a little bit of something in everybody.” P15 claimed first not to be creative but then adjusted her analysis to include different types of creativity: “I wish everyone was creative and needed to be unleashed; but – I suppose everyone’s creative in their own way. I mean for example, someone is going to be an artist; and another person is going to be a musician; or an actor. I like to bake, so I think that is maybe where – and I like to cook; so although I don’t think of me as being creative, I suppose that is a way of me being creative. So I think everyone is creative; but I don’t think of myself as being creative.” P22 stated: “I would say some people are more creative; but I think everyone can be encouraged to be – you know everyone can be more creative [through] training and exercise.”

Others mentioned that creativity is a process that is facilitated. P6, for example, mentioned: “I think the creativity that could come out of a group is probably directly linked to the skill or the capacity of the facilitator to engage the group.” P7 also suggested that structure contributed to creativity: “There are probably ways in which you could organise these activities in order to, you know, stimulate creativity around a certain issue... Everyone has a certain kind of environment in which they function best, you know, as a creative, and any kind of organisation just needs to find a way to cater to the most common denominators.”

Several respondents mentioned that they felt the benefits of the session in terms of their creativity afterwards: P12 mentioned “I had such really good ideas after I got home that night actually.” P20 said: “after... [I got] home I was playing guitar and I haven’t played in ages. I think it sort of heightened that awareness... I actually do have other skills. I do enjoy more creative things when I tried to remember a song; it is a silly example; but I think it does inspire; if that is something you like.”

Several participants suggested that there are different styles of creativity, and that improvisation was not necessarily the style that they were used to. P12 said: “I think there were a lot of people in the group who were not naturally comfortable with that style; but it did feel like there was some creative energy going on there.” P28 explained: “I suppose you get different approaches to creativity and some people are more systematic about it and I am
on the more systematic side; an agenda lined up that I can stick to; it was quite strange; but it is quite liberating in the end. It’s adjusting to it as it starts that was strange.”

Referring to P22, P16 mentioned: “People are creative in different ways. I mean, if you just take that one group… there was a particularly shy person in that group who found the whole thing a lot more difficult than everyone else; very cerebral; very literal. That person was, I would say, quite highly challenged, and although very pleased to have done it, I think he is creative in very different ways. So I wouldn’t say he is not a creative person, just because he found that kind of creativity difficult.”

Certain respondents made comments that illustrated a tendency to rank how creative people had been. For example, P30 explained: “You can pick up – in all games – who was saying just normal things and who was plucking something out of the sky; space ships and funny things like that. So even there you could already tell you know, who was trying to be creative; or who was just grabbing the first thing that they could sort of think of to say.” In addition P25 mentioned: “What I like about it is that some people who you – who I perceived as not being creative ended up being – I don’t want to say the most creative… but ended up showing their creativity in a different light that I hadn’t anticipated at all… I liked the fact that – I don’t know whether to say it challenged my view on how people are creative… So some people I would have dismissed… landed up being creative.” P24 also mentioned being surprised at how creative her colleagues were: “I was just so amazed at their creativity; and it kind of gave me a new perspective of them as well.”

P34 made the distinction between group and more personal and private forms of creativity: “I think some people are more creative than others; but I think we all have creativity in us. I think it often requires, particularly as one gets older, it needs to be catalysed, either catalysed you know, in group processes such as that one; or through introspective individual kind of processes, or revelation. I mean, one can be moved to creativity by all sorts of things. I think it is a good collective way of doing it. I mean equally sometimes collective activities close down creativity. People are so bowed by the pressures of responding to other people, that they close in on themselves. So I think you will find that very private people are much more creative in solitary circumstances. So this is a particular kind of creativity that is produced.”
Some respondents commented on whether they thought creativity was inherent in individuals or facilitated through complimentary environments. P12 explained: “some people have been – have developed that attribute themselves – put it that way. I’m sure it is not a given innate state; but I think there is no doubt that certain sort of experiences of life; or outlook; or training; would have made some people more creative than others; and I’m sure that exercise like this can sort of open the space for people who aren’t normally very creative; and I think that can only benefit them. But where you say some people are more creative full stop: I don’t know; probably not true; it is more that they have had that part of them stimulated and so they are more creative.” P28 felt creativity is more situational: “I think it is more environments. I think the reason why accountants aren’t that creative is not that they are not creative people; it is just that they are not given the opportunity to be creative. So I think it is more about what opportunity is there and what encouragement there is.”

Speaking about the ‘gibberish’ game, P4 found that his ability to be creative was challenged by the multi-faceted nature of the task as well as elements of performance anxiety: “that’s more of a challenging thing because speaking in gibberish you then have to come up with a voice that you’re going to speak in… a language that is going to be coherent but not recognisable as Italian or something like that. So that takes one element of creativity. The second element of creativity is that to enact the … so even if you’re quite eloquent you might not have the acting ability to match to that and that’s what the exercise required: for you to be able to say interesting things and then express it in an interesting way to get the full effect… It’s asking quite a lot of people on the spot, especially if they’re feeling a bit defensive about it then the ability to be creative becomes a lot harder. You spend more of your time worrying about how you’re being perceived and all that energy is being redirected away from the energy that you could spend thinking [about] what would be fun and interesting.”

Finally, P26 who had done more improvisation work than any of the other respondents had this to say about creativity: “improv takes a part of my creativity to a place I actually didn’t really know existed. When I first did improv maybe four years ago, I remember leaving that first class feeling like: oh my God; this is an avenue that doesn’t matter if I do it a little bit or a lot; but now I know that that’s out there; and you can access a part of my creativity; and openness and spontaneity that nothing else has; so anyone should try that; that’s what it is.”
Necessary environment

Twenty-three comments were made about the environmental conditions that are required to facilitate and enable improvisation. P22 remarked: “So being imaginative you know; and thinking; and being spontaneous about new ideas; and new ways of thinking about things must be done in the right sort of context.” P13 said: “the environment definitely has a role to play.” Again, P4 alluded to this when he said: “I’ve got some suspicions about the conditions you need to have before one can be allowed to improvise… I also have quite strong feelings on what you need to have right in order to get people to unleash a little bit of their creativity.”

P26 referred to the specific environment created by improvisation: “It’s an environment that promotes newness; new ideas; and I think that’s the way forward; at least that’s the way I would want to create.” P17 and P21 made reference to the relaxed and non-threatening nature of the environments created in their sessions: “it was a very informal environment; very relaxed environment; so I felt it was very conducive to making friends; there were no inhibitions; or anything like that; so from that perspective… it was useful… in highly formal, reserved environments, you won’t even hear one idea coming out, because people are so scared of sharing.” P21: “It was a non-threatening environment and there were no consequences to lying so I don’t think it was you know. It was fine… the environment was a safe one.”

P8 suggested the environment included intangible factors such as atmosphere: “…it also depends a lot on the atmosphere that you find yourself in because a lot of us wouldn’t be that way because the atmosphere doesn’t allow it. So I think that the fact that the atmosphere allowed for us to be funnier or crack more jokes, that made it more comfortable for us.”

P8 suggested that the benefits of improvisation would be lost if the environment that was created was lost: “…if you don’t foster that kind of environment all the time… we can easily slip back into normal way of doing things. Even in our sessions, within the session you just need to be kind of reminded.”

P15 also suggested that environment had a role to play in her willingness to be spontaneous: “It depends how comfortable I feel doing it. I think because of the environment that we were in; because everyone was being asked to do things, it was fine; but possibly to be asked to do
something just at the drop of a hat – I think I would hesitate slightly before doing it; I would have to find out what’s the rationale behind it; what am I doing it for?”

P23 explained how her work environment stifles creativity and enthusiasm: “I think everybody would be a bit more enthusiastic than just to sit there and work all day. I think the environment is – I don’t think it is very enthusiastic.” P33 also referred to her work environment as an inhibitor: “…it is the work environment. You just do your work – we are like robots you know. We should get out of that and start living, we should really start living.”

P32 referred to environmental factors throughout a person’s life that either make them creative or not: “I don’t really buy the argument that you are either born with it; or you don’t; but I think there’s a whole lot of things that happen to a person right the way through their childhood and school career that helps them to become an imaginative person or not. You know, if you are in a stultifying home environment and school environment; and in work learning and that kind of thing; you are going to end up a pretty unimaginative person; but if you are exposed to different things all the way through, then I think you can; but it is hard to take somebody as an adult and then change the picture. I think that is much harder.”

Originality

Despite Johnstone’s (1979) assertion that improvisers should not necessarily seek out novelty or originality, creativity was equated in two instances with originality. P14 suggested that his creativity was thwarted because: “I was going to do exactly what the person before me did”, so instead “I went with what I thought of before; but I felt not as good doing it, because someone else did it before me and I couldn’t think of anything else to do on the spot.”

Problem solving

Respondents spoke of problem solving on twelve occasions. The dominant pattern of responses was that improvisation provides an alternative way of approaching problems as well as innovative and creative ways for inviting solutions. P13 said: “I think [improvisation] is a good way to solve problems. It is a good way to come up with creative ideas as well. I think that it would help to solve problems… maybe listen to other people better… thinking
out the box… finding a solution where there isn’t one; or finding a new way of thinking about something that isn’t the conventional way.”

P6, an MBA student, contrasted thinking patterns in the business school environment with those she encountered in improvisation: “the business school environment for me, is a context that’s not very open to different ways of looking at things or problem solving always and I thought this was a really great opportunity within the context of a school environment with school colleagues to explore a new way of seeing how something can potentially be resolved down the line.”

P8 explained how this might actually take place: “it’s like we were almost forced not to be negative. We were forced to say look you know, whatever the challenge that is thrown to you there’s a solution. Or you have to see the positive out of it. You can’t say ‘no’. you can’t say I don’t have an idea. Whatever idea comes out, even if it’s gibberish or even if it’s something backward or upside down, say it… I think most ideas come up that way. It’s like the opposite of what everybody else has been doing. Or they’re trying to find a solution to something where everybody is saying ‘this is the problem, this is the problem’, somebody’s looking for a solution and improvisation does that.”

However, P22 rejected improvisation as a problem-solving tool in favour of more rigorous and academic forms of approaching a problem. Referring to students, he said: “So if they are confronted with a problem that has not been solved before, they will sit down and solve it; but I don’t think it fits with your concept of improvising.”

P25 on the other hand, emphasised how improvisation helps one communicate and visualise a problem better in order to solve it: “I think improvisation would help problem-solving in that way; especially the communication aspect; and then bringing something maybe to life; like maybe acting it out; or the role plays that we were doing.”

