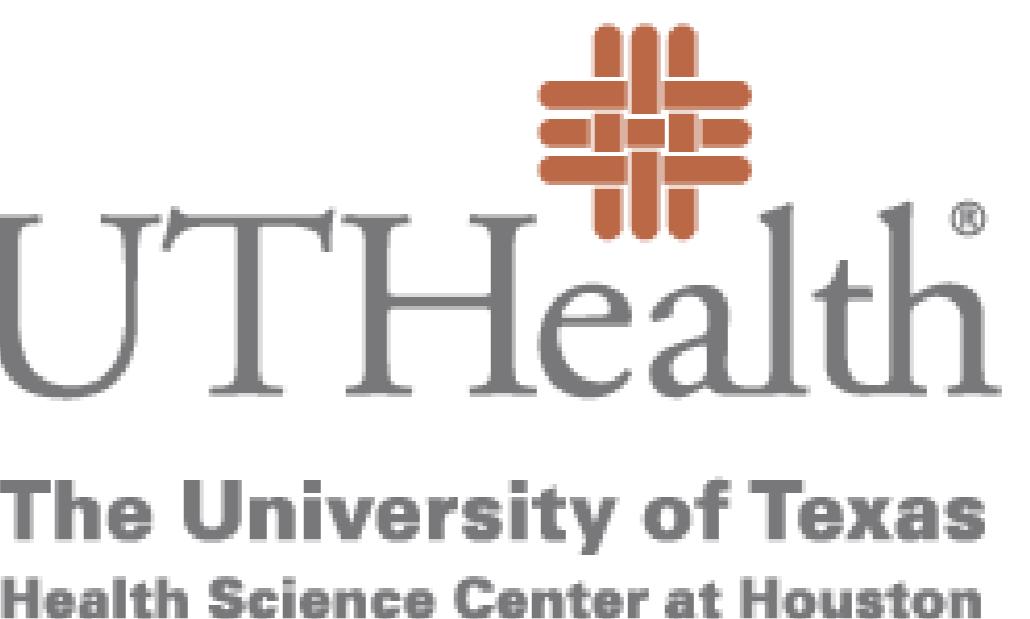


# Feasibility and Acceptability of a Virtual Improvisation Course for Medical Students

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McGovern  
Medical School

## BACKGROUND

- Communication skills and integration of the arts are important aspects in medical training.
- Improvisation (improv) has been introduced at medical schools as an adjunct to training in communication
- A new fall 2021 elective at McGovern Medical School at UTHealth paired the skills of improv professional artists with the medical expertise of the authors.
- The elective was required to be virtual instead of in-person during the Delta variant spike of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## OBJECTIVES

The objectives were to assess the feasibility and acceptability of a virtual improvisation course for 1st and 2nd year medical students.

## METHODS

- 19 students enrolled and split into 2 groups
- Each group had one improv professional and one of the authors.
- 6 one-hour sessions were held virtually via Zoom.
- Sessions included an icebreaker, 3-4 improv activities, the medical faculty providing examples of how the skills practiced during the session could apply to the medical setting, and student reflections on that session.
- Attendance in 5+ sessions for course credit
- An anonymous course evaluation was provided after the last session and the data were analyzed quantitatively by averaging and calculating the standard deviations of the scores for each item.

## CONTACT

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Table 1. Anonymous Course Evaluation of Students Taking the Virtual Improv Class

