

Improvisational Theater Techniques for Public Professionals:
Unscripting Policy Analysis And Making

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The notion that the creation, implementation, and explanation of public policy is more art than science is not new. While John Dewey's "Search For The Great Community" may have used the language of machinery to describe developed democratic institutions, his analysis of how and why those institutions either thrived or floundered leaned less on engineering and more on creative exploration. "Knowledge is a function of association and communication."ⁱ Or, as Deborah Stone later argued, policy can only be crafted and executed in communities. "Unlike the market, which starts with individuals and assumes no goals, preferences, or intentions other than those held by individuals, a model of the polis must assume both collective will and collective effort."ⁱⁱ Communities are concerned with values, fairness, equity, justice, culture, and beauty. To further complicate the calculus, those aims are constantly in flux not just within the community, but by individuals themselves. An appeal to efficiency does little to capture the breadth or dynamism of public values.

The public sector ought to be particularly concerned with this messiness. As Janet and Robert Denhardt explained, the sector by its very nature is owned by the public. It therefore is compelled to serve, not steer, the public.ⁱⁱⁱ Public managers who can make it through their career without engaging the broad community, whether at the start or end of a policy-making process, are an increasingly rare (and likely ineffective) bird. As Richard Bolan argued as far back as 1969, "the scope of today's urban problems seems to impose special demands for awareness," on planners.^{iv} Those problems have only become more wicked and complex since then. Professionals must have a toolkit of soft-skills to navigate their work effectively, whether crafting, analyzing, implementing, or reforming policies with community impacts. The challenge for those who believe the public sector

has a role to play in mitigating or solving these challenges, is to develop means by which those ends can be sought.^v The explicit study and practice of empathetic communication, adaptive collaboration, and creative leadership are a powerful foundation to this practice and worldview. The art of improvisational (improv) comedy has trained performers in the skills of empathic listening, adaptation, and collaboration for work on stage. Yet those same skills are at the heart of what will make public managers more effective in their work, service, and leadership.

Improvisational comedy theater may seem an unlikely framework for approaching public policy. This paper attempts to explore why comedy is a valuable means of translating complex issues of policy and politics. It then outlines an agenda for policy makers, shapers, and implementers to exercise and hone some of the soft skills key to their work. It does so using the art of modern improvisational theater—as pioneered by Viola Spolin, Del Close, and Keith Johnstone among others—as means to explore and heighten those skills. It will describe the civics-inspired improv comedy troupe I co-founded and detail what its successes can tell us about informing and engaging communities. Finally, the paper will detail a civic engagement process incorporating both the spirit and the explicit use of improv comedy theater and discuss its potential uses and implementation.

The result is not a paper that offers a specific solution to a particular policy challenge or dilemma. Rather, it demonstrates an approach to thinking about policy with a stronger emphasis on communication, adaptability, and creativity than some traditional methods offer.^{vi} It is not intended as a radical replacement for study of policy analysis. Rather these tools should simply supplement and enhance that for a generation of

practitioners who will live and work in a world defined by wicked problems demanding community-shared solutions.

Comedy as Translation

The use of humor and comedy to express politically or culturally precarious positions is arguably as old as formal political power itself. Humor allows an author or performer to disguise their critique of the powerful, or come at a sensitive topic from an unexpected direction where the subject's defenses are not already up. Chinese histories dating as far back as the 1st century B.C.E. include performers akin to European court jesters several centuries later. Comedic performers were common throughout ancient Rome, as were periodic imperial purges of those in the profession in retribution for their outspokenness against the political elite. ^{vii} Although members of the court had agency to comment on local affairs and political proceedings, the jester necessarily remained an outsider. The satirist in ancient societies was respected, if not entirely trusted, as an individual “to be regarded with awe, with reverence, and with fear.” ^{viii}

To that end, humor as a tool of information sharing or engagement has often been lumped into a category of processes perceived as something suspect or less-than formal, straight-forward methods. This view maintains that the ostensible goal of the humorist is to entertain rather than inform or engage in decision making. That focus on amusement over information can be detrimental to maintaining an informed democracy, according to scholars like Russell Peterson: “Topical comedy makes matters worse, if not by misinforming us exactly, then by encouraging us to focus our attention on the wrong things.” ^{ix} He called out the extended late-night talk show hosts' attention to President

Bill Clinton's infamous "sexual relations with that woman" and *Saturday Night Live* impressions of figures like George H. W. Bush and Al Gore. These permeated the culture to a point of distracting from important policy issues and debates. Often, humor, performance, and art generally are summed up in this way, as a distraction from the real, serious issues.

Yet humorists have the uncanny capacity to take complicated issues and debates and reframe them in ways that are relatable and digestible to a broad audience. The comedic performer's use of metaphor, for example, is widely recognized as a powerful tool in making sense of political and policy debates.^x The role of humorist as translator has grown in U.S. media in the past decade. An analysis of stories by the satirical newspaper, *The Onion*, found that stories with an explicitly political frame were statistically higher in the run-up to the 2004 presidential campaign than they had been in the run up to the 2000 contest.^{xi}