P7 also emphasised the manner in which improvisation games open up different cognitive pathways: “I don’t know if you could specifically apply them to a specific problem, but you could certainly maybe use them to open up peoples’ mental space a bit. You know, to generate a general sort of creative vibe, rather than to apply it to a certain problem and then solve it.”
By creating a different mental space, P30 felt that improvisation might help individuals re-frame their problems: “I think just doing something like this; it just releases your mind when you literally – I mean, I wasn’t thinking about work at all while I was there; and those are usually the times that that problem that has been bugging you; or that issue pops into your head at the end; or maybe even during; and you go: ah that’s what I can do about that; because you haven’t been thinking about it sort of thing. So I suppose in that regard – not necessarily right there; but maybe doing something like this and then going back to your meeting; or getting back to the project or whatever you are working on; your mind is in a different place. You’ve given it a little bit more room to be creative and breathing room; so when you get back to your project you are looking at it differently.”

**Spontaneity vs. creativity**

A number of participants drew a distinction between creativity and spontaneity, as if to suggest that creativity required more time than spontaneous ideas.

P30 explained how she viewed the distinction: “you could already tell you know, who was trying to be creative; or who was just grabbing the first thing that they could sort of think of to say… I mean, when I do things like that, I will on purpose not just go with the first thing that pops into my head… I’m thinking: well that’s kind of boring; and then I’ll think of something else like taking an elephant to work; or whatever; because that isn’t something that somebody else is going to say. You know, I’m not going to pick what was one of them? Owning a ship or something because those are possible; I would rather think of something - I suppose an elephant isn’t impossible; but is hardly going to happen.”

P8 mentioned that: “even though we think creatively all the time, for us when we started to think on the spot was very difficult.”

Referring to how individuals prepared answers to various games P26 stated: “I think it is really bad to do that… in improv I took elsewhere they said don’t make jokes. You know, that’s not what you ought to do, you know you should go to comedy school for that; but I think I got stuck on a few jokes and I tried to like maybe work something around that; and that’s terrible. I mean the funniest thing I’ve ever seen with the... called dutch result in improv come from a totally natural place where you don’t necessarily know you are going to
get called on or called out and you know all of a sudden you’ll draw on something that the whole community knows, or the whole group knows and gets a big laugh and the game keeps going; and that’s a good improv I think.”
Applicability or Pragmatism

An additional construct was added to account for the numerous references made to the manner in which improvisation might be applied in the ‘real world’, when there are issues at stake in highly politicised environments. A number of participants speculated on the effects of future and continuing practice as well as the usefulness of improvisation in both their work and home lives.

Respondents questioned how one might apply improvisation in ‘real life’, suggesting that when there is something at stake, a disagreement of some kind, or some kind of agenda to be fought for then the practice of saying ‘yes, and’ was largely unhelpful. They also referred to improvisation sessions as time outside of their ‘real’ life, a time of play and games. It was interesting to note how dissimilar the practice is to the manner in which respondents conduct their ‘real’ lives so as to appear unrealistic to them. Of course, improvisation’s encouragement of possibility and sometimes even fantasy is not bounded by real world constraints. However, it was interesting to note that what one might call more ‘practical’ elements of improvisation such as dialogue and creativity were also deemed by some respondents to be unrealistic in power-based or political situations. Some respondents battled to see a parallel between the fantastical world of improvisation and the more stultifying atmosphere of their work environments.

However, the large majority of respondents suggested that with continued practice they would become better at improvisation, would understand the rules and assumptions more easily and be able to apply it more usefully in their lives. The fact that each session only offered a brief and fleeting introduction to improvisation was commented on and the benefits accompanying further practice were a source of frequent speculation. The research findings failed to elaborate upon the manner in which taking a practice like improvisation and institutionalising it within an organisation, or embedding it within an individual’s behavioural and psychic lexicon, might be achieved. Rather it alluded to participants’ first impressions and their speculation around further practice.

In terms of implementation, mention was made of how improvisation might be particularly useful in large corporate or bureaucratic settings that may have lost some of their entrepreneurial edge.
Continued practice

Thirty-nine references were made to the consequences of practising improvisation further. The large majority of respondents speculated that one would get better with practice, but there were different interpretations of how and in what ways this would occur. P4 pointed out the transitory nature of the group that formed for session one: “…it would be interesting to see what would happen to groups if they were to do this on a repeated basis. I mean this was a group that formed and then disbanded and I think a lot was achieved in that moment. I would like to see what would happen if that was every Monday morning, we do this silly thing for an hour, or even Friday afternoon like the last thing we do instead of going to the pub and getting trashed. That would be interesting.” P29 suggested: “I think those exercises are really good; but I think you probably need to do quite a lot of them before you lose that inhibition.” P31 saw practice as building familiarity with the art form: “I think it’s kind of like if you keep on doing it, it kind of comes automatically more; whereas the first time you’ve got to really think about it.”

P8 noted that the atmosphere of improvisation is quickly lost: “I’m not sure if you don’t foster that kind of environment all the time… we can easily slip back into normal ways of doing things. Even in our sessions, within the session you just need to be kind of reminded.” P32 questioned how one could entrench and routinise improvisational behaviour over the
long term: “…whether one could really take a group of people who didn’t usually think that way and turn their heads around… I think you would need a lot of those kinds of sessions. I think a one-off would not work. You’d need pretty intensive and frequently repeated sessions to get people’s heads to change; and then I think you would also have to make sure they didn’t compartmentalise that way of thinking from you know, if you are trying to get that attitude into people’s routines; it is very easy to compartmentalise it and not sort of pull it back to your everyday work; or everyday life. So how do you get people to connect back?”

For P33 the session length was insufficient: “I think the session should maybe go over more than a day; or a few hours you know, to – if I get back in the office; if it was like this morning; I get back in the office; you are a different person type of thing. I think if the session is a bit longer and – I think it would work – get you to rediscover yourself type of thing.”

P11 explained how the process of getting better at improvisation might occur: “Through doing it a couple of times; feeling like, ‘wow’, that one was a real stinker; but hey, I won that round! So you establish that… I’d love it if somebody forced me to do this; and they would have to force; otherwise there is always something in your mind that is much more urgent. If I had to do it with my colleagues from my old work; we struggled with common ground; I think this would give you a long series of running jokes and camaraderie in the group; which we never had; because of a variety of backgrounds and education; and so it was – that would have worked very well.”

P12 was unsure of the effect or how it might be varied in future sessions: “I wonder if it would have that effect. You would have to vary it quite a lot in your exercises… because improvisation is always like that. You do different stuff… I would be interested. I don’t have any sense whether it would really loosen up your way of thinking in another context; I don’t know that.”

P16 also spoke of the need to vary the sessions and surmised: “I suppose I would feel looser. It was fun. It was really good fun. So once a week would be like – I would get bored if we did the same thing every week; but if I improvised every week with different things and a group of people, I think it would be – I would live more lightly.”
P14 suggested that continued practice would help with workplace spontaneity: “… possibly in a business setting, if I had to be more creative, I would be able to think more on the spot, so yeah, actually I do think it has helped… the more often it is repeated, the easier it will be to improvise.”

P15 said that if she did improvisation more: “I would probably be a very spontaneous person who could do things at the drop of a hat; without too much notice; and things like that. I think there are definitely benefits that go with it… I would imagine that it would definitely help people with their confidence levels in particular.” P28 also mentioned confidence: “Certainly I came out feeling quite a lot more confident; so I imagine doing an exercise like that once a week or something might very well make it easier to take risks, I suppose, in uncertain environments because you realise that in that setting taking risks mostly paid off and in some cases where it was neutral was not ever pushed down.”

P17 explained that practising improvisation would not change him to any great extent, but mainly because he is already an open person: “My gut tells me ‘no’; but not because the game doesn’t have the potential to change one’s approach to life; but because I personally feel I’ve had this sort of experience already that would encourage an outlook on life similar to what the improv session would encourage in that I am already quite cheerful and open-minded…” For others he suggested it might be different: “In fact we witnessed it in our group with [P24]. She was very… self-conscious and shy at first and then gradually towards the end she started opening up; and then she took part in the gibberish; and that was a wonderful transformation to see. So I can definitely see that it does work with other people. I guess it comes down to the individual to what degree they are willing to try it; and embrace it; and just see where it goes.”

P20 speculated that one’s ease with any task increases with repetition: “if you do it more often you get used to it. It also depends on what you are doing obviously. If it is something you do every day I don’t mind doing it at the drop of a hat; but if it is something that I don’t do every day; then I would probably need to think about it… I really think it’s something you just need to practice. I think specifically for me; because I don’t actually act on the spur of the moment; often the more you do it the more you would feel comfortable; the more you will come up with new ideas and try new things; and explore it.”
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

P21 continued the theme of practice but also warned that improvisation’s novelty is its strength: “…it’s also something that you have to work on so I don’t think two hours once off is going to solve it but I think that the concept of improvisation can be used to solve many things… I also think you might become stale or you might develop your own techniques and then use them over and over again and lose some of the spontaneity. But I do think you would definitely become better and change the way you think.”

P22 spoke about needing to continue the positive affirmation involved in ‘yes, and’: “…one should practice giving positive feedback and learning how to reinforce what people are saying; rather than [being] negative; but it would come with practice really. I don’t know if I would do it well enough; that’s what struck me… I don’t think it became easier [in the session]… but I think it would if you practised enough... If it became a kind of normal activity and you could learn to use it… you could become familiar with the contours of it and what’s required; and you could use it… and become less self-conscious.”

P22 went on to explain that familiarising himself with the games themselves inhibited him from understanding the deeper purpose behind them: “Well you know in the exercises; if you were more aware of what the exercises were trying to do and you could use the activity that you are doing to try and achieve the goals; rather than to be too focused on the activity itself, you know: what am I going to think of next; or the sounds that I make or that sort of thing. You could definitely become more familiar; and you could be more focused on the actual interaction I think.” P27 made a similar remark: “I think had we had another practice round for the twos, we would probably have improved it and enjoyed it as well… through repetition you are going to be improving; you might even start looking for ways in which you can become more creative in anticipation.”

P24 stated that she: “…would possibly look into doing it at some point on my own… to build up the confidence... I think it is actually very useful; but it was so much better than the first one, it really was.”

P26 was just reassured to have improvisation training available as an option in his life: “…this is an avenue that doesn’t matter if I do it a little bit or a lot; but now I know that that’s out there; and you can access a part of my creativity; and openness and spontaneity that nothing else has; so anyone should try that; that’s what it is…”
He then provided a summary of his feelings about continued practice of improvisation: “…if I did improv every single day, there is very little that I feel could come and seriously phase me… I firmly believe that. I mean, maybe like you know, the death of a loved one would throw me off; but like on a daily basis I mean you wouldn’t go through too much of a wrench in my day or my feelings because I would be used to: ‘oh alright, well fine. If you’re going to throw me this; I’ll respond with that’ and if you practise that thousands of times, there would be a benefit. I can’t even underscore how huge that would be. So if I had the time – I don’t know how to make time – I should get back into it.”