Item*	No. (%) of students who agreed or strongly agreed	Average Score (SD)**
1. The presenters created an atmosphere in which I could take risks.	17(100)	5.00 (0.00)
2. I felt supported by my classmates.	17(100)	5.00(0.00)
3. I felt free to try new things in this class.	17(100)	4.88(0.32)
4. I felt free to fail in this class.	17(100)	4.88(0.32)
5. I felt playful and spontaneous in this class.	17(100)	4.88(0.32)
6. I felt good about myself in this class.	17(100)	4.82(0.38)
7. This class helped me become a better listener.	17(100)	4.82(0.38)
8. This class helped me become more observant.	16(94)	4.88(0.47)
9. This class helped me respond in the moment.	17(100)	4.94(0.24)
10. This class helped me to be a more flexible and resourceful person.	17(100)	4.94(0.24)
11. This class increased confidence in myself.	16(94)	4.65(0.59)
12. This class improved my ability to deal with stressful situations.	15(88)	4.53(0.70)
13. This class increased my comfort with ambiguous situations.	15(88)	4.65(0.68)
14. This class helped me become a better team member/collaborator.	16(94)	4.76(0.55)
15. This class helped me feel more fearless.	16(94)	4.71(0.57)
16. Studying improv could make me a better doctor.	17(100)	4.94(0.24)
17. I liked having 1st and 2nd year med students in the same group.	17(100)	4.94(0.24)
18. I feel I grew my empathy for others in this class.	16(94)	4.76(0.55)
19. I would recommend this class to other medical students.	16(94)	4.76(0.55)

\*Items 1-16, 19 from Watson K. Serious Play: Teaching Medical Skills With Improvisational Theater Techniques.

Acad Med. 2011;86:1260-1265

\*\*17 students (89%) completed surveys. Agreement rated on a 5-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)



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## RESULTS

Table 2. Course Evaluation Free Response Questions and Selected Answers of Students Taking Virtual Improv Class

Question	Selected Free Response Answers	Question	Selected Free Response Answers
My favorite thing(s) about this class was:	"The freedom to explore" "It gave me the opportunity to work on my listening skills in a non-graded, non-stressful environment." "The levity and spontaneity"	One change that would improve this class would be:	"More tie-in to the medical field" "More classes" "...the class should potentially reconsider the time that it is offered. For MS1's, it was slightly stressful to have it in the hour before anatomy..."
I hoped this class would teach me (and did it do so?):	"How to be more confidently spontaneous and become a better communicator (which it did!)" "Better listening skills (100% did)" "Empathy. Oddly it taught me empathy for self." "How to connect with patients better. It did but I also thought it would be more about role playing patient and physician interactions"	One thing that surprised me about this class was:	"It was silly, but it was hard." "I was surprised to see how my classmates started to let loose and really be vulnerable and not afraid to make mistakes. That was great!" "Other students' willingness to embrace making mistakes, being awkward, and putting themselves out there to try and have as much fun as possible and engage with the session meaningfully" "How effective it was even through Zoom"
Most important/favorite thing I learned in this class was:	"How to think quickly in conversation!" "Not being so egocentric - realizing everyone is also feeling anxious to 'act'" "Be more comfortable and confident in unexpected moments, even when I may make a mistake."	One thing that disappointed me about this class is:	"There could have been more variation as far as activities" "Online format" "Nothing" "It was too short! More sessions!"
I wish we did more:	"...of connecting our various exercises to patient care" "Exercises that would help us learn more about ourselves"	I wish we did less:	"Zip zap zop" (name of one of the exercises) "I don't think anything should be removed"
Any other comments about the instructor(s)?	"Jeromy [one of the improv instructors] was such a great leader! I've worked with quite a few people in the improv world, and I loved the energy and environment that he created." "Great job, fun, support, great disposition"	Comments for having the course on campus in person:	"I think this will further improve the experience. Although classes on Zoom also went very well." "...we can get to know our peers better." "I feel like it would have been better on campus, but the online version was more convenient."

## DISCUSSION

- Virtual format of improv courses may still be effective, is flexible, and has the potential for greater reach
- The skills developed in this course may improve students' ability to communicate and empathize with their patients
- Most students would have preferred the course in-person, if available.

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## CONCLUSIONS

- Course was both feasible and acceptable to 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year medical students
- Students agreed the course helped them with several communication skills
- Considerations for future courses include
  - offering them in-person at convenient times
  - More sessions
  - More relevant tie-ins to medical scenarios