

Improv education: yes,
and... resonance!

How art education can
contribute to social
engagement

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Abstract

In search of how art education can contribute to social connection, this research explores improvisational theatre (Improv) group classes as a potentially relevant educational setting for improving levels of social engagement through experiences of resonance as defined by Hartmut Rosa, with outcomes that can affect the lives of participants beyond the educational sphere. By using observations and interviews, we further conclude that the principles of Improv can, when competently facilitated, be beneficial to art education in general, as in its spontaneous and flexible nature lays the premise of creativity.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary western societies are characterized by a fast pace of life, backed up by a constant need for technological growth and innovation. This phenomenon is described by sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2003) as *social acceleration*: a societal context that can compromise an individuals' capacity for connection and belonging, leading to feelings of alienation and various degrees of lonesomeness (Rosa, 2019). From a sociological point of view, Rosa argues that a possible response to this alienation caused by social acceleration in a high-speed society is to create more opportunities for transformative experiences of *resonance*: moments when individuals feel connected to themselves, to others and to life per se (Rosa, 2019). An experience of resonance is characterized by a combination of four different qualities: *affection, emotion, transformation, and elusiveness* (Rosa, 2019).

It is however not clear how resonance can be facilitated or induced. If being in a state of resonance is having a responsive relationship to the world and feeling some level of connection, then improvisation theatre (Improv) practices of multi-dimensional interaction and collaboration could provide a promising framework for the operationalisation of resonance: "Improv aims to increase personal awareness, interpersonal attentiveness, and trust among members of the ensemble." (Bermant, 2013, p.1) Besides the basic principles of teamwork and responsiveness such as embracing a "yes, and..." mindset, some Improv exercises can give rise to a remarkable capacity for cooperation between participants during a scene, a phenomenon called "group mind" in moments often described by participants as "magic" (Bermant, 2013).

In this qualitative research we look at the four qualities present in experiences of resonance from Rosa's theory (*affection, emotion, transformation, and elusiveness*) in connection to the application of the principles of Improv in an educational setting (following Improv lessons), excluding the experience of performing for an external audience.

By establishing links between the criteria for resonance and the core principles of Improv practices, we hypothesise that groups of participants following Improv classes are a fertile ground for transformative experiences of *resonance* and consequential social engagement and sense of belonging.

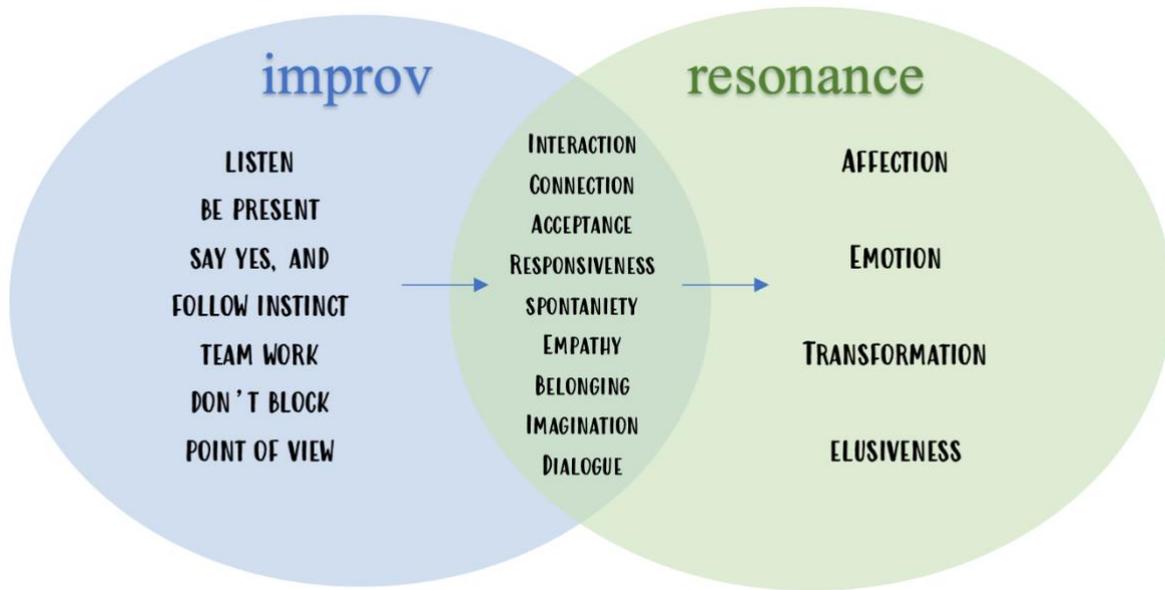


Figure 1. Venn Diagram over hypothesis of relationship between Improv and Resonance, by B. Pais, and S. Jimenez, 2021, October