**Having something at stake**

Ten comments were observed around the fact that in improvisation there is nothing at stake, whereas in other scenarios there often is. This was a particular concern for P12, who suggested: “I think the question would be when you are put into the situation where there is a purpose – more purposeful instead of just being playful how well it would work. And that I can’t really say from that experience. It is difficult to know because in the setup that you created there it was for fun and there was no pressure for a particular outcome; and there were no stakes around what you wanted as an outcome. So although you might play your own natural tendencies, there wasn’t actually anything on the table there which would drive you… and I think that is what worries me about applying it in the real context; how would people respond to that? Or how would I respond to that if there was actually a purpose that you were sitting in together?” As if answering her own question P12 continued: “…even where you get more – how can I say – constrained situations where you have to come out with a particular outcome; where it is more goal directed; I still think that an approach; almost like an approached way you listen to people; and not go into defensive modes; or a combative state is probably a very helpful thing to demonstrate; and that if you can open up thinking and listen; as opposed to always approach[ing]; you can get a better outcome. So in that sense I think it could be usefully applied.”

P13 explained: “you can’t always say ‘yes, and’. I mean you can help and collaborate and say ‘yes, and’ sometimes; but sometimes you need to say ‘no’.” P22 took up the theme of having something at stake and applied it to politicised environments in which people are protecting their own agendas: “I think in a very politicised environment [improvisation]
wouldn’t work very well; but I think when you try to build collegiality; or work with students it would be a very good thing to do; and I think even personal relationships actually… the whole idea of improvising; and affirming people; and building on what they say – it is a kind of apolitical view of the world; because if you are in the room with a bully who is trying to dominate you; and dominate a group; and all you can do is say: ‘yes, and’, what you are doing is furthering their agenda. So at some point you’ve got to smash them in the teeth and say: [expletive] you; shut up; but buts – shut up, you know. So in the real world where power relations are played it’s quite different. A person can become much more difficult… You have to fight someone, not because you want to search for the truth; but because you want to put them in their place.”

P12 pointed to the need for further investigation of this topic: “I would be very interested to know how you could use it in – simulate in a way that it has got higher stakes for people; maybe you could do that in the second round; because it is an anxiety provoking exercise, you need to make it very unstressful like you did try to do.”

Real life

In a similar vein to the comments about having something at stake, a further twenty-seven distinctions were drawn between the improvisational context and ‘real life’. P21 questioned the real life utility of improvisation as she too grappled with the research question: “I don’t know how it would relate to the work place or how you exactly bring it in… I don’t think it would be maybe as successful as it was here the other day but I think that it could be used as another tool, almost like a problem solving tool.” P8 could see applicability for real life: “So for me to be in the moment I saw the connections she was making it wasn’t something that was ‘we’re just doing these stupid little games’. Even though they were stupid little games they had an intent and I think the intent [was] strong enough.”

As outlined above, P12 was concerned about improvisation’s real life applicability: “I think that is what worries me about applying it in the real context; how would people respond?” However, she suggested that improvisation might provide valuable practice or experience for real life scenarios: “So I think it is a good experience to let people have to be in a situation where they make a plan; and it actually works out; because it might make it less frightening if you are in a situation in the real world.”
Speaking of having to defer to another’s agenda P4 said: “I think in a real life situation I’d probably be more miffed about that than I am in an exercise like that because there are no consequences to it.” P4 continued this theme when describing ‘yes, and’: “These exercises individually are quite fantastical so I’d be interested to see if they were done in the same style but with more serious content, would you have the same result?”

P10 also referred to the applicability of ‘yes, and’ in real life: “That one was a good one actually. I think that could be used for a brainstorming session. I think you could definitely adapt something like that into [something] legitimate… something that actually is a deliverable.”

P6 mentioned that improvisation provided an equalised setting that was not possible in real life: “…everyone is on the same level and I think that’s very important because it’s hard to get that in a work setting. You just don’t have that. It’s not what you know.”

P27 speculated that improvisation would be more useful in some areas of organisational life than in others: “…it depends on whether you are working in a situation for example, like number crunching; [the] finance department; where you have to get your accuracy and things; as opposed to something that is like – let’s say human resources where you can go round things a different way; but you might come out at the same result; so I like to believe that nothing is by chance… there [are] no wrong answers. I like to believe in that; but in certain areas I don’t think it is always going to be possible.”

P22 remained unconvinced by the parallels drawn between improvisation and the ‘real’ world: “I was thinking back to what you said at the beginning [about] being able to improvise in an artistic way… makes one better improvising than other ways; in real life; or in one’s job. I wasn’t sure if there is such a strong link. I think there is a difference between acting and improvising in life; and improvising in one’s profession, which would be quite different, for example, I could improvise but it would take me two or three days to think up an improvisation in my profession. Something could go wrong with a survey and I would have to sit down and think about a solution; and how to manage it; but it could take me quiet thinking for a couple of days; making calculations and checking out options… [I] could save the day you know; or could respond to the problem in some way. It is not really the same as – not an acting… improvisation; it’s not a life changing kind of episode… It is improvising
but it is not the same thing; improvising within the context of a discipline of a history of thought; and of techniques; and applications. It involves creativity; but it is not really – it is not the sort of instantaneous, spontaneous kind of a thing – it is not that sort of creativity. It is quite a different context I suppose; that requires different kinds of skills… I’m thinking about it in the academic context and I’m not sure of that link between improvisation and the sort of acting mode of improvisation and an academic mode. I’m not saying there isn’t any usefulness for it; but I don’t think it is quite the same thing you are talking about.”

P32 echoed this scepticism: “…improvisation is obviously training the mind to work in a different way; but in relation to things like, you know animal noises; and I mean it is a whole set of stuff that wouldn’t necessarily start to affect everything else you did.” However, when referring to ‘yes, and’ she noted: “…that was something that was far more easily transferred from the game environment into other circumstances; and it was quite funny. I noticed someone using that phrase the next day at the HOD’s workshop; so it was effective there as well. So I mean out of all the sort of – the transferable lessons; transferable ideas; maybe that was the one that stuck with me.”

P34 maintained however that improvisation still had applicability in certain areas of life, where old methods had perhaps failed: “…different strokes for different folks – I’d say improvisation is sometimes very useful; and sometimes absolutely necessary; and sometimes improvisation Heath Robinson you know, produces something that is not very elegant; not very successful… so I wouldn’t automatically say that improvisation is always the best way forward; but in certain circumstances it obviously has a strength over returning to something you know, that is just fixed and… going in exactly the same direction; and it’s going to give the same possibly poor result.”

Usefulness

One interviewee mentioned how improvisation could prove useful, particularly in a corporate work setting rather than in an entrepreneurial environment like the one in which he operated. P17 remarked: “Because I run a small business, if we had to do that at my business, I am not too sure how much we would benefit from it because we are really quite casual and we are very comfortable sharing ideas in a serious context; speaking nonsense if we feel like it.”
Work vs. home life

Seven instances occurred during the interviews in which participants expressed a different approach to improvisation between their home and work life. For example P5 said: “I can act quite like an idiot with my children at home; I never knew that I would be able to do it here at work.” P23 said she would do exercises like this: “With my daughter… but not around [the] work area; you know, you don’t have time to perform. You don’t have team buildings and stuff like that; so I will be the spontaneous person at home with my daughter; trying to do little things with her; but not at work… I was actually sitting there in the exercises: okay I will go and do this with my daughter tonight and try and keep her into that habit as well.”

P25 mentioned how she seldom improvises professionally, but will do so in other areas of her life: “…on the professional side life I don’t; in my personal life; sure every day; more or less; I mean I don’t have the ingredients to cook this; but I will try and do something else; or I can’t do this and this; I will try and do something else; but when it comes to my work life I try to stick to the rules.”

P31 referred to the innate capacity in all of us to do this kind of work, which is often only expressed in the home environment: “I believe we are all actors and entertainers because I mean I act also a lot at home with my little girl; so because she is like a real drama queen sort of thing; so that’s fun; and I enjoy that sort of thing.”

P33 expressed a view that the rigid work environment spills over into her home life: “I think your whole life is not based on work; and I do part-time studies as well; so you have a life besides work; and I do have a life besides work; but you know my kids can enjoy me much more. I’ve just come to realise that; and the thing is, they grow up; there’s rules. Because of your rules at work; you tend to set rules – strict rules at home as well; and it think it causes a lot of barriers as well on a personal level”.
Resourcefulness and Responsiveness

The family code resourcefulness and responsiveness is broken into five sub-codes: resourcefulness, planning and information gathering, adaptability, making do and preparation. This section refers to respondents feelings regarding the lack of props or resources both within the improvisation session and in general life.

Improvisation forced participants to rely solely on their own physical and mental faculties rather than providing them with props, costumes or other resources. For many respondents this was an alien and disconcerting experience, especially when asked to consider how they might do their jobs without the resources they were traditionally used to using. Others however, experienced a great deal of liberation in a lack of resources because it forced them to be more imaginative and meant that an element of equality was introduced to the group. Others equated management with the need to be resourceful because the argued, it is very seldom that one has everything at one’s disposal. For these respondents, improvisation and management were aligned with respect to the requirement to be resourceful. Improvisation for many respondents was tied to an increased ability to adapt and ‘make do’, both key leadership attributes in a context of declining resources (Heinberg, 2007). Only one game allowed participants to use a prop, the ‘jaffle iron’, and in this exercise elements of bricolage (Levi-Strauss, 1966) were in evidence as all manner of suggestions were made for what was a simple single-purpose object.

However, in terms of responsiveness, many participants still felt that they preferred to meet resource problems through preparation, planning and information gathering. It was acknowledged though, that a planning orientation had limitations and worked only up to a point and thereafter, an improvised response was required.
Resourcefulness

Forty-seven mentions were made of the need to be resourceful. Respondents commented on the manner in which improvisation puts one in a position where one does not have any tools to rely upon apart from one’s own physical and mental faculties. Participants had differing responses to how this made them feel in the session, and how a lack of resources affects them in everyday life.

P21 said that not having tools to hand made her feel “vulnerable, frustrated [and] incompetent” when she approached a task. P13 articulated what many participants felt, though was unsure about improvisation’s wider applicability in this regard: “you have to be resourceful with improvisation. I don’t know if it would make me more resourceful in general.” P6 commented: “I think it certainly highlights the fact that you’re very aware of what you have at your disposal… or more accurately what you don’t have. So the fact that you don’t have props, you don’t have anything to hide behind or some kind of indicator of what your role is, like a prop of some kind, I think does make you look at things slightly differently.”