Some scholars have suggested that as more traditional forms of information sharing and gathering (namely the news media) have fallen far short of their historic role as arbiters of factual, unbiased news, comedy and performance art's role in this space has grown.^{xii} As an example, Russell Peterson compared how a controversy over a Bush administration proposal to put control of some U.S. ports in a private, foreign company's hands were covered by major news networks like CNN versus the *fake* news parody show hosted by Stephen Colbert. Peterson argued that the networks largely abdicate their role framing the debate in a larger context, opting instead to invite lawmakers for and against the proposal to present their perspectives, largely unchallenged, to viewers. In contrast, "Colbert contextualizes the story in a more explicitly political manner, framing Bush's

port position in a way that raises larger questions about his approach to governing and his relationship to the conservative media.”^{xiii} For Robert Dahl and others, policy makers and implementers have a responsibility not only to make the levers of democracy available to everyone in a society, but also to provide them with means to understand and make sense of civic issues and trade-offs.^{xiv} The era of top-down planning and implementation of policy is ebbing, in favor more participatory processes.^{xv}

Satire, parody and comedy generally, then, are doing a job historically understood as the purview of journalists, elected officials, or public sector managers: helping the public make sense of a complex set of issues by unraveling their political intricacies and putting them in context.

Why Improv?

Within the comedy world, improv is actually a relatively new player. Yes, improvisational theater can trace its roots back many centuries to Roman and African performances, through *Commedia Dell’arte* in the 16th century, and into vaudeville.^{xvi} But when most modern readers hear “improv,” they think of the theatrical techniques and styles developed in mid-twentieth century United States. Improv, or unscripted theater, is commonly understood, as Charna Halpern put it, as “getting on-stage and performing without any preparation or planning.”^{xvii} It is typically (though importantly not necessarily) comedic in nature. It follows a set of general principles (which once again are not necessarily rules). Among these principles are a commitment to support of one’s fellow actors, a focus on the moment without planning ahead, and agreement/working

together to achieve something bigger as an ensemble than any one individual could manage by him/herself.^{xviii}

These are the elements which make improv a uniquely appropriate art form for public policy managers and officials interested in better engaging the public. While satire, parody, and other forms of scripted comedy have a capacity to help translate complex issues and matters, they are largely one-directional. The speaker or author is delivering a message or set of messages to his/her audience. Improv, on the other hand, is based on collaboration and mutual discovery.^{xix} It is one of the few art forms where the audience is witness (and even in some cases party to) the act of creation and the final product at the same time. These elements, in addition to the translation capacity inherent to humor, make it a toolkit ideal for public managers keen to work through problems with the public as opposed to only on their behalf.

Del Close is credited in naming what is traditionally considered improv's central tenet, "Yes, and..."^{xx} Building on the work of Viola Spolin's *Theater Games*, Close distilled the notion of improvisational theater being built on agreement and collaboration into two simple words. An improviser not only accepts whatever statement of fact her scene partner offers, she builds something else onto, offering a "gift" of their own in return. By answering every declaration in an improv scene with "Yes, and..." the players collaboratively build a scene together including bits and pieces of both of their contributions.

The philosophy Spolin developed in creating this basis of modern improvisation could just as easily describe the basis for good policy making as it does for unscripted theater. "The 'Spolin approach' provides a way for people of different cultures, with

different life experiences, to work together collaboratively to achieve productive outcomes. It is a way for individuals to participate fully and authentically in the solving of problems.”^{xxi} This mirrors what New Public Service scholars have long advocated over the paradigm of New Public Management or Old Public Administration. Building the institutions and policies of a well-functioning society *must* be done democratically using widespread public input. Government’s role, in this paradigm, is to facilitate the public’s ability to create something bigger together than any one individual would be able to create by him or herself. ^{xxii} That is the same ethos that underpins the improviser’s approach to the stage.

In 2011 I co-founded a civic-engagement performance company called The Theater of Public Policy with a longtime collaborator Brandon Boat. He and I had both worked in the public sphere and nonprofit institutions we generally shorthanded as “civic do-gooders.” We found that while government agencies and nonprofits did valuable, important work, they were often lousy at communicating their own stories. This led to a gap between the impact these organizations or agencies were having, and how a general public understood their function and role. We had performed improv together for several years and knew improvisers were good storytellers.

We created The Theater of Public Policy based on three simple ideas: most people understand the world through stories; it is important for policy and issues to be accessible and engaging for the public; and improv performers have the skills to translate and make sense of complex issues and policy by turning them into stories. The company’s primary show format follows a simple structure. A host interviews a policy expert, elected official, or leading thinker, on-stage in front of a live audience and a team of five improv

performers. Following the interview, the cast completely takes over the stage, using everything discussed during the interview as inspiration for improv comedy scenes. In most shows, the guest is then invited back on stage to answer questions from the audience. The shows always end with a final round of improv, again inspired by the information from the on-stage guest.

The show demonstrates the various ways improv can communicate complex policy questions. The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum of Public Participation delineates five levels of participation: Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate, and Empower. (See Appendix 1 for the complete spectrum). The show would seem to fall squarely on the Inform end of the spectrum (though it could be argued the Q&A portion of the event stumbles into the Consult column).^{xxiii} Performances assist the public in making sense of problems and potential solutions to them.

As with other speakers who use comedy, the improvisers have agency to critique or approach arguments in ways that would be more challenging in a debate or other type of conversation. As an example, a state legislator appeared on the show to discuss his plan for free college tuition. Part of the plan entailed students committing to work for at least two years in the state following graduation in exchange for the subsidy. The improv performance included a scene in which cast members played a state-run bounty hunter agency, tasked with finding recent college graduates who had fled the state and dragging them back to complete their two years of service. The scene was funny, dramatic, and raised a serious question about how such a requirement in the legislator's bill would ever be enforced.