This leads to our research question: *How can improvisational theatre (Improv) classes help stimulate experiences of resonance within a group?*

Using observations and interviews, we evaluate the ways in which Improv classes can facilitate optimal circumstances for the occurrence of resonance. We further investigate the role of the teacher as facilitator, and review which factors contribute to encouraging and hindering the experience of resonance, both from an individual and from a collective point of view.

2. Background

a. Resonance

According to sociologist Hartmut Rosa, life in late modern societies is characterized by an escalatory mode of progression that has become unsustainable for various systems that are not able to keep up with the pace:

“Multidimensional and high rates of change and instability transform the relationships of human beings to the places in which they live, the material structures that surround them, the people with whom they are in contact, (...) their own feelings and convictions.”

(Rosa, 2015, p. 318)

The need for stability and a sense of permanence is core to the human condition (Berkowitz, 2020). This means the faster things change, the more problematic it gets for human beings to adapt to new situations, leading to a decrease in the effort to “assimilate oneself” to them (Rosa, 2015). If our capacity to assimilate into our surroundings is compromised, Rosa argues that we become alienated, and our relationship to the world becomes mute and disconnected, leaving little space for feelings of belonging - to a place, to a group, to oneself, to the world. The concept of alienation has been previously theorized, for instance by sociologist Max Weber (1993) as *disenchantment*, a social reaction to a modern secularized society that had lost its capacity for enchantment (Jenkins, 2000). Considering Rosa’s *alienation* and Weber’s *disenchantment* as a “de-magic-action” of the world, how does one bring the magic back?

One possible response to counterbalance feelings of alienation and disconnection is to look for experiences of *resonance* (Rosa, 2019). “Resonance is a kind of relationship to the world, formed through affect and emotion, intrinsic interest, and perceived self-efficacy, in which subject and world are mutually affected and transformed.” (Rosa, 2019, p. 174) *Resonance* is the process of a having a responsive relationship to the world, in which subject and world meet and transform each other, in moments of attunement and reverberation, characterized by a combination of four different qualities:

- *Affection* (one is moved by someone or something)
- *Emotion* (one feels a “call” and reaches out, experiencing self-efficacy)
- *Transformation* (one has the possibility to be touched and become different)
- *Elusiveness* (one never knows how or when it might happen)

In Fuchs (2020) view, “resonance has the capacity to redress modernity’s multiple alienations by overcoming the Cartesian split between mind and body, the crippling disjuncture between the individual, society, and nature.”

At the core of resonance lies its dynamic capability to generate transformative experiences, where both ends involved are transformed, experiencing self-efficacy and connection. In the words of Rosa "(...) in this process of being touched and affected by something and of reacting and answering to it, we are transformed – or we transform ourselves in the sense of a co-production." (Schiermer, 2017, p.3). Phenomena such as being moved to tears through a piece of music or a work of fine arts indicate that resonance is then not an emotional state, but rather a relational mode (Rosa, 2019). It can also be analysed as a heightened sense of aliveness and connectivity (Felski, 2020). Resonance-seeking activities - activities that reflect the desire or need for meaningful interactions - are vital for individuals to attach value and purpose to their lives (Susen, 2019). From this perspective, art in general offers the possibility of getting in touch with "some other," something else besides oneself (Peloquin, 1996, p. 656). Artistic experiences offer the possibility of creating *empathic resonance*, by connecting one to "the other", being that an object, a music partiture, or a group of actors, and letting one be moved by the experience.

In the field of Psychoanalytic Psychology, Coburn (2001) refers to *emotional resonance* as a quintessentially human propensity toward attunement to the subjective world of another, resulting in a mutual process of emotional harmonization, an intermittent sharing of subjective experience of what it is to be human. In this view of the concept, *emotional resonance* is a dynamic process of registering, grasping, acknowledging, and confirming (or disconfirming) the other, "much in the way the apparent structure of improvisational dance is determined by both dancers" (Coburn, 2001, p. 309). Fredrickson (2013) refers to the *positivity resonance theory* as the capacity for caring and synchronized interactions to generate high-quality emotional connections, contributing to good mental health and growth in personal and social resources (Prinzing et al., 2020).