Some respondents said they would be hamstrung in their working lives without the resources they required. P5 said of her working life: “There’s a telephone; there’s the email… if we do
have a power failure, then it’s like you are a little bit lost. If you want to do some paperwork, then the light isn’t good enough; so you do sit and wonder: now what now? What did the people do before?... It is difficult because you have to let your imagination run a little bit.” P9 felt that doing a session with no props felt like “hard work… okay so you don’t have that; but you know you need to do something; how are you going to get around that?” P18 said: “I mostly work with a computer… if it is taken away, how am I going to do the job?”

P19 suggested this attitude might be linked to reactive attitudes within organisations and that improvisation forces one to reappraise working practices: “…from a management point of view, one has to be resourceful. We are so used to having particular kinds of resources; and feeling that we can’t do anything without them; and for example, I know that when the internet is down; [software package] is down; people throw their hands up and say: the internet is down; I can’t do this; I can’t print; I can’t send emails; and yet there is lots of other work that one can do; but it is because now we are so dependent; our work mode is so intricately connected to the internet, that when it is down, we feel completely lost; and then you actually have to just step back and think again and say: okay, let me find something else to do. For me it just shows that once you get used to working in a particular way, when one thing changes, then you literally have to reorient yourself again and say: how did I manage to do this without this?”

Others continued this theme by suggesting that resources can often become a crutch. P15 suggested: “I think you feel comfort in having things there as props. I mean, it is almost as a disguise; like you put on a funny hat; or a bow around your neck; and you know that all the attention isn’t necessarily on you… so it is a way of disguise… definitely having people; objects; and props around you definitely makes me feel more comfortable; more relaxed.” P26 commented: “I think people always have their computer; they always have their blackberry; adopt their usual principles; and routines; and methods; and without those – oh my God, you know – the whole world changes; and that’s terrible.” P30 remarked: “To give too many props; too many things to work with then you can hide behind that.”

While some respondents above felt it was difficult to operate without resources, others found it freed them up. P11 said: “It’s liberating. I mean, if you were to work in environments where you can’t have a laptop; that’s not liberating; but usually when you are reduced to
some absurd circumstance which you can’t possibly be expected to deal with, it’s very liberating; because then you can’t do wrong. You have the ultimate excuse for it not working; ‘because they only gave you a what?’ So I find that very liberating.” P20 remarked about the session: “I like space and no clutter. You are not tied to anything, which is actually quite freeing.”

P12 made a similar observation: “In some ways it is liberating I think. The fact that you can’t get them [props/resources] at all is not like you have to make a choice; or you have to spend energy trying to make them come out in the right way… if you just don’t have it and you have to make a plan; it can in some ways be quite a positive experience in that you have to think of something else; and you often then create new and different ways of doing things; which may often be better. So I think it is a good experience to let people have to be in a situation where they make a plan; and it actually works out; because it might make it less frightening if you are in a situation in the real world.”

Others suggested that the mere fact of not having tools or resources forced them into a more creative or imaginative space. P14 said: “I have found that I am more imaginative and creative by trying to do different things with what I’ve got.”

Some felt that it also eliminated elements of rank in the group setting by putting all participants on an even level. P16 said: “it was great because everyone starts from the same level of nothingness. So it is kind of an equaliser; and it stops people who might have more or better… from using those resources; and with the gibberish exercise; even that; even language; or your level of articulateness; all those sorts of things were stripped from you. So I would say the first response I would have is that it was a positive equaliser. It was then also confidence building in that you realise that you had resources that you’ve never drawn on for a while. It is a bit like going for a walk up a hill and then your calves hurt; and you realise you haven’t used your calf muscles for a long time. So the resources I was able to draw on I hadn’t drawn on for quite a while, some of them.” P26 echoed this communal sentiment: “it’s a little unnerving at first and it’s like: oh boy, you know; like wouldn’t it be great if I had something by me; ...; sort of make me feel more comfortable; but then that feeling passes when you know that you are in a safe place and everyone else doesn’t have resources by their side; and then… you sort of feel that collective safety”
Of course, one of the exercises did require participants to use a prop – a jaffle iron – and this elicited some interesting responses. P28 explained: “I think what was the most creative and challenging things for me was when she brought out the jaffle iron; because all of a sudden we were dealing with an object that was a prop in the room; which comes with its own limitations… a lot of the other exercises were fairly verbal, where that one you had to be more visual and had to be more about action than about words, it might have been creatively at least the most challenging.”

Participants also distinguished between external and internal resources. Some considered resources to mean the tools and props that surround one, while others took them to be the physical and mental faculties that one can draw upon. P34 explained: “I’d say generally one looks – I look outside of myself; but sometimes you have to look inside yourself; because the resources are there.” He went on to suggest that experience allows one to rely less on external resources: “I’m comfortable – not in every circumstance – but to have less and less preparation… to do it almost ad lib; so the props have become – I’ve in a way become more of a mime artist as I’ve gone along and I’ve just been able to have confidence in what I know with very little reference to stage craft; and all the things that go with it, to use a dramatic metaphor.”

Finally, three participants mentioned not being struck at all by the lack of resources in the improvisation session. P17 said: “I wasn’t at all experiencing any discomfort for the lack of resources; I was just going with the flow I guess… I guess if there were a lack of resources in the improv session, I would just make do with my own limbs and… whatever I can come up with, you know; my voice; anything I really had on me. I wouldn’t really feel constrained in any way, because I can see that others are aware of my lack of resources and they are not going to hold it against me. I’ll just do the best with whatever I’ve got; and if I’m given resources I will make the most of those, great; but if I’m not, I’m not going to be less spontaneous; or less creative; or less dedicated to what it is I’m trying to do.” P10 added: “There wasn’t a time when I thought: I wish we had balloons, or anything?” P22 suggested that improvisation is a challenge for him, regardless of his access to resources: “I don’t think it was a big obstacle provided you’ve got your voice and your body; there is quite a lot you can do with that. I would feel equally nonplussed with either. A prop or no props I would
still find it difficult. I don’t think it would help me much. It is essentially a conceptual activity and the ability really to speak out.”

Adaptability
One participant, P14, mentioned that improvisation had increased his capacity to adapt and that while preparation is generally important, one should: “have a bit of preparation planned initially; but don’t feel as if [when] you get thrown off course think: ‘oh no, I’m in trouble now’; but rather go into it thinking on the spot; [this attitude] actually makes me hold less anxiety.”

Making do
Allied to adaptability one respondent referred to ‘making do’ while two others alluded to it with phrases like ‘making a plan’. P4 explained how improvisation ensures resourcefulness by citing the phrase: “necessity is the mother of invention.” For him improvisation placed him in a position where he had to make do. P24 remarked that improvisation “gives you those skills… when you do that you’ve got to be in a space where anything goes really… I don’t have a speech prepared and I don’t have twenty slides to back me up; but if I’m comfortable enough in myself and I’m comfortable enough in a group then we can come up with something.”

P20 said: “…you can make a plan with whatever you have… I find myself often in situations where I actually don’t have all the resources to resolve what I have to do and to actually make a plan with what you’ve got is to me quite creative. It sort of almost forces you to make do with what you’ve got and to then see that it is actually okay.”

Planning and information gathering
Twenty-five comments were made about the need to face uncertain situations by planning and information gathering, particular in scenarios where resources are scarce. Some respondents felt that planning was a highly important coping mechanism while others preferred to use it in conjunction with spontaneity.

P13 had more of the latter approach: “I don’t plan my life. I don’t have a plan of what I want; or what I do; but I do make sure that every step I take is the right one. So as decisions
come up, I make decisions based on what would make me happiest… I think about it until I’ve got an answer. I sleep on it if I’m not certain of something.”

Other respondents placed their identity in their ability to plan. P32 remarked: “I’m a planner. I plan ahead and think of all possible options and scenarios and plan for them. I mean I’m a planner by profession; that’s what I mean. So I suppose that probably spills over into my personal life a bit.”

P18 explained that planning provided her with comfort: “I like planning. I like my week to be planned out, especially at work.” For such individuals it emerged that planning can be a way of achieving greater certainty. P33 explained: “I want to be certain… that is why I plan things and I do whatever it takes to be certain.” Others, like P34 suggested that they try and find out as much information as possible when faced with an uncertain situation: “If I am uncertain, I go and talk to people. I say: ‘here is the situation; this is what I think; what do you think?’ That’s generally how I deal with it.” P25 said: “I hate uncertainty. I try and find all the information I can.”

Respondents largely acknowledged that planning had only limited applicability, in that plans are frequently disrupted by circumstance. P27 for example, suggested: “I start my day with my plans in my mind of what and how my day is going to progress; and many a day I have gone home and said to my husband that I didn’t do a single thing throughout the day that I can show you I have actually done what I planned to do in the day. … it’s got to the point where I am scared to plan my day because it is going to be turned upside down for me.” Others explained that having no plan can produce anxiety. P20 for example, explained: “at this point in my life I have no idea what is going to happen next year – I don’t know where I am going to work; I don’t know in which city I am going to be; so I feel quite unplanned; which leaves me with quite a lot of anxiety; just because I am used to a lot more planning.”

Other respondents were more positive about unplanned situations. P28 said: “I think that not planning too much can – well it is more conducive to creativity.” P12 proposed a healthy balance between planning and emergence: “I think I’ve got an unusual combination in that I plan relatively well, but I don’t like – I like to be able to respond to a situation as it is coming up; so it is a kind of combination approach. I would like to control the immediate
Finally, two respondents in particular mentioned that they were trying to get out of a planning orientation because they felt it was restrictive in their lives. The point was exemplified by P14 who explained: “Normally I plan things in advance and I don’t really enjoy the moment when it happens; and because of that I think I lose out on a lot in life… What I should rather do is possibly think more on the spot; so it comes across as being more authentic. Have a bit of preparation planned initially; but don’t feel as if you get thrown off course to think: ‘oh no, I’m in trouble now’… it makes me rethink: should I plan as much? My social life isn’t planned. I do things on the spot; and I enjoy that the most in life... At work I usually plan a lot and maybe it might be a good idea not to plan as much so I would be open for more imaginative ways of executing things.”

Preparation

Alongside planning and information gathering, there were a further nineteen references to preparation, particularly within the session. Often games would progress in a circle with participants anticipating and preparing their contribution in advance, thereby reducing the spontaneity of their responses. At other times they were unable to prepare until such time as they had heard the contribution of the person who offered it to them.