It is worth at least a few words here on the capacity of humor to harm at least as much as it can bring people together. There are at least two types of comedy to my mind, and they both can be understood in terms of silverware. One is a “jabby, pokey” kind of comedy, that wins laughs by othering or belittling an individual or group. Any humor with a sharp edge where the audience is clearly laughing *at* someone or some group (beyond themselves) I would put in this category. The other kind of humor I shorthand as a “place-setting” type of comedy. This style involves using humor to show absurdity in a situation or a farcical system, without pointing blame at any individual or group, and therefore brings people together. The anecdote above involving the improv scene that imagined an extreme logical end to the proposed higher education funding legislation, would be an example of this kind of “place-setting” humor.

Obviously, these lines can often be blurry, depending on situation, audience, and subject matter. Finding a comfort in the “place-setting” versus “jabby, pokey” humor requires regular practice and attention. There were a couple of hard and fast rules that The Theater of Public Policy set to try and make that work easier. We set a rule to never “punch down.” That is, any person or group that was the victim or the one with less power or status in a situation, should not be the butt of any joke. Their low status should not be reinforced through our comedy or improv. Rather, we would look for opportunities to spotlight that low status individual or group’s story. Additionally, The Theater of Public Policy generally steered away from direct impressions of particular individuals. The very nature of caricature in a comedy setting almost necessitates othering the subject from the audience. Because a focus of The Theater of Public Policy was to bring people

together and highlight the connections between policy makers and the broader public as human beings, these live-comedic portraits were deemed largely counter-productive.

In the course of many The Theater of Public Policy shows we discovered it indirectly empowers audience members to see their role in policy and civic society differently. Because the performers have not necessarily heard the public problem, the speaker's perspective, or the proposed solutions previously, they are grappling with the issues in real time on stage, while simultaneously crafting theatrical scenes. Show attendees often remark in one way or another following a show, "If those comedy actors can figure out these issues on stage well enough to turn them into comedy, then certainly I can too."

While we initially designed The Theater of Public Policy's as a conversation-starter, it helped demonstrate the intersection of improv and creative civic engagement. The performers were critically analyzing policy problems and solutions in real time on stage. It stood to reckon that the skills they used to do that would be valuable to individuals who study, craft, or implement policy off stage as well. Not long after The Theater of Public Policy was founded, I began teaching improv-based workshops to public sector workers and students. Together, we tied the theatrical exercises to skills critical to their current or future work in public service. During this same time, I became a Masters of Public Policy student at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs. My time at the Humphrey school underscored the value of the skills improv theater imparts. They are skills, I believe, that every policy student would benefit from and that institutions should strongly consider incorporating into their curricula. Below are a three examples of skills that improv exercises teach with a clear and direct

connection to policy analysis, making, and implementation, as well as community engagement.

Empathetic Listening

A “rational planning model” was always based on false assumptions, argued Xavier de Souza Briggs. It presumes “we all speak the same language, that we interact in simple exchange of fact and opinion, and that obtaining and relaying information is thus a technical, and not a social, problem.” Instead, he advised planners consider “micro-level” interactions in preparing their work.^{xxiv} In making the case for “inclusive managers” in the public sector, Martha Feldman and Anne Khademian argued managers must be able to work within complex social systems, quickly understand the norms and language of that system, and communicate authentically with its members.^{xxv} The question remains, *how* policy makers should make those opportunities a reality and in what ways they can prepare for that work.

Few exercises more quickly hone the listening skills needed for Souza Briggs’s recommended approach than Viola Spolin’s *Kitty Wants a Corner*.¹ A brief deconstruction of the word “listening” is in order before moving forward. For many, listening simply denotes hearing—and perhaps understanding—what another person is saying. This paper uses the term “listening” more broadly, to capture a variety of observations that are traditionally described in other ways: watching non-verbal cues, considering what is *not* being said, attempting to interpret the intention of the speaker, observing the context and environment of the event, and even taking note of the relational power dynamics between the participants. These are all encompassed in listening to

underscore that they are related skills which can be practiced and developed in tandem through exercise and focus.

Individuals who play *Kitty Wants a Corner* will quickly discover it pushes them to exercise these different dimensions of listening. In attempting to steal the spot of someone on the outside of the circle, the Kitty must be actively listening to what is going on around him/her. The Kitty will be listening/watching for the sound or sight of any movement by players on the circle, heightening a sense of situational awareness that will

EXERCISE

Kitty Wants a Corner

This exercise is best with groups of eight to 20. Participants stand in a circle, with one person in the middle. It is important that the people making up the circle have clearly defined spaces: as with something like Musical Chairs, there must always be one person *out*—in the middle without a space in the circle.

- The person in the middle (the Kitty) turns to anyone in the circle and says, “Kitty wants a corner.”
- Individuals on the circle always respond with, “Go ask my neighbor.”
- This verbal interaction is repeated, with the player in the middle able to turn to any person on the circle and say, “Kitty wants a corner.”
- Meanwhile, any players on the circle attempt to trade places with one another.
- If the Kitty notices the other players switching spots, he/she can attempt to steal one of the open spots before the other individual gets there.
- Whoever is left in the middle becomes the Kitty and proceeds turning to individuals in the circle saying, “Kitty wants a corner.”

feel familiar to anyone who has ever been responsible for young children. Advanced players will watch for any look in other players’ eyes of potential ambition or eagerness to move. Meanwhile, those on the circle, attempting to swap places with one another, will quickly learn the nonverbal cues of fellow players attempting to signal them that they are

¹ Spolin and her acolytes called the game *Pussy Wants a Corner*. Many modern improv teachers and practitioners have changed this to *Kitty* so the mere title of the game does not become a giggle-inducing distraction to its actual aims.

ready to swap. Players who move without first ferreting out this unspoken message will more than likely end up stranded in the center and become the new Kitty.

