



The art of science:
How 'Academic Improv'
can be an essential
tool for scientific
communication



Once a hobby and now the basis for a startup company, Improvisational Theatre ('improv') has been a tool that has helped Dr. Aniek Ivens to better communicate science. Aniek Ivens is an evolutionary biologist by training, who in fact completed her PhD at the RUG, and who got involved with improvisational theater already during her bachelor studies. With over 12 years of experience in training scientists and others in practicing improv, Aniek has now tailored several workshops to specifically assist scientists to improve their communication skills. Aniek herself received training in improv and storytelling in Wageningen, Groningen, New York and The Hague and is an alum of the 'improv for scientists' program at the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science at Stony Brook University in New York. Among the workshops that Academic Improv offers is the "improv(e) your science communication" workshop, which works on presentation skills, developing elevator pitches, and developing storylines. These workshops are the product of years of experience, personal interest on improvisational theater, trial and error, and feedback from the workshop participants in different academic and scientific settings.

What is 'Academic Improv'? How long have you been doing these workshops?

The company Academic Improv was established in 2017, but I have been developing these workshops since 2015. I developed these workshops to assist scientists to prepare and engage in any situation in academia that could benefit from the skills used in improvisational theater. The workshops Academic Improv provides, work on presentation and other communication skills, team building activities, and brainstorming sessions. Much of the work we do involves communication in academic settings. For example, we work on communication skills between PhD students and their supervisors, we moderate conferences and panel discussions, we also assist in personal coaching for PhD students who are preparing for their thesis defense and work on personal coaching for young scientists who are preparing for

interviews associated with grants and academic jobs. Academic Improv also offers brainstorm sessions aimed at developing roadmaps for research projects or to start new research lines and collaborations.

How did you get the idea to start the 'Academic Improv' workshops?

To do good improvisational theater you need a certain set of skills like flexibility, creativity, precision in your communication to sell an idea, and attentive listening; furthermore, you need to have the ability to work in a group, as cooperation skills are essential to good improv theatre. Practicing skills that are the core of improv with the goal of applying them to every day life is also called 'Applied Improvisation', a movement for professional development worldwide. At Academic Improv we offer Applied Improvisation for academia. For example, one



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of the skills that improv theater helps scientists with is how to handle making mistakes, as improv theater forces you to be comfortable to make mistakes in front of an audience. Improv theater not only helps with boosting your confidence but also enhances your creativity, as you must always be thinking on your feet. Throughout my academic career, I noticed that these skills are also essential to be an effective scientist and that I, myself, and many of my colleagues were struggling with them. For example, many scientists tend to have a personality that favors perfectionism. This personality trait can be very beneficial in academic settings; however, it can also have a downside. For example, it can pose a challenge when delivering a public speech. In their strive for the perfect speech, the speaker may focus on themselves rather than on their audience. As a result, the message that the speaker tries to communicate may not get across as well as compared to a situation in which the speaker really focusses on their audience and its understanding of the message. After speaking to some of my colleagues in Groningen we decided to get together and work on these skills by meeting every other week to do some exercises developed for improvisational theater. We worked on skills like giving a conference talk, dealing with unexpected questions, coming up with new research ideas, but primarily on thinking outside of the box (and

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having a lot of fun). All these skills focus on problem-solving by adopting an attitude, central to improvisational theater, of accepting a challenge and building on it. We started noticing that these exercises were helping us in our presentation skills. This is how I began to incorporate improv theater into my academic life and how Academic Improv was born.

Who attends these workshops?

In principle, these workshops are designed for any academic level, from bachelor students to academic professors; however, most of my services are sought out by PhD students and postdocs. Other groups that work in an academic setting have also reached out to obtain these services. Recently, I provided a workshop to a group of research data officers at the UMCG and I have previously worked with grant support offices. I have also worked previously with data science companies. Although these are corporate settings, these companies benefit from the workshops too as they also deal with the challenges surrounding communication of data to non-experts and many employees previously trained in an academic setting.

Academic Improv helps you to focus on your audience rather than on yourself. This is a great presentation skill to have as a scientist. Although at any point of your academic career you may benefit from developing improvisational theater skills, PhD and postdoc researchers do perhaps gain the most benefit from these workshops because they have the experience of working on an academic group setting, are fairly independent in their research, but are flexible enough to change and adapt to new and different research environments. I believe that it is never too

early to start acquiring communication skills, thus even bachelor students could greatly benefit from acquiring improvisational theater skills. I also think that since these workshops also focus on storytelling, it is never too late to benefit from them.

What is your opinion on the role that cultural background plays in scientific communication?

Stories and storytelling are a universal characteristic across cultures. What makes an interesting and appealing story applies cross-culturally. Hence any cultural background can benefit from improving their storytelling skills. An important aspect of the Academic Improv workshops is to connect with your audience, which implies that you must understand the social and cultural context of your audience. Effective storytelling creates a bridge between the storyteller and the audience built on knowledge and experiences that both have in common. This aspect of storytelling is sometimes lost in translation and improvisational theater allows the presenter to sense and adapt to his audience. Improvisational theater is very intuitive and requires the actors to say the first thing that comes to mind. This is of course very hard to do in a language that is not your mother-tongue. However, these workshops were designed to also benefit people whose first language is not English. In fact, this is the case for the majority of the participants.

■ BY JAIME MONDRAGÓN

■ PORTRAIT PHOTO BY CHANTAL BEKKER

Feedback from the 'Academic Improv' workshop participants

"Eye-opening, motivating, and fun. The activities are very original. Aniek's broad experience in academia and science communication leads to useful and specific feedback, which helped my students to improve their presentation skills. After an afternoon of active exercises, students went home with an updated science communication toolbox. Everyone who wants to improve communicating about his/her research project, including addressing the question "What do you do?" at parties in a more satisfying way, can benefit from this workshop." - **Lemke Kraan**

"Having already participated in improv activities in Groningen, my experience with Academic Improv is very positive. The workshop was about reducing communication barriers by working towards succinct messages that would enable the receiver to quickly grasp, and relate, to my ideas. The workshop began with a short improv session which helped to open up and to realize that transmitting a good message does not have to be contingent on having a good idea. I believe that this workshop could be useful for all my colleagues because it could help to facilitate discussions within the group." - **Omer Markovitch**