What are then the possibilities for encouraging resonance, particularly in the context of art education? Rosa's suggestion for measuring "quality of life via indicators such as laughter, dancing, and singing (and perhaps also crying), via intensity and frequency of physical and eye contact" (Rosa, 2019, p. 452) can indicate a direction to empirically operationalizing resonance. Resonant experiences are also embodied experiences, affecting skin resistance, breath, heart rate, body tension, resulting for example in goose bumps or teary eyes, confirming a link between psychological and physical realms that can be measured at a neuropsychological level (Rosa, 2019). In Fuchs view, "resonance has the capacity to redress modernity's multiple alienations by overcoming the Cartesian split between mind and body, the crippling disjuncture between the individual, society, and nature, and the modern competition over social resources." (Fuchs, 2020, p.354)

b. Applied Theatre and Improv

When observing various forms of theatre education, research revealed various projects of applied theatre among “individuals who have lost touch with a sense of groupness” (Thompson & Schechner, 2004), in which theatre practices were used to explore social experiences (Brown et al., 2017), rather than a way to produce a performance. Through its embodiment characteristic, acting stimulates expression, offering the possibility to put oneself into someone else’s shoes (Niccolai, 2020) and as such to get in touch with this “other” on an embodied and emotional level.

Modern Improv was developed in the years 1960 by American author and educator Viola Spolin, who believed that *transformation* was the heart of improvisation (Viola Spolin Biography, z.d.). Her pedagogical approaches involved exercises and games that promoted spontaneity, intuition, adaptability, and creativity, as well as improving self-awareness and communication among members of an ensemble (Rossing, 2016). Another key contributor to modern Improv is Keith Johnstone, who reinforced the importance of imagination, affirming that most schools encourage children to be *unimaginative*, in an environment that is designed to suppress spontaneity, and that imagination should be appreciated just as effortlessly as perception is (Johnstone, 1987).

Modern Improv practice involves a series of unscripted verbal and nonverbal exercises and performances where characters, dialogues and stories are created spontaneously (Schwenke et al., 2020).

If Improv performances are operating mostly on the interaction between actors on stage and the audience, Improv classes seem to offer an optimal setting for the operationalisation of resonance by focusing on the interaction between players building a scene through exercises that allow a high level of interpersonal connections between the participants of the class, as described by Bermant (2015): “The beauty of improv is that it is quintessentially a collective, cooperative form that rest completely on trust for the spark of creativity that can transport players, briefly, into confidence- building interpersonal connections.”

At the core of Improv are several principles used to boost creativity, acceptance, and interaction, resulting in scenes marked by intense awareness of the other and cooperation, which often include humour. Some of these key principles are:

- *Listen and be present*

This is a difficult yet crucial rule of Improv. Listening carefully to what the other participant is saying, doing, feeling, will release you from thinking ahead and bring you back to the present moment. It is about paying a close attention to what is happening during the scene.

- *Embrace a “yes, and...” mindset*

This is the core principle of Improv, saying “yes” to any idea or suggestion, and continuing the interaction by adding something to it. It means to listen carefully to someone else’s bid for collaboration and building on their idea. This reinforces engagement and cooperation.

- *Follow your instinct*

If participants are listening well to the partners and staying emotionally present in the scene, they can use their instincts to guide them, making it an intuitive practice.

- *Interact, it’s teamwork*

Improv is a vast mechanism of give and take and of seeking support. The group mindset is greater than the individual.

- *Accept, don’t block*

This rule serves to emphasize that the focus is on accepting the ideas of others, but also on self-acceptance, accepting the input brought on the spot during the scene

- *Point of View & intention*

This can be used as a starting point for interaction. To enter a scene with a point of view, emotion or intention and let it drive character and response.

After conducting a literature review on the principles and practices aspects of Improv, we further look at how they can be used in search of experiences of resonance.

3. Methodology

a. Measuring resonance in Improv classes

The purpose of this qualitative research is to explore to which extent theatre education, in particular Improv classes, can be a favourable setting for operationalising transformative experiences of resonance among a group of students.

To measure resonance within a group of students of Improv theatre classes, we developed a research instrument around the concept of resonance and its four qualities and conducted observations of existing Improv classes and interviews of students and teachers. This research follows an inductive reasoning: in fact, the field research is based on existing educational programmes in which factors playing a role in the operationalisation of resonance will be identified and analysed, factors that may be applied in other educational contexts.

b. Participants

This research has been conducted on two groups of 12 students each enrolled in a beginner 10-week programme consisting of weekly three-hour Improv classes. The main difference between this educational context with Improv shows is that the players are following lessons in which the teacher will challenge them through different exercises, and in which scenes will only be performed in front of the group of players taking the class. The group is not working towards a final performance for an external audience.