The listening practiced through this game goes deeper. Players will begin to collect information about which of their fellow participants are more or less likely to jump and switch places. In this way, they are observing and recording information about others that is never spoken. Some of the most interesting actions emerge if one player ends up stuck as the Kitty for an extended period of time. Frequently, groups will slow the game down or create more obvious opportunities for the Kitty to reach an open spot on the circle. They usually do this for one of two reasons. Either they find the game dull with the same person in the middle. It would be fair to argue that paying attention to the amount of fun the game is producing for its participants is another form of listening. Alternatively, players may begin to feel a sense of empathy for a trapped Kitty. Many times players who notice that a person in the middle is feeling down or defeated will take pity on him/her. The act of noticing and processing the emotional state of the Kitty is yet another dimension of listening the game teaches.

This paper considers the ability to listen akin to a muscle that must be exercised and kept in shape. A game like *Kitty Wants a Corner* is a CrossFit workout for those muscles and will leave them honed and toned long after the game is complete. Players will be more easily able to tune-in to others' verbal, non-verbal, emotional communiqués. It will also help them recognize and appreciate situational realities and limitations. The capacity to listen for and understand emotion or feeling in a room is a near super-power for public servants. It allows them to connect and understand what their community is communicating on the deeper, more human levels Souza Briggs and others demand.

An illuminating final question to ask participants after they have played this game for a while is “Why did anyone move?” There is nothing in the rules to the game that requires players on the outside of the circle to switch places and thereby take the risk that they would be trapped and end up as the Kitty. Yet inevitably, players do end up moving, and typically making riskier and riskier attempts as the game goes on. The answer as to why will likely change from group to group. Often groups will note that it demonstrates something about human desire and our social nature. We want to take risks and try new things, because standing still would be boring. It is the same instinct that drove our ancestors to leave their caves and explore. Understanding this innate drive is valuable for public managers. Individuals and communities are constantly in flux, driven by an innate human desire to explore and invent. Any facilitation process or policy that does not appreciate this reality is doomed to fail.

The premise that those in the public sector must be proficient in comprehending and working within a complex social system, as Souza Briggs, Dahl, Feldman and Khademian’s argue, depends on the kinds of listening skills this game hones. *Kitty Wants a Corner* serves as just as single example of how performative exercises and creative play built on communication can train these key skills. The public sector practitioner who is competent reading, processing, and understanding others’ spoken *and* nonverbal communication, as well as comfortable observing and analyzing situational information and cultural context, will be well equipped to engage their community.

Adaptive Collaboration

Bolan articulated the necessity for planners to hone their “awareness” of the complex systems and cultures in which they operate or intend to intervene. “Understanding the nature of this cultural envelope will help in determining appropriate strategies and techniques for planning and intervention.”^{xxvi}

Much like, *Kitty Wants a Corner*, the exercise *One-Word-Story* provides practitioners a means of honing listening skills. To achieve the exercise’s desired outcome, a verbal narrative that sounds as though it is only being said by a single individual,

requires the players to focus deeply on each other’s words, without preplanning or scripting their responses ahead of time.

In that same way, *One-Word-Story* also has something to teach in terms of collaboration and adaptation. Because each player is only responsible for part of the story, he/she must work together with their partner. It will be readily apparent if one player has his/her “own idea” of where the story should go. More often than not, if a particular player attempts to force a direction or narrative, the resulting set of words will be grammatically or logically nonsensical. The only way the exercise works is with both players committed to integrity of the story as something larger than either one of them.

EXERCISE

One-Word-Story IN PAIRS

This exercise is done with a partner.

- The pair faces one another, either sitting or standing.
- Their task is to tell a story, but each person can only say one word at a time.
- Each player takes turns speaking one word, with the aim of getting to a pace and rhythm of a single speaker. Each player should avoid trying to think of the “right” or “funny” word to say for each turn.
- The exercise continues at least several minutes, until a facilitator feels the pairings have gotten into a good rhythm.

Executing the exercise with a commitment to the story's integrity can often be frustrating to an individual player. It may turn out that he/she never gets to say anything *interesting*. Over the course of dozens of words, a player may feel they only ever say words like "the," or "and." Should that player get frustrated and attempt to interject an *interesting* word in the story where it doesn't logically belong, the story will derail. If, for example, the grammatically correct next word is "an" and the player says "platypus" the sentence and story will fall apart, leaving all participants in the lurch.

This is a powerful lesson for policy makers. If we accept Dewey's view, that the purpose of a democratic state is, at least in part, to do things collaboratively that no individual could do by his/herself, their job is analogous to the *One-Word-Story* game.^{xxvii} Attempting to dictate an outcome or impose policies on a community is largely doomed for failure. Harkening back to Denhardt, those in the public sector ought to serve rather than steer the public.^{xxviii} Rather the policy professional should see his/her role as facilitating change, serving as a helpful partner adept at filling any necessary role the community needs at a particular moment.