P29 described his experience as follows: “Sometimes, particularly in the sequencing; the word sequencing; the story stuff, where it’s in the round and everybody’s watching. I mean, it is exactly like it would be in the academic seminar. You are listening and thinking: if I was asked that, what would my answer be? So you are preparing yourself through watching other people.” P17 said: “…in the one situation we were standing in a circle and we were each asked to say something in gibberish and I was – based on the direction in which we were going – I was going to be one of the last few people to go so I had quite a long time to think about what I was going to do; and while I was sort of watching what everyone else was saying and doing, at the same time, I was planning my own little skit in my head; so from that perspective… I certainly was planning ahead.”
P16 found herself preparing “…and then forgetting what I had prepared. Yes; and of course when it went round the circle and got to me, it was a different story anyway.” P20 remarked: “In some of it I did [prepare] and some… I didn’t. I think the first gibberish thing I did; and then the second time round I thought: ‘let’s wait and see what comes out’; and I think I do better if I do actually have an answer prepared than if it just comes out.”

P24 described trying to prepare contributions as a means of relieving her anxiety: “…instead of… relaxing and just kind of seeing what everyone else is doing and just waiting for something to happen, I was just thinking: ‘okay, what are you going to do; what are you going to say; what are you going to do?’ The next thing I knew it was my turn and I came up with nothing, you know and I kind of missed out on a lot of the fun stuff that the other people in the group would come up with. Whereas I think if I just relaxed more and sort of just let myself go and like okay here I am, you know – he did that; that’s really funny; maybe I can pick up on that; I didn’t… for the most part I was standing around thinking: ‘okay, what am I going to say; what can I do with that jaffle iron?’… I spent a lot of time thinking about it.”

Other participants mentioned that it was impossible or even pointless to prepare. P11 said: “…there was no way I could prepare; because I’ve no idea what she was going to do.” P22 commented: “No I didn’t actually see the point in it [preparing]. I couldn’t anticipate.”

Several respondents described a situation in which they had an idea, and then someone did something similar, which put them off their stride. P31 said: “…sometimes somebody else comes up with the same idea sort of thing; and then I’m like: ‘oh my gosh, what now? What must I do now?’ Then you sort of step back you know… Like: ‘ah that’s my idea!’ And then you go think about it again you know; and then you know it kind of felt a little: ‘oh my word, what now? What would I do now?’ But you just carry on.” P25 experienced something similar: “…when somebody else is speaking you know what to say; I mean you are thinking of something to say; and then they end up covering your topic and then you are like; oh [expletive]; now it’s my turn to say ‘yes, and’.”

One respondent indicated that preparation actually hindered her ability to listen and be present in the session. P21 explained: “I would think and think and think and wouldn’t come up with anything in between paying attention and then suddenly it’s my turn and I still don’t know what I’m going to say.”
P17 pointed out the need to adapt when preparations became redundant: “There were one or two situations where I was about to – it was about to be my turn to do whatever was instructed; and the person before me said what I was thinking of; and then I had to be really spontaneous because I didn’t have a chance to think about what I was going to say.”

Finally, a game such as ‘zoom, screech’ gave participants the opportunity to take a prepared stance on either of the two options. Some respondents indicated a prepared response, including P26 who said: “Sometimes; like in the go screech I sort of said to myself: I’m not going to screech once; I just didn’t want to do that for some reason; so I didn’t. I just... there was a little bit of preplanning.”
Living with Uncertainty and Ambiguity

Uncertainty and ambiguity were a source of anxiety for the majority of respondents. The ability to live with uncertainty and ambiguity was fundamentally linked to participants’ ability to manage anxiety, whether that was the anxiety experienced at the start of improvisation session or the anxiety provoked by uncertainty in life. The uncertainty that respondents felt improvising, which for many was something they had never previously experienced, was a source of much anxiety. Through a process of facilitation, information gathering, trust-building and time however, they were able to relax into the session.

Responses to the session were compared with respondents’ views of uncertainty in life, which took a variety of forms: some dreaded uncertainty, others took a proactive information gathering approach while several individuals were more *laissez-faire*, finding the experience of not knowing ‘fun’ and ‘exciting’. Respondents were unsure of what to expect, so improvisation was seen initially as a source of anxiety. Later participants relaxed sufficiently enough to recognise that rather than being a source of anxiety, improvisation might be a potential solution to overcoming, or at least dealing with uncertain situations. The fact that participants were thrown into an uncertain situation, comprising “high rates of change, ambiguity, unpredictability, and turbulence” (Adler, 2006, p. 490), and were still able to relax speaks to the power of improvisation to manage uncertainty.
Personal anxiety

P4 provided an eloquent and sophisticated analysis for how, in his view, anxiety is a stumbling block for managing uncertain situations: “I think uncertainty is heightened when you’re anxious… If you think there was a black box that lay beyond that door and it was full of uncertain things, which is essentially what this exercise is, the more anxious you are, the less likely you are to step freely through that door and figure out what’s on the other side and play around in that space and then come back with what you find. You might be tempted to stick your head out, have a quick look and come back in. I think that as anxiety and defence mechanisms fall away that door becomes seemingly worthless and you can step out and wander freely in that uncertainty with more of a curiosity than an abject fear of what you might encounter. And then you’re more likely to find something really cool and that would sate the initial fear that you would have had”.

Other respondents felt that it was uncertainty that contributed to their anxiety. P28 explained how she was particularly anxious “when [the facilitator] took her shoes off; I thought: oh [expletive]; how – exactly how much are we going to have to do here? So I was anxious and generally things like improvisation scare the crap out of me; so I was anxious anyway… those things are kind of scary”. P30 explained that she felt “a little nervous, but mainly because I didn’t really know what was coming up each time, especially after the gibberish
thing because then you are kind of waiting for something else to come up that is going to make you feel that uncomfortable. It was a little bit of an exciting nervous because you don’t know what’s coming but it is probably going to be fun; but then after the gibberish thing it was like: are we going to do more of that?”

There were a total of sixteen instances in which respondents mentioned personal anxiety. Some examples included P24 who said: “Well it made me feel quite uncomfortable”. She described this discomfort as: “…definitely self-imposed. I am not so good in big groups. They make me feel uncomfortable and I feel very, very self-conscious and I kind of freeze up, you know. I have just always been that way… you actually have to let go of a lot of your own inhibitions and your own insecurities to be able to do [improvisation]”. P32 found the session “excruciating” describing improvisation as “not something I would choose to do under normal circumstances, let me put it that way”.

Of respondents who experienced anxiety, all said it was worse at the beginning of the session. P6 explained: “Some of the things that were more difficult for me was firstly engaging early on. I found the early part of the session was a bit more awkward for me”. P25 remarked: “I was like dodging eye contact from the beginning. I was also not comfortable with the group at that point”. There were however, respondents who felt no anxiety, including P14 who stated: “I didn’t personally have any anxiety. I felt very comfortable in the room”. P27 said “I was not perturbed… in fact when I heard what it was about I thought: ‘oh great, here’s some fun’; but somebody else might hear what it is about and pull out; and I think somebody else who pulled out did it more for the reason of what it was about and not so much for the reason of: ‘oh no, I’m too busy’”.

Uncertainty

Uncertainty was a prominent theme amongst interviewees. This research distinguishes between general uncertainty (eleven mentions), uncertainty regarding the improvisation session (thirty-three mentions) and uncertainty in life (twenty-one mentions), outlined below.

Speaking of uncertainty P5 explained: “I try not to panic. I think about it, you know… I just – when I’m in that situation I just make the best of it. I am not going to worry about it.” P19 described her experience of uncertainty as making her feel: “…a bit anxious; because I like to
be in a place where I know what I have to do... uncertainty – look you know, it is a way of life and it makes one feel quite anxious that you don’t know – either you don’t have the information; or you haven’t heard the response to something; you are waiting for someone to do something and they are not doing it; and so on. You kind of put your life on hold while you wait for something indefinite. I think we are all kind of used to definite, rather than uncertain. And so any uncertainty that creeps in sometimes even makes you feel like you have failed”.

P21 felt that her environment is more uncertain than it was before: “…the way that times have changed… you do have to embrace a certain level or more uncertainty than before.”

P22 distinguished between different types of uncertainty, explaining: “…the worst kind of uncertainty is when someone is trying to make an enemy out of you; or humiliate you; or play their own agenda at your expense. That’s sort of quite threatening… The other kinds of uncertainty I don’t really mind the outcomes you know… You just have to manage it.”

P23 adopted a robust approach to uncertain situations: “You must never be afraid of the unknown... You must always be ready for challenges.” P32 also indicated that uncertainty must be dealt with: “I think if one is faced with uncertainty a lot and one sort of consciously thinks: now I’m going to have to – I don’t know what’s going to happen; but I’m going to have to cope with it; or get through it; I think one can start… to find ways to adapt.” P34 was equally positive: “One can make – one can resolve uncertainty; and sometimes uncertainty is generative in one’s self.”

**Uncertainty in life**

Twenty-one comments were made about interviewees’ approach to uncertainty as part of their day-to-day lives. P8 mentioned: “…you have to expect the unexpected.” Generally, respondents favoured a balance between planned certainty and low stakes uncertainty in their lives. For example, P7 explained: “I like to have a degree of uncertainty in my life, to the extent that I still haven’t got a cell phone contract in the last three or four years; because I am at a point now where I don’t know where I will be in six months time. Yeah, I don’t want to map the future out too much.” P20 also mentioned that despite her anxiety she was relatively comfortable with the uncertainty in her life: “…at this point in my life I have no idea what is
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

going to happen next year – I don’t know where I am going to work; I don’t know in which city I am going to be; so I feel quite unplanned; which leaves me with quite a lot of anxiety; just because I am used to a lot more planning; but on the other hand I think I’ve also mellowed out this year a little bit. So I think I have got to the point where I realise to let some of it go.”

P31 described her physical reaction to uncertain situations: “In my life – normally when I am uncertain sometimes I will start blushing; or I’ll starting getting the rittle-tits [Afrikaans word: state of nervousness or anxiety]; but I tend to try not to get – how will I say – locked onto that; and I just start speaking; or go to somebody – like for instance, say I walk into a big hall with people I don’t know, I will just go somewhere and look at the corners; stand in a corner and look at everybody; and say: okay which one will I speak to; and then eventually I will get myself to go and speak to that person; and then just carry on from there.”

A common theme around uncertainty in life was planning and information gathering. P7 said: “If I make a plan with someone, I want to know the times and the general sort of ...; but if a weekend comes up and I’ve got absolutely nothing planned, I am not bothered by that.” P16 also emphasised planning: “I am a control freak. I like to know exactly what is going to happen; and prepare for discomfort; prepare for feeling out of synch; or just bolstering myself against what might happen next; and you know, I’m a PAYE taxpayer; not an investor in the stock market. At one level I am a high risk taker; but when it comes to the fundamentals, I am very, very cautious and risk averse.” P18 mentioned: “I hate making a decision, especially when it is a big decision. I don’t like surprises... I do need more information when I step into a situation. I like to be prepared.”