The class is given in English, in Amsterdam, as part of the educational programme of the Boom Chicago Academy, an Improv school known for its American influences and for bringing the Improv theatre to the Netherlands more than 25 years ago.

Because of the language being English, and not Dutch, the official language of the country, the programme is expected to attract mostly “internationals”, meaning adults who have moved to the Netherlands during their adult life. This target group has been identified as particularly relevant to this research on resonance, since the search for a sense of belonging and for creating more social interaction might be experienced more vividly by adults living in a society in which they could have less social and interpersonal bonds, such as family, than adults who have grown up in this country.

c. Data collection

We made non-participative observations of two different groups during improv classes ([appendix A](#)). During these observations, we observed the “live” connection and interaction within the group and took notes on the exercises, the teacher role and the group dynamics. In our strive for unobtrusiveness, we have gathered limited visual data, which is not being used

as an active part of our research. A few weeks after the last lesson of the course, we conducted four structured interviews with two theatre educators and two students ([appendix B](#)). The structure of the interview was based on the four criteria of resonance as defined by Rosa (affection, emotions, transformation, and elusiveness) and on humour. All interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams. The interviews got recorded both on Microsoft Teams with both audio and video and with a Dictaphone software.

This methodology inspired both by Rosa and by our pre-research on Improv aims to access the perceived levels of the qualities of resonance and social connection both from a student's and from a teacher's perspective.

For both interviews and observations verbal and written consent was asked to all participants for using the data, but all chose to consent only verbally and not in written form (please view consent form in [appendix E](#)).

d. Data analysis

Once all observations and interviews were conducted, the coding process went in two steps: we first used an open coding method. Then we worked on the categorisation of all the collected data by grouping key words into five different groups (axial coding): Drive towards resonance, specificities of Improv, factors that hinder resonance, factors that increase resonance, and effects ([appendix C](#)).

This methodology allows us to bring the field data back into the theory of resonance and its operationalisation. We developed a code tree ([appendix D](#)) presenting all the collected data during the axial coding method (coding structure of the code tree visible in [appendix C](#)).

4. Results

We have identified different areas that can influence the occurrence of resonance in Improv classes and have organized them in three categories that are relevant for the operationalisation of resonance. The results of this qualitative research on the question “how can Improv classes help stimulate experiences of resonance within a group?” will be presented according to the following structure:

a) *Motivation*

In this category we identify and analyse the effects of a pre-existing individual willingness towards social competences and connection. From the collected data, the motivation to join an Improv class is divided into three main topics: *social skills*, *humour* and *dealing with unpredictability*.

b) *Factors facilitating resonance*

This category refers to the observation and identification of factors that can contribute to facilitating experiences of resonance during Improv classes. These factors were analysed and divided into three different spheres: *the teacher* - how the teacher conducts the class; *the self* - what is happening within oneself; and *the group* - the effect of group dynamics.

b) *Factors hindering resonance*

This category refers to the observation and identification of factors that can contribute to the decrease of experiences of resonance during Improv classes. These factors were analysed and divided into three different spheres: *the teacher* - how the teacher conducts the class; *the self* - what is happening within oneself; and *the group* - the effect of group dynamics.

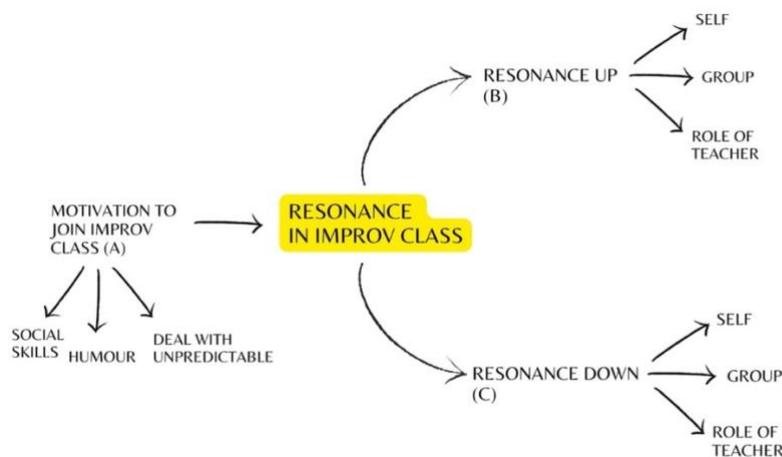


Figure 2. Illustration of the categorisation of our results, by B. Pais, and S. Jimenez, 2022, February