That is an anxiety-inducing space for many public managers and policy makers. Judith Innes and David Booher note that modern Western societies are particularly infertile ground for any practice that embraces uncertainty. "Positivist epistemology seeks certainty and objectivity, and modern Western culture encourages this largely futile search." Yet it is critical, as they note, because the world is constantly changing, complex, and impossible to engage with in a static manner.^{xxix}

After trying the One-Word-Story exercise in pairs, policy students might try it in a larger group or circle. In comparing and contrasting the two versions of the exercise, players are likely to discover that trying to tell the story in the larger circle is in some ways more challenging: getting in sync with six other people is typically trickier than syncing with a single partner. However, the stories resulting from the larger circle are often more creative and surprising to the participants than when they play the game in pairs.

Quick and Feldman make a

distinction between “participation” and “inclusion” that is helpful in thinking through these two versions of the exercise. Many public meetings, they argue, are broadly participatory, garnering large amounts of input from many individuals. Inclusion, on the other hand, is focused more on making connections between people, thereby deepening the participation and the input received. They are careful to note that it is not a matter of inclusion over participation, but rather that they are “two different dimensions of public engagement and that organizing public management to incorporate both enhances the quality of the decisions reached and the community’s long-term capacities.”^{xxx}

Similarly, the two versions of One-Word-Stories should not lead public sector agents to consistently lean more toward processes that increase the number of voices participating, or towards ones that limit the diversity of views in favor of a deeper

EXERCISE

One-Word-Story CIRCLES

This exercise is done in a small group of five to eight.

- The group stands or sits in a circle.
- Their task is to tell a story, but each person can only say one word at a time.
- Each player takes turns speaking one word, with the aim of getting to a pace and rhythm of a single speaker. Each player should avoid trying to think of the “right” or “funny” word to say for each turn.
- The exercise continues at least several minutes, until a facilitator feels the group has gotten into a rhythm.

connection between individuals. Rather, players should leave the game understanding the trade-offs between the two forms: fewer voices makes it easier to focus and dig deep into a connection whereas a larger group provides a diversity of voices that can lead to more creative and innovative outcomes.

Creative Leadership

Xavier de Souza Briggs describes the work of planning practices in terms of “social performance.”^{xxxii} It is not, he says, a sterile rational act that can be divorced from the social context in which the process or engagement takes place. Planners and engagers must, therefore, think of themselves in terms of performers. They are playing a role in a larger system and should practice using the information they have garnered from listening and analyzing the social situation. The following exercise provides practitioners a means of self-analyzing their own comfort level in playing various facilitator or engagement roles, while simultaneously pushing them to practice working with another person in an intimately collaborative manner.

Mirroring is an exercise that may date back to the first time two social creatures crossed paths. Yet beyond the challenge of trying to match another human being’s physical movements, the exercise holds lessons on how to think about leadership and collaboration in creative contexts. For example, after switching rolls from leader to follower, many players will discover they are naturally more comfortable in one position versus the other. Some will gravitate toward leading, and the control it offers. Others will prefer following, not having to think of what movement to do next and simply leaving the driving to their partner.

Of course the phase of this game that is most analogous to real life is when both players have agency and responsibility to both lead and follow. This give-and-take mirrors (*pun* intended) elements of boundary work collaboration Quick and Feldman have previously outlined. ^{xxxii}

What is traditionally seen as a tension between two individuals attempting to share control, can be understood as an opportunity for collaboration. Just as individuals or organizations working across sectors must learn to negotiate a back and forth, so too must the individuals in the mirroring exercise. Once they get comfortable in this space, however, they are likely to find

EXERCISE

Mirroring

This exercise is done in pairs.

- The partners stand and face on another.
- The pair choose one person to be Partner A. The other is Partner B.
- With Partner A leading, he/she makes smooth, steady motions.
- Partner B mirrors all of Partner A's movements. Ideally, a third party who walks up would not be able to tell who was leading and who was mirroring.
- After several minutes, switch the roles, so Partner B is now leading and Partner A is mirroring.
- After several minutes of this, start a new round, where both partners have agency to lead (make moves) and both partners are responsible for following the other.
- The exercise is called to an end by a facilitator after he/she feels everyone has had an opportunity to experience the various roles.

themselves pushed and pulled in unexpected directions and learn something about themselves and about collaboration in the process.

Understanding collaboration is a key to successful engagement and policy making. As Camilla Stivers and Cheryl Simrell King argued, anyone working the public sector ought to view citizens as contributors and collaborators, not simply voters or clients. ^{xxxiii} The *Mirroring* exercise is a manifestation of that paradigm. Playing it will make the experience of co-creation tangible for public sector employees, managers and

students. What they learn about their own comfort levels in terms of leading or following their partner should also serve as vital information as they head into managerial work. If they naturally find themselves much more comfortable following the lead of someone else, they may want to practice leading more often to get comfortable in that space. Alternatively, if the player finds they are always wanting to lead, they may take this as a cue to pull back and practice giving others room to help direct.

A Facilitation Design: Improv as Reflection and Translation Tool

The following is a case study in how and why the art of improvisational comedy theater is useful in community engagement. It is a real life example from my work with The Theater of Public Policy where the skills our cast had mastered as improvisers allowed them to listen and communicate in critical ways. Additionally, the performative aspect of this event surfaced important concerns and issues that would have been difficult to ferret out through traditional survey data or even other kinds of communication.

In the spring of 2016, a mid-sized Midwestern foundation wanted to increase its strategic giving in smaller communities and rural towns. The foundation wanted new investments or program funding to be strategic and serve aims identified by the community itself. As John Bryson might have put it, their aim was “figuring out what the problem is and what solutions might work are actually part of the problem, and taking stakeholders into account.”^{xxxiv} Precisely how to determine the community’s priorities and where they might align with foundation resources and goals was an open question. In constructing a facilitation method to answer it, the foundation wanted to avoid what Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari deemed “participation as tyranny.” Specifically, how could the

foundation have an open and honest conversation with community members without creating a dynamic that reinforced traditional power structures? ^{xxxv} There was a fear that simply holding a traditional community conversation where residents were asked to provide suggestions or ideas would turn into a pitch meeting favoring those with professional fundraising or development experience. As one of the foundation staff who helped organize and participated in the event explained, “We wanted to get beyond some of the usual suspects who always attend events like these and to get a more honest conversation that you might otherwise.”

At this point The Theater of Public Policy came into the process to help design a facilitated conversation that would use improvisational (improv) theater as a vehicle to spark, harvest, and reflect back the authentic “local knowledge” Innes and Booher write about. ^{xxxvi} The following is an outline of the model developed for that specific case as well as recommendations for anyone considering it for future conversations. A visual depiction of the model is included in Appendix B. It illustrates how such a model can help address barriers to open dialogue such as institutional power dynamics and the chilling effects inherent to communities small enough that everyone is on a first name basis.

A local community leader (a former county commissioner with ties to both the public and private interests in town) took the lead in identifying key stakeholders and ensuring their attendance at the gathering. Her process involved following much of Bryson’s advice: determining who was already engaged in community initiatives, who was not but should be, and who needed to be in the room to provide the process with political feasibility. ^{xxxvii} She also spread the word about the event through radio

announcements, online postings, and fliers at local business, instructing anyone who was interested to contact her. While not a perfect course of action (it inherently put a lot of power in the hands of this one individual and did little to bring people on the far fringes of the community in) it ultimately helped achieve many of the gathering's aims. By having a local champion and not the foundation or improvisational theater company extending the invitation, it not only facilitated key stakeholder engagement, it lent the event authenticity and trustworthiness. The novelty of an improv comedy company participating in a community forum, along with the credibility the community champion provided, succeeded in drawing in a diverse crowd—it was by all accounts beyond the “usual suspect” list the foundation staff had wanted to avoid.

One of those atypical participants was an older woman who had moved to the community less than a decade before (a short stay in small town terms). She did not drive herself and either walked where she needed to go, or depended on rides from friends. Her concerns and voice were ones that might not have been easily picked up in more traditional survey methods or community forums, but in this instance ended up leaving a significant impression on the gathering.

The general structure followed many elements of a World Café conversation but added two improv comedy performances to facilitate dialogue.

- Approximately 50 key stakeholders were invited to a lunch meeting community conversation.
- The event opened with small group conversations framed by three powerful questions.

- An improviser was stationed at each table, listening and recording the key ideas, thoughts, and discussion points.
- The improvisers brought those ideas to the stage and used them as inspiration for improv theater.
- Following the performance, two representatives from the foundation were invited on stage to reflect on what they heard and how the foundation's giving might align with community priorities.
- The improvisers and foundation staff spread out once again amongst the tables for another round of table conversations.
- This inspired a final round of improv theater which attempted to capture everything that had emerged from the first and second conversations.

On the one hand, the small conversation model provided opportunities for many participants to be heard and exchange ideas in an informal, conversational setting. At the same time, it meant having to choose who would be in the room, as a gathering of more than 50 would have upset the opportunity to listen to and harvest participants' ideas. One complaint was the difficulty hearing people speak because the room was so full and noisy. Were this model going to be employed for engagement with larger communities, it could be repeated in a series of similar events at different times and locations to facilitate more participation.

The gathering was designed to use a cast of improv theater performers as something of a buffer that allowed a freedom of communication and a more honest and open discussion than would be otherwise possible. Participants sat at tables in a warm,

hospitable space for lunch. A lead facilitator from the improv troupe posed a question to the assembly and participants took approximately 10 minutes to discuss it with their tablemates. Then the main facilitator asked a second question, and a third question, allowing about ten minutes of discussion for each. Products of the conversation were recorded on large sheets of butcher paper covering every table.

The questions were designed following Eric Vogt, Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs's template for "powerful questions." They aimed to "catch people where they were," evoke participants' values, hopes, and ideals, and ultimately move the conversation from a problem focus to a possibility focus.^{xxxviii} If replicated, questions would need to be tailored to each event's purpose and reality. As an example, the questions asked at this case event are below:

- What are the challenges of living in rural Minnesota?
- What would overcoming or addressing those challenges/opportunities look like?
- What would it take to make overcoming/addressing those challenges a reality?

The event differed from a World Café in that at least one improv performer was present at each table, recording the highlights of the conversations. Improvisers are trained to be deep and empathetic listeners. Constantly flexing the muscles necessary for these skills made the improvisers capable and skillful facilitators. "The improvisers knew enough to push a little deeper," explained the Foundation staff member after the event. "It helped the conversation to go deeper." On stage, their job is to listen for not only what is being said, but what isn't being said, for what the scene is about and where it's going, for how the audience is reacting and how that is shaping the performance. The improvisers employed these same listening skills during the table conversations. Their job was to

listen to what community members were explicitly saying in response to the questions, as well as what larger picture they may have been attempting to get at or illustrate. This included listening to the older woman without a car at the event. The cast member at her table knew the town was less than pedestrian-friendly in several places, especially where a major highway cut through downtown. When the improviser heard that this woman did not drive, he knew enough to ask her how she managed to get around, particularly in crossing the highway. Engaged listening, not just to what people at the table were saying, but to the geographic and situational context, and for how that might intersect with an individual participant, is a complex and important skill set as valuable for policy makers as it is for improv comedians.

Following the round of table conversations, the cast took what they had learned to the stage, using it as inspiration for improv theater scenes. Some of the scenes relayed specific concerns or ideas discussed. Others exaggerated ideas or problems. While this provided entertainment value, it also put the ideas in context and helped illustrate how important they felt to individuals in the room.

The woman without a car's story ended up as a powerful example. She had explained to her table facilitator that only way to get to the grocery store from her house was by crossing a highway. On paper or even as an oral anecdote, this might seem insignificant. Yet a theatrical scene featuring an elderly woman slowly making her way across the stage as pantomimed cars whizzed perilously close to her, amplified the experience to resemble the speaker's experience for the audience in a way she was not able to portray herself.

As the Foundation staff attendee explained later, the theatrical mirroring of individual experiences can make sense of problems and contexts that communities might otherwise just take for granted. “People get used to things the way things are. What (the improv) was able to bring out were the themes you were hearing. It got people to ask why do we do things the way that we do them?”

This is both the power of this model and a place for critique. The structure turns authority for telling the story over to a third party, the improviser. This fairly raises concerns of agency and ownership. As Jane Mansbridge and others have written, facilitators and communicators of all stripes must be cognizant and sensitive to who is speaking on behalf of whom, and whether that is inflicting cultural violence in a way that outweighs its benefits. ^{xxxix}

In the model’s defense, however, the performance element served to help the originator of the story communicate her truth in a manner she was not able to do on her own. The improviser’s ability to listen and pick up on elements of subtle importance allow him/her to highlight something that might otherwise be buried in the scrum of a heated conversation. Additionally, the improvisers can help counteract some of the gender inequality in many conversation models by specifically amplifying traditionally under-represented voices. ^{xl}As a more anecdotal yet no less meaningful bit of evidence for the model’s effectiveness, the woman without a car was heard during the performance saying, “They’re doing *my* idea!” This was a note of celebration and excitement, not outrage or critique. The audience member was expressing a feeling of empowerment in that her contribution to the conversation was being valued and highlighted by being brought to life on stage. The Foundation staff attendee might have summed it up best

when she explained, “It’s not in a ‘we’re making fun of you way’ It’s about shining a light.”

Following the first round of improvised scenes, two representatives from the foundation were brought on stage for an interview conducted by one of the performers. The conversation was straightforward, largely asking the foundation representatives to reflect on what they had heard in the table conversations, what they had seen in the improv, and talk a bit about how they felt the challenges, opportunities, or specific ideas that emerged fit with the foundation’s current giving or investment programs. Following that brief on-stage portion, the foundation staff and improvisers disbursed back amongst the tables for one last round of table conversations. This final conversation round was looser than the first. Community members used the time to ask foundation representatives at their tables further questions, reflect on ideas that emerged in the improv, and elaborate on anything they did not get to cover in the first round.

The last programmed part of the event was a final performance by the improv cast. Once again, they took the stage, using what they had heard in both the first and second round of table conversations, as well as the brief interview with the foundation representatives, as inspiration for scenes. This performance served a function similar to the first by reflecting and spotlighting key elements of the conversation. Ending with the improvisers on stage, however, was also important in that it put both the foundation representatives and community members back into a similar power position. Those two parties ended the event as an audience together, on the literal and figurative same level—at least within the context of gathering. The Foundation staff participant argued that the model should make it easier for the two groups to meet again in the future on a more even

playing ground. “In any community there are dynamics where some people are seen as leaders and some are on the periphery or not even thought about. If you want change to happen you have to have different conversations. Something like The Theater of Public Policy can play a unique role as an observer in surfacing that. It will help position them for the future.”

Conclusion

New Public Service as Dendhart described is an approach to policy making, implementation, and assessment with almost as much in common with human-center design as with Old Public Administration. It asks those in the public sector not only to consider the citizenry they serve in every stage of their work, but to consult and collaborate with them in shaping and executing policy. Scholars on the forefront of this paradigm have had to push against the rise of New Public Management, which focuses on citizens as clients and customers. ^{xli} Part of New Public Management’s appeal is that its aims are relatively simple to comprehend and therefore work towards. If market efficiencies are the public manager’s ultimate goal, he/she can take much from the private sector in advancing those aims.

For New Public Service to hold its own or begin taking ground in this existential fight over the proper role and endpoint aims of government, scholars must provide students and advocates with the tools and skills to implement this vision. The path to those skills will not simply come from the private sector. Instead, many will be borrowed from cultural and artistic disciplines.

Schools of public policy and administration have a responsibility to equip students with all the tools that will enable them to serve the common good. This must include skills like empathy, creativity, cultural competency, communication, and dynamic leadership. These should be at least as central (if not more so) to a policy education than analytical skills and statistical analysis. After all, what good is any data set without the capacity to make sense of it in a larger context, communicate it to others, and use it in collaboration with a target community for a common good?

Institutions of higher learning could achieve these ends in three steps. First, offer (or require) a course that focuses on the skills such as empathic listening, collaboration, and creative leadership. Such courses could give students tangible means of practicing those abilities, such as the exercises detailed in this paper. Additionally, the course could push students to imagine new and different ways of exercising these skill-muscles by presenting them with real-world case studies that require creative approaches to be successfully addressed.

Second, tests of these skills could be incorporated into virtually all coursework the way policy memo writing or data analysis is embedded in a variety of policy school classes. These skills will likely be tested in any and all real-world work graduates will someday tackle, whether having to communicate complex subjects with a diverse public, or craft policy across sectors, so regular practice during a student's time in school would be warranted. This could be as simple as professors simply asking students working on a complex policy analysis or prescription simple questions:

- “How would a community be involved in your analysis process or implementation?”

- “How would you communicate what you have learned in this project to a broader public?”
- “What aspects of this problem or what values could not be easily expressed through the data and how would you address that in crafting/implementing the policy?”

Instead of simply requiring a policy memo as a final project, professors should challenge their students to present their findings in creative ways that speak to non-policy students as fluently as it speaks to their peers. Some classes could even invite the general public or a target community into the classroom for final presentations and incorporate their feedback into the grading process.

Finally, schools should embrace and celebrate students’ creative approaches to policy analysis and community engagement. From top to bottom, institutions should show that they embrace the messy, artistic side of policy work as much as the data-driven analytical side. This may be through tangible measures, like annual awards for student work in creative communication and engagement, as well as through less explicit means such as the language used in the institution’s mission and values. Ultimately though, this will require a bravery on behalf of school faculty and administration. Successes from embracing the *art* of policy rather than just the science, may be more difficult to quantify. Yet those creative skills will be critically important as students head into careers in public service.

This paper outlined a case for the art of improv comedy theater as a pathway for public sector managers and students. The skills of empathetic listening, collaboration, and creative leadership are central to the kind of work New Public Service advocates

advocate. They help students and managers better understand their own role in co-creating democratic institutions and civic society. They do not necessarily solve any particular policy problem or propose a specific solution. Yet policy implementers who take a “Yes, and...” mindset to their work and practice the exercises outlined above are far more likely to co-create solutions that are community-based, culturally-relevant, and politically palatable.

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IAP2'S PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SPECTRUM



The IAP2 Federation has developed the Spectrum to help groups define the public's role in any public participation process. The IAP2 Spectrum is quickly becoming an international standard.

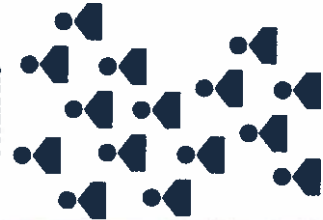
INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
<p>PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL</p> <p>To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.</p>	<p>INFORM</p> <p>To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.</p>	<p>CONSULT</p> <p>To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.</p>	<p>INVOLVE</p> <p>To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.</p>	<p>COLLABORATE</p> <p>To place final decision making in the hands of the public.</p>	<p>EMPOWER</p> <p>To place final decision making in the hands of the public.</p>
<p>PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC</p> <p>We will keep you informed.</p>	<p>We will keep you informed, listen to concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. We will seek your feedback on drafts and proposals.</p>	<p>We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.</p>	<p>We will work together with you to formulate solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.</p>	<p>We will implement what you decide.</p>	<p>We will implement what you decide.</p>

Bringing Together Community Members and a Regional Foundation For an Honest Conversation Through Improv Comedy Theater

A foundation wants an honest conversation with the community. So they bring in an improv cast.

Community Members



Foundation Staff



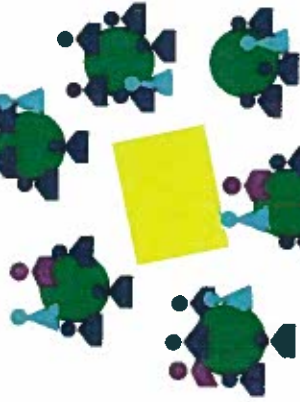
Improv Cast



One month prior...
A community champion invites key stakeholders.

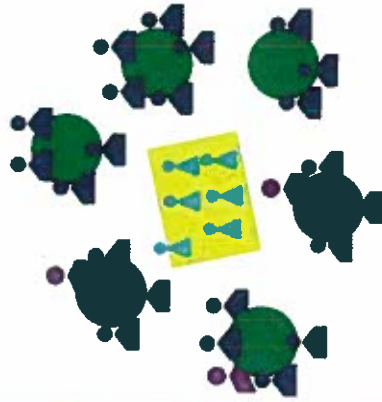


Attendees are treated to lunch. Then a World Cafe!
The improv host asks three powerful questions with 10 minutes for each.



An improviser is at each table, recording thoughts and ideas through empathetic listening.

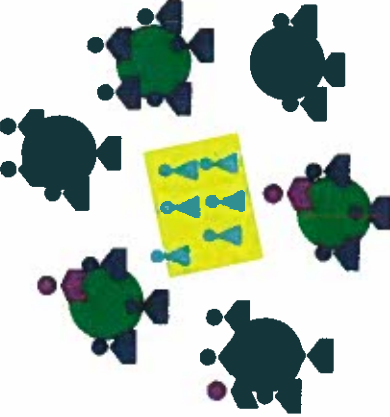
The improv cast improvises scenes inspired by the table conversations. This helps reflect truths.



After a 15 minute improv set, Foundation staff are invited on stage to react, reflect, and answer questions.



The improv cast performs once again, summarizing the day and leveling the power dynamic in the room by being the last ones on stage.



Attendees end the two-hour event energized, optimistic, and newly connected to each other and some big ideas.