Several interviewees distinguished between how uncertainty can be both positive and negative in different contexts. P12 explained: “It depends for me quite a lot on the context; and in some ways I respond very well to sort of an opportunity to things that may – the possibility that there might be things you don’t know what they are out there; but when it comes to risk taking, I’ve got a severe anxiety; so it depends very much on what the risks would be in that situation. So you know, as I’m saying, it depends a bit on the context.” Referring to uncertainty, P32 stated: “…one accepts it’s there; but I suppose in my own life I like things to be fairly certain. So I do think ahead a lot and I think what possibility might...
and am I prepared for them or not. So uncertainty worries me a bit, if it’s negative uncertainty I mean, there is also positive uncertainty, which can be fun. You know, if something nice is going to happen and it’s unexpected, I mean, that’s okay; but where the uncertainty is a threat more than an opportunity, then… I do worry about it.” P13 added: “It is a little bit nerve wracking; but it is kind of fun… as long as it’s not dangerous.”

P11 noted that uncertainty becomes more negative when there is more at stake: “…it’s a paralysis if I had that much uncertainty when the stakes are high… It’s a problem if it’s ambiguous; and you feel like the stakes are high; and that you are going to screw up.”

P34 explained his strategies for dealing with both personal and professional uncertainty: “If I am uncertain, I go and talk to people. I say: here is the situation; this is what I think; what do you think? That’s generally how I deal with it. Sometimes when I’ve spoken to people, or people aren’t around who I trust, because it is not any old person I will ask; then I go with my gut; and quite what that means I am not sure. In relation to personal uncertainty, rather than professional uncertainty – and that can’t obviously be altogether divided, I think it’s best to have a kind of mediated dialogue with yourself. I mean that would be psychotherapy – would be one obvious solution; or some people would just write it down, you know; and they talk to themselves; put it down on paper and look at it; it’s like writing a letter and not sending it.”

Other respondents were less proactive in their approach. P6 explained her approach to uncertainty is avoidance: “I guess my take on that is, if in doubt just stay out. Really. So if I don’t know how to participate or what necessarily what to say or if I’m concerned about what I might have to offer I would probably tend not to take part.” P33 adopted a more spiritual ‘come what may’ stance: “Do you know that hymn: take it to the Lord in prayer? Exactly. Sometimes we as human beings just need to sit back and trust in God. That’s my motto. I’ve grown into that motto.” P18 noted: “There is nothing you actually can do. Just try to be yourself; listen to the person that is speaking to you.”

Several respondents alluded to the positive benefits of tackling uncertainty. P26 said: “there is nothing like feeling safe and at home; and: oh yeah I know what’s going to happen; but when you can learn to deal with uncertainty and know that it is part of life and it is how it is, it makes it easier and there’s obviously always work that can be done on that.” In the same
vein, P17 commented: “I used to be very uncomfortable in the face of uncertainty until I grew aware of this discomfort and then I made a point of changing my mindset through a lot of self help… I have learnt… almost to lean into that fear. So now I find whenever I experience uncertainty; or I guess I get that nervous feeling in my tummy; I almost tackle it head on; because I end up turning it into an exciting feeling; because I was never quite sure what the outcome is going to be. So almost just you know go for it; and say: what the heck, let’s just see what happens; and you can try and have fun in the process… I will turn uncertainty into an opportunity to have fun and perhaps learn something; as opposed to a life or death situation.”

P14 echoes a common theme in discussion around uncertainty, that it can be a liberating and exciting phenomenon: “I’m risk averse; however the strange thing is in uncertain situations, I enjoy it. I enjoy new things; and experiencing new ways of doing things; however the way I tackle things in an ambiguous situation is try and make it as risk averse as possible; and decrease the risk as much as possible. So I do enjoy it; and that is why, I guess, I didn’t feel too much anxiety in that ambiguous situation.”

Finally, P22 explained how uncertainty as he experiences it, resides in the unpredictable behaviour of other people: “I don’t live in a particularly uncertain world. I think the most uncertainty I have to face is, you know, is actually dealing with feelings of individuals who may come up with objections; or problems; or obstacles – not approve of what I am saying or suggesting; and want to, you know take things in a different direction; or worse, try and embarrass me; or humiliate me.”

**Uncertainty regarding the session**

Thirty-three mentions were made of participants being uncertain about what to expect in the session, even from respondents who had prior experience of improvisation work. P5 said “Nobody knew what to expect.” P16 said: “…my feeling – and I think a lot of people going into that room at the beginning, I would imagine, felt – certainly expressed feelings similar to mine, which is: God, what have we let ourselves in for; what’s going to happen?” P20 remarked: “Initially I was unsure exactly what it was going to be about; what it was going to be like; what’s going to be expected.” P31 said: “You feel a little bit uncomfortable because
you are not – because it is not what you do; but it is fun… I think in the beginning everybody was a little bit uncertain about what to expect and what is going to happen.”

P6 explained: “I think it was a bit of an unexpected… We came along knowing it was improv, obviously having some sort of insight into what we’d be engaged in more or less but not being fully, not really knowing exactly what it would be about. It was okay, here we go, it’s an hour and a half of time, let’s see what happens. It was… a little bit anxiety provoking initially, it was the unknown I think really.”

P8 suggested that he did have certain expectations: “We don’t know what to expect. And we know that we’re probably going to do some funny things because improvising leads to that.” P10 described having no expectations, though it is clear he did have certain preconceptions about what would be expected: “I had no expectation… walking in there, so whatever there was, there was. I didn’t even think about it… I think actually I don’t like uncertainty when there’s meant to be certainty; but in an improvisation session, I just don’t expect certainty at all. I expect it would be something I hadn’t thought of and just go with the flow; and I had been through enough of them and probably; maybe that helped to know that you just go with [it]; and try to be as open and creative as possible; and just have fun. Don’t try to outsmart the [process] because that’s not what it is about.”

P16 had negative expectations of the session: “I was dreading it because it is not my cup of tea; that kind of touchy feely stuff. I was very daunted at the thought of having to move around and do things with a group…”, while P17’s expectations were positive: “…because I had watched a couple of ‘whose line is it anyway’ shows and I’ve seen them use props; and I was immediately reminded of that and how much fun that can be.” P18 said: “I was scared that it was going to put me in the spotlight.” P23 also had negative expectations to do with acting: “When we came here this morning [P30] started speaking about acting and like I’m not that type of person; so I am here to sit; I thought we were going to sit and do questionnaires; or just listen to somebody speaking; but never expected what actually happened today.”

Some respondents however, did have a degree of certainty with regard to the session, including P13: “I did drama at school so I did a lot of this kind of theatre sportsy stuff. I always found it very stressful; but I don’t anymore as much as I did then because it is
familiar… I knew what it was going to be.” P15 said “…it was actually quite nice doing something like that, having done it before, I found; because I kind of knew what was to be expected.”

P6 explained: “I wasn’t completely ignorant of what it might be. I had an idea it would be fairly active, fairly engaging, participation required. I had a vague idea… I have seen theatrical improv but more from an audience perspective which is obviously very different. So I would say again, I was curious about what it would be but I wasn’t completely unaware of what it would entail.”

P26 commented: “I knew what to expect; but there is still that sort excited thing that happens anytime you are about to start improv… having gone through these a couple of times.” P28 also mentioned a sense of excitement around the uncertainty of the session: “…as I realised that it was a kind of anything goes… it became quite exciting not to know what was going to happen next; and not to know whether what I was doing was going to be received well or not.”

Other respondents showed no anxiety towards the uncertainty posed by the session. In fact, P17 positively enjoyed it: “Probably the reason why I had so much fun is because there was a lot of uncertainty about it and I could just go for it and not have to worry about the outcome; because I know that anyone else in my shoes would probably also feel uncertain. It wasn’t as if I would hold myself back, you know, given that I didn’t have a clearer vision of what I was trying to do… it was just a case of having fun really.”

Some respondents described their feelings of uncertainty with respect to individual games, including P11 who recounted this experience: “…in the beginning that [the silly noise and movement game] completely freaked me out. It causes a sort of a paralysis. So the moment I saw [another participant] coming up to me making a ‘meeping’ noise; I could not think of any other noise in the whole world at all to answer with; and I didn’t know if she was going to stop with me; or if she was going to carry on; or if I could potentially beg her to carry on. So I find it – it’s a paralysis if I had that much uncertainty when the stakes are high.”

P12 spoke of the ‘yes, and’ game as “…quite a fun activity because it was interesting the way in which you couldn’t really interpret the way it would go… because it had all sorts of
possible outcomes… you never knew which way it was going; and it was kind of stimulating and fun.” P15 had never experienced gibberish before and described her feeling thus: “So I suppose as a game that was a bit of the unknown; because it was something completely unknown… and I don’t know if maybe because, had I have done it before, it might have been a bit easier, probably.”

Describing ‘it’s my fault’, P6 said: “That one was a little bit more haphazard and a little bit more I guess you could say chaotic in that it required a lot of moving around. It wasn’t as controlled, there was less predictability to it. I liked it though because it got… I do think that the activities that required a lot of movement got people more engaged.”

In one instance, a respondent (P30) had misconceptions about the session based on the way it had been explained to her by a colleague: “when I did ask her originally: well, what is this about? Do we fill in forms; what do we do? She said: no no no something about acting; and then I said to her: I’m not acting; I’m not getting up; I’m not doing anything in front of anybody. So she was like: no no no they are going to do the acting; and you’re all going to just like comment; or I don’t know what nonsense; something she spun at me; so I was kind of like: okay, - and then obviously when I got there this morning I realised: right, this is not what’s going to be happening. You’ve just opened the whole floor up here; which means we’re going to be doing things; and I very nearly decided I’m kinda busy; I’m just going to go; because I don’t like that sort of thing normally; but it did turn out to be quite fun actually.”

Finally, P14 provided an example of a carefree attitude towards his feelings of uncertainty in the session: “I came in there with an open mind; so I enjoyed being there. I didn’t feel too threatened at all; and I wasn’t anxious; as opposed to a lot of the other people… because I was free to do whatever was going to happen.”

**Relaxation into the session**

While the session inspired a great deal of uncertainty there were fifty mentions of how participants became increasingly relaxed as time elapsed. P6 said “…it’s a short session but somehow it was less awkward as we got into it. As the group engaged more I felt like I could engage more… [I sensed] a very distinct difference in the mood, or not the mood but the
behaviour within the session… in the beginning I sensed there was a lot more reserve whereas again as we got more into it and also the activities, it might be my imagination, became almost more active… because it was a progression of involvement.” P23 described the session as “…scary at the beginning; but you get used to it. You try and think quicker; you try and do things quicker.”

P7 remarked: “I guess it helped reduce my stress levels, although it raised them enormously for about half an hour; and then by the end it had reduced them.” Speaking of anxiety P11 said: “It went away once I had kind of joined up and started playing.” P13 said: “I relaxed more towards – as it went on. I think everyone did.”

P16 explained how this relaxation manifested itself physically: “Everyone was very stiff and apprehensive at the beginning; and by the end of the session people were, I think, quite enjoying themselves; and there was lots of laughter; much looser body language; and interaction; very much less uptight.” P19 echoed these views about physical looseness and added an interpretation based on information gathering: “As we progressed people loosened up more and more; and they knew what was expected; and so... But I suppose in any new environment it takes a bit of time to work out what one should do; and how one should respond and so on; but once you get into it; then it becomes easier.” Part of this information gathering including learning what would be expected of them in the session. P30 explained: “I think everyone was a little nervous in the beginning and that sort of thing; but as it sort of went… I think, when the people got the hang of what they had to do then it kind of picked up from there I think.”

P26 who had experienced improvisation previously had this to say: “…it was cool to see the magic of improv sort of do its work when after you know the first few games everyone sort of loosened up and they said things they wouldn’t usually say, or kind of were able to act with a part of them that without these exercises you know would sort of lay dormant.”

P12 postulated that comfort and safety may have been potential reasons for increased relaxation: “I think in general people became easier in that environment as the time passed; and there was – being a bit more comfortable with each other and being able to be out there; and it being a relatively safe environment… in that sense I think there was less reservation as the session went on.”
P17 detected trust barriers with the facilitator: “I noticed that people at first were also resistant to [the facilitator]... A couple of people were resistant; and then they also gradually learnt to drop their guard; but personally I was loving it from the start. I was quite comfortable; but I certainly did notice that that level sort of stress or intensity as people saw others you know having fun and going wild; then they gradually you know played their role as well; which was quite cool to see.”

P20 pointed to the potential growth in trust between group members: “…it is interesting to see how the group supported each other; how people very soon almost went into certain roles; things like rescuing other people. There was a bit of a vibe in the beginning that you could actually feel; it was amazing to actually experience it physically how things change; and you can almost feel like: okay there is almost like… it is going to be okay; we can actually do this.” Others spoke of better group engagement as the session went on. P25 explained: “I think it broke barriers… it gave us an opportunity to interact; and I think at the beginning everybody was tense; especially when she said: I want you to say ‘yes’ to everything; and we were wondering okay: now what is she going to make us do? And finally we found - it was a safe environment so it was fine. I liked it.” P32 explained: “…there was definitely just a loosening of the energy if that makes sense. I think people found themselves in a way funnier; or – not funnier – but better at improv not because they were actually getting at the craft; but because they were learning or feeling more easy to open themselves up.”

P11 also mentioned an increase in her perception of her personal competence: “Once the stakes had lowered; and/or I had become a bit more comfortable in my own abilities – and I have to say relative abilities – then it wasn’t such problem.” This point was echoed by P26, who said: “…there was definitely just a loosening of the energy if that makes sense. I think people found themselves in a way funnier; or – not funnier – but better at improv not because they were actually getting at the craft; but because they were learning or feeling more easy to open themselves up.”

P28 explained that her relaxation was a result of positive reinforcement from the facilitator: “You start out kind of scared that you are going to screw up and then you realise that it is quite difficult to screw up because everything is encouraged… It becomes quite a stimulating thing to do and you get more and more enthusiastic about doing it.”
Only one respondent (P22) did not relax into the session but put this down to insufficient practice: “I don’t think it became easier, no; but I think it would if you practised enough, you know. If it became a kind of normal activity and you could learn to use it you know; you could become familiar with the contours of it and what’s required; and you could use it you know; and you become less self-conscious.”

**Comfort zone**

One respondent (P32) made mention of the fact that the session took her out of her comfort zone: “It’s not something I would choose to do under normal circumstances, let me put it that way.”

**Managing change**

Two interviewees mentioned having to cope with and manage change as part of their understanding of uncertainty. P4 provided a detailed analysis of how improvisation plays a role in adapting to change: “I think the nature of reality is more that you start off under a certain set of assumptions… but as you go in you actually end up finding that what you had expected to encounter is slightly different to what you thought you were going to encounter and that’s when you need to understand, how what it is that you have is different to what you thought it was going to be. What difference does it make? If you think of the world in terms of objectives and goals, a set of constraints that sit between you and those objectives and goals. It’s very easy to improvise as long as you figure out how has it changed? How are the constraints now different? So maybe the mountain I was supposed to climb is now a lot bigger than I thought it was but just to figure out the nature of that change and to figure out where you are in relation to your objectives and goals as a result and then it’s very easy to compromise.”

P20 suggested that improvisation may have a role to play in implementing or affecting change: “I was initially thinking about [improvisation] in terms of R&D teams; even marketing teams; creative teams; but even like a finance team; just to actually get people to think of other options and other ways of doing things. So I think wherever you want implement something new; whether it is a process; or structure… you very easily get into a process or a system and just do things the way it has always been done. So as soon as you want people to move out of that it can really help.”
Research conclusions

The predominant conclusion that resulted from this study is that while the seven constructs previously identified play an important and significant role within improvisation, there are an additional three themes that must be considered alongside them: facilitation, the personal capabilities and education of those who participate and finally, the real-world question of implementing, institutionalising and applying the principles of improvisation, which the researcher has termed ‘applicability and pragmatism’.

Therefore, the researcher has redrawn the interrelationship diagraph and systemic scorecard previously conceptualised in the introduction, as evidenced in Figures 13 and 14.

Figure 13: Revised interrelationship diagraph
The systemic scorecard compiled from the research findings suggests that the major outcomes of improvisation are that it may encourage creativity, possibility, resourcefulness and an ability to manage uncertainty and ambiguity, provided however, that it is appropriately applied. In terms of achieving this application, not only do leaders have to be present, practise dialogue and avoid judgemental behaviour patterns but they also need to leverage their individual skills, capabilities and education in a properly facilitated fashion.

If the reader shares the view that such competencies as being present, dialogue, creativity, managing uncertainty, resourcefulness, seeing possibility and suspending judgement discussed in the literature review and research findings above are valuable tools in the arsenal of an effective modern leader, then it is the researcher’s considered view given the findings above, that improvisation can help to strengthen these skills, with practice over time. The research indicated that practitioners may become better at improvisation over time, much like becoming physically fitter through exercise and that some participants had a better base level
than others. However, there are a number of inhibitors to the practice and utilisation of improvisation such as unwillingness, incompetence, anxiety, avoidance or a lack of awareness. The major inhibitor to the practice of improvisation demonstrated in the research findings was anxiety, whether performance, personal or generalised group anxiety. The researcher also observed a correlation between the level of anxiety felt by individuals and their opinions about whether improvisation could then be usefully applied. For example, P12, P22 and P32 were among the most anxious participants but were also those who questioned whether improvisation would be of any use to them as leaders. A willingness and an open disposition to the process yielded more positive responses as to improvisation’s potential benefits. P26 for example, was a devotee before attending the session and the research intervention did little to sway that view.

In the researcher’s opinion there was too literal an understanding on the part of some participants of the potential benefits of improvisation. It was never the intention of this research to test whether such games as ‘what are you doing?’ or ‘gibberish’ for example, could necessarily be used as tools to solve organisational problems. Rather, when practised by individuals, could improvisation transform the thinking and orientation of those individuals in such a way as to make them better or more equipped leaders?

A number of respondents commented above (see sections on limited time, applicability and continued practice), and it accords with the researcher’s own view, that a single one-and-a-half hour session can only constitute an introduction to the art of improvisation. As such, participants’ thoughts about improvisation’s usefulness remain largely speculation. While this does not render the findings null and void, a more long-term engagement with participants would be required to test such speculation. That said, a number of legitimate and authentic responses to improvisation indicate that even in the space of an introductory session learned patterns of behaviour may become exposed, particularly with regard to criticism and judgement; creativity may be enhanced; anxiety typically diminishes; focus, understanding and listening are all increased; and one’s confidence in one’s ability to make do without resources or certainty can increase. The question then becomes, ‘how does one make this a habit?’ and practice would seem the next avenue to pursue.
The findings outlined above are personal experiences and do not claim to be universal. Even within the sample there were discrepancies and inconsistencies. Rather the findings suggest that individual leaders are at different phases in their ability to improvise. The researcher therefore, has conceived of a three-phase model [see Figure 15] whereby a leader may embark on their improvisational journey with only their personality, capabilities and education to guide them. Through improvisational practice and effective facilitation improvisation can first help them to become less inhibited and thereafter develop orientations that may equip them to become better leaders. Through practice and reflexivity these orientations strengthen and become enhanced until such time as the leader is able to apply them in pragmatic and realistic contexts. It is at this second phase that the outcomes of improvisation occur, namely creativity, resourcefulness and the ability to respond within uncertain and ambiguous environments.

**Figure 15: The phases of improvisational applicability in leadership enhancement**
It is the researcher’s contention that different responses outlined above represent the different phases within which participants were operating. For example, a novice might find that improvisation is so novel that all they experience is anxiety and effective facilitation will be required to manage the individual through the session. The result for such an individual was typically diminished anxiety and increased confidence. However, a leader may occupy a phase two position whereby their anxiety or other inhibitions have been managed such that they may now start practising the different orientations that improvisation allows. This phase will typically expose learned patterns of behaviour and through practice leaders will become better communicators, more present, less judgemental and begin opening the door to possibility. The present research was not able to provide evidence that with sufficient time and practice the orientations of improvisation become sufficiently embedded within a leader’s style (as indicated in the third phase) that individuals become resourceful, creative and able to manage uncertainty. However, there was sufficient speculation amongst respondents for this supposition not to have been refuted by the research findings.

**Effectiveness of methodology**

The researcher largely views the choice of methodology as successful, given the fact that participant observation and semi-structured interviewing have both allowed for the presentation of relatively unstructured data that pertain to individual perceptions and emotions, as well as for the explicit interpretation thereof (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). To observe each session, the issue of the researcher’s presence needed to be dealt with, particularly because of the various forms of anxiety that were in evidence during each workshop. Participant observation allowed for such an interface to occur without respondents feeling threatened, judged or explicitly placed under observation (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955). The interview process was again aided by the selection of the semi-structured interview format, which allowed for new topics to develop (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Being aware that observation is frequently ‘selective’ and ‘purposive’ (McCall, 1984, p. 270), the researcher is pleased to have discovered new categories of information that did not form part of his original thesis: facilitation, applicability and pragmatism and personality, capabilities and education. The grounded theory approach to data analysis provided an excellent way to make sense of the interview transcripts, allowing the researcher to start
noticing trends between interviews and building a theory from the ground up (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The iterative nature of the grounded theory approach (Parker & Roffey, 1997) outlined in Figure 9 above was particularly useful in informing the theoretical conclusions outlined above.

With a sample size of only thirty-four respondents there are clearly issues with external validity, which refers to the degree to which findings can be generalised to other research settings (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Furthermore, no explicit attempt to get a representative sample across stratifications such as age, race, class, leadership experience or gender was made. This will have an adverse effect on the transferability of the findings. The reliability of the interview data was tested against the original sound recordings and found to be highly accurate, though the reliability of the field notes could not be tested or verified for reliability.

The researcher adhered scrupulously to the chain of evidence model outlined above (April, 2004), ensuring that records were kept of all phases of the research and that this information was stored in multiple formats and locations. However, the researcher struggled to ensure confirmability during the interview process when a respondent followed a line of argument that was divergent from his own opinion. There were instances when the researcher re-questioned interviewees when met with an unanticipated response as well as proffering his own opinion from time to time. However it is the researcher’s view that confirmability remains largely intact as it is not felt that such opinions swayed “the conduct of the research and findings deriving from it” (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 414).

It is noted that not every participant in session five had been given the correct information as outlined in the Improvisation Training Proposal [Appendix 2]. This had the potential to affect the ethical integrity of the research. When the issue came to the researcher’s attention, a full explanation was given as to the purpose of the research and participants were asked again if they were willing to take part. There were no refusals at this point.

While the researcher succeeded in leaving no more than three days between the end of the session and each interview, the time lag in some cases might have reduced or altered respondents’ feelings or memory of the events and therefore the validity of the findings (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955). The researcher was forced also to draw upon his own
recollections when recalling details of particular sessions and this may have affected the dependability of the study (Bouchard, 1976).

**Research Limitations**

A limitation of the research is that in all cases barring session five participants volunteered themselves. Therefore it might be suggested that only those with a predisposition towards improvisation, or its merits might have attended and skewed the sample somewhat. The researcher is mindful of this criticism but would suggest that there is sufficient evidence of anxiety and a pessimistic outlook towards improvisation amongst respondents to suggest that the sample did not merely contain favourable interviewees. It is interesting to note that 73% of participants were women, not a representative sample in terms of gender. If this difference were to proliferate across a larger sample size one might be able to conclude that women are more open to participation in improvisation, but this inference cannot be drawn from the present research.

A shortcoming of the improvisation sessions and the way they were facilitated was their lack of neutrality. The facilitator used positive reinforcement to praise certain individuals for their actions, which may be viewed as inappropriate for neutrality in that it singles out an individual and implies, therefore, that others have done ‘less’ well. There are occasions however, like in the teaching of a new practice, when neutrality can be broken: “As facilitator you can supply additional information if the group agrees, but you should only do this if you are the only one who has the information and it is critical to the group’s functioning” (Smit, 2009, p. 180).

In many of the group exercises the researcher was in the privileged position of having performed the games in the past and therefore knew how they worked. This did not place him on an equal footing as a fellow participant. He was unable however, to consider an ethical alternative to this way of working.

The research is also limited by the criteria by which leadership development is judged. In this case, the researcher has sought to measure respondents’ own subjective feelings towards improvisation. This is by no means a more legitimate form of measurement than say the measurement of a leader’s actions over a sustained period of time or profiling of their
personalities, for example. The question remains, by what criteria do researchers judge leadership development?

Allied to this criticism is the time-frame required to make such judgements. The research is limited in that it only provided one session for a small sample of largely novice improvisers. Several authors (Emerson & Fretz, 2001; University of Toronto, 2005; Fox, 2004; Bouchard, 1976) make note of the time required for the practice of participant observation. It is important to note that the present research was not conducted over a long time period in the way many anthropological studies typically are: “Participant observation – establishing a place in some natural setting on a relatively long-term basis in order to investigate, experience and represent the social life and social processes that occur in that setting…” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001, p. 352). The researcher was not undertaking an ethnographic study, nor seeking to build a picture of the respondents’ entire lived reality or ‘social life’, merely their response to one particular form of activity (improvisation), making it appropriate to eschew a long-term approach.

There is no indication as to what (if any) consequences would derive from a continued engagement with a group over time. Considering that improvisation is a time-based practice, a hyper-critical analysis might conclude that the present research is akin to measuring a weight-lifter’s muscle growth after one session in the gym. The time allowed did not provide for a follow-up interview with respondents to test whether their opinions had changed. Neither was there a neutral, non-improvising group against which to test the results. Improvisation games were learned once and then not practised or repeated again.

It is interesting to note however, that a one-off session can still achieve a great deal, especially if it is followed by a reflective exercise like an interview where people are compelled to ponder on what happened. This might make it a feasible and cost-effective strategy to implement in an organisation both for team building, promoting collaboration, as well as for getting people to focus on what characteristics they need to cultivate for effective leadership under conditions of uncertainty in a fast-changing world. To get an even better sense of how improvisation might enhance leadership development, a longer-term engagement will be necessary.
Future Research Directions

As previously stated, this research provides an introduction to improvisation for leaders and asks them to consider the potential benefits of future practice. Future studies may wish to consider the way in which research might measure progress in any of the ten construct areas over a longer time frame, personal and organisational implications thereof and what criteria to measure when assessing leadership development, other than the subjective and personal lived experience of individuals. For example, a study may perhaps conduct personality profiling or behaviour alongside further interviews in order to compare responses amongst say anxious, risk-averse individuals, or confident extroverts. Further investigation into the three-phase hypothesis will also be necessary.

In addition, to provide broader and more generalisable conclusions a larger sample size with quantitative elements may be devised and implemented in different cultural settings.

Furthermore, this study has revealed some limitations of improvisation with respect to politicised environments where protagonists have something at stake. Future studies may wish to compare improvisation with other arts-based interventions such as role-playing, or story-telling to gauge differing levels of effectiveness for differing leadership issues.
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development

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An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development


An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development


An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development


249
An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development


An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development


An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development


An Investigation into the Applicability of Theatrical Improvisation Techniques to Leadership Development


253


Appendix 1 – Informed Consent Form

Title of study: An investigation into the applicability of theatrical improvisation techniques to leadership development

Principal investigator: Charlie Beall

Institute: Graduate School of Business, University of Cape Town

Introduction:

I used to be a professional actor and am now studying for an MBA at UCT’s Graduate School of Business. As part of my research report for the MBA, I am conducting research into whether improvisation exercises used by actors in their theatrical training can be of any benefit in organisations and businesses.

Purpose of this research study:

The study hopes to find out whether forms of theatrical training- including that of improvisational theatre- in which acting under conditions of uncertainty, accepting offers, crafting a disciplined imagination, suspending judgement, being present, and enhancing awareness skills may become part of developing leadership skills.

Procedures

A typical improvisation workshop begins with a brief overview of the importance of improvisation. Individuals then work in small groups (10 to 20 individuals) with an experienced improvisation facilitator from theatre company Improvision (founders of Theatre Sports) who takes them through a series of progressively more challenging improvisation exercises for about two-and-a-half hours. The facilitators provide coaching on some of the important principles of improvisation as the exercises unfold. More concrete links to the practice of management are made once the individuals have had a chance to experience improvisation. Thereafter, the researcher will ask you a series of questions about how you found the improvisation workshop in an informal interview setting. The researcher will ask for ease of memory that these interviews be recorded on a Dictaphone.

Possible risks or benefits

There is no risk involved in this study except your valuable time. There is no direct benefit to you also. However, the results of the study may help us to formulate guidelines for how improvisation techniques may or may not be used in organisations.

Right of refusal to participate and withdrawal

You are free to choose to participate in the study. You may refuse to participate without any loss of benefit which you are otherwise entitled to. You may also withdraw at any time from the study without any adverse effect. You may also refuse to answer some or all the questions if you do not feel comfortable with those questions.
Confidentiality

The information provided by you will remain confidential. Nobody except the researcher will have access to it. Your name and identity will also not be disclosed at any time. However the data may be seen by an ethical review committee and may be published in journal and elsewhere without giving your name or disclosing your identity.

Available Sources of Information

If you have further questions you may contact the researcher Charlie Beall on Tel: 071 595 3907 or email bllcha008@gsb.uct.ac.za

AUTHORISATION

I have read and understand this consent form, and I volunteer to participate in this research study. I understand that I will receive a copy of this form. I voluntarily choose to participate, but I understand that my consent does not take away any legal rights in the case of negligence or other legal fault of anyone who is involved in this study. I further understand that nothing in this consent form is intended to replace any applicable national, provincial, or local laws.

Participant’s Name (Printed or Typed):
Date:

Participant’s Signature or thumb impression:
Date:

Principal Investigator’s Signature:
Date:

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:
Date:
Appendix 2 – Improvisation Training Proposal

I am currently looking for organisations willing to participate in and benefit from a short 1-3 hour training session in the skills of theatrical improvisation. There is an increasingly large body of literature that points to how the Arts can be used in business, and particularly the art of improvisation as it applies to leadership.

Very little research has been done to measure how (if at all) improvisation is helpful in organisations. This study seeks to test some of the assumptions that improvisation is a skill that can help businesses:

- Manage uncertainty
- Become more creative
- See new possibilities
- Become more resourceful
- Communicate more effectively
- Understand current needs
- Learn from past failures

The sessions take place in groups of between 4 and 20 people, and can be run in any facility where furniture can be moved to the periphery of the space and where no observers can look into the room. Sessions can be arranged at your premises or off-site, as desired. We are hoping to run sessions between 13th October and 1st November.

Normally these sessions are priced from R8000, but the research team at UCT has been able to secure an agreement with our partners Improvision, that for the purposes of this research sessions will be conducted for a nominal discretionary donation, to be agreed with the researcher.

About the sessions
A typical improvisation workshop begins with a brief overview of the importance of improvisation to motivate individual investment of time and energy in the process. Individuals then work in small groups (10 to 20 individuals) with an experienced improvisation facilitator who takes them through a series of progressively more challenging improvisation exercises for between one and three hours, as agreed.

The facilitators provide coaching on some of the important principles of improvisation as the exercises unfold. More concrete links to the practice of management are made once the individuals have had a chance to experience improvisation. Following each session the research would like to arrange a convenient time with participants to have an informal interview about their experience of the session to see what (if any) learning occurred.

**About the facilitator - Improvision**

Improvision is a theatre company that has been making and performing specific, unique and diverse live performance in South Africa for the last 16 years. The company is run by Megan Furniss, a performer, writer, director, producer, and graduate of the University of Cape Town. Megan ran Cape Town’s longest running and award winning live theatre improv show, TheatreSports, for over sixteen years and has performed, taught and workshoped improvisation in a variety of organisational settings. Her company, Improvision specialises particularly in improvisation workshops and performances, for team building, training, leadership, creativity and change management.

**More about the research**

This study hopes to elucidate an alternative form of training- that of improvisational theatre- in which acting under conditions of uncertainty, accepting offers, crafting a disciplined imagination, suspending judgement, being present, and enhancing awareness skills may become learnable components in leadership development.