a. Motivation

In order to remain aware of the specificity of our focus group, and of possible intrinsic bias, we introduce as first part of the results elements related to the motivation of students to join an Improv class, which can be interpreted as a pre-existing desire to seek for social connections through resonance-seeking activities (Susen 2019). The motivation is an element that was discussed during the interviews, that derives from the quality *affection* as defined by Rosa and that can be defined as a pre-existing willingness towards social connection. From our data, three main topics emerged related to the motivation to join an Improv class: *social skills*, *humour*, *dealing with unpredictability*.

Social skills

Both observations and interviews have shown a strong will from participants to develop social and communication competencies such as improving public speaking skills through Improv practice. “I think we all want to be brilliant socially, we all want to be on a table and have like good remarks, good comments, make a joke” (Student B). Whether already comfortable or on the contrary experiencing some level of social insecurity, all participants involved in our research field expressed a common motivation to acquire stronger social skills and as such a better ability to connect with others. It is noticeable that this motivation seems to be present among different types of personalities, the ones who would have some predisposition by showing more self-confidence, and others who will experience performing on stage as a challenging experience of “going out of your comfort zone”. Participants reflected on their expectations but also on the effects of following Improv classes. One important finding is that they all talked about transferable skills and activable skills such as a better ability to listen, which can be applied in many different situations outside of the Improv practice. The acquisition of new and transferable skills is directly related to new ways of seeing and experiencing the world, which is associated to the criteria of resonance *transformation*, when one is transformed by an encounter.

Another finding connected to social skills is the interest in feeling comfortable and at ease while being in a group, which can be linked to an inclination towards social popularity, and it can be interpreted as a favourable prerequisite for a successful experience of resonance.

This inner drive to be “more social” or more at ease while being social, in accordance to social acceptance, will be later developed (in the following parts b and c) as both a motor but also a possible obstacle to social connection with others.

Humour

Following-up on the previous part about being comfortable socially, being funny appears to be one of the common modes of expression identified to facilitate social interaction. During the

observations and interviews it was apparent that humour and comedy are a fundamental part of Improv. All interviewees related in some form to a “need to laugh”, often referring to Improv class as “the highlight of the week”. This drive towards humour was identified mostly in two ways: by improving their skills in order to make others laugh, increasing social popularity, or by laughing (as audience) and feel connected to others within the group. Student C talked about being funny as “an easy starting point” to make people comfortable. To him “humour is a fundamental emotion that everybody quickly uses to bond or quickly uses to create social comfort around you”. The need to laugh was also mentioned as a drive towards joy and as such as a way to enjoy the Improv practice and the social interaction happening within this frame. Humour also seems to play a big role in dealing with more challenging aspects of life in general, particularly during the pandemic of Covid-19, where a teacher reported a “boom in stand-up comedy”, as humour can help “reminding you that you can laugh and that things can feel OK even when things are kind of a nightmare.” (Teacher A)

Dealing with unpredictability

Improv practice is guided by a few rules and practices, the “Yes, and...” being one of them. The “Yes, and...” rule means that one participant accepts another’s premise and adds to it, allowing an Improv scene to start and develop. This rule can be seen as a practice of acceptance, as participants must agree with each other’s starting point and build up the Improv scene from it, never really knowing what the scene partner will do next. This setting has proven to enhance each other’s ability to be creative and to take risks, as discussed with Student C (“the very idea of Improv is that it will be made up, on the spot. [...] This is like a perfect thing to join as an adult. The whole idea is perfect”). Because Improv is an art discipline based on the ability to improvise rather than mastering a technique to apply in a set environment, many participants talked about being attracted to “stepping out of the comfort zone” while learning new skills. Being forced to react spontaneously can be experienced during an Improv class as a way to learn how to interact with others and to cope with unpredictable reactions. Experiences of spontaneity are intrinsically related to the ability to deal with unpredictability. Teacher A talked about learning “tools to control the chaos”, describing improv as “controlled chaos”.

Based on our interviews, especially with Student C who developed his perception of Improv generating less frustration compared to other hobbies practiced as a beginner, the willingness to remain open to whatever comes during the lessons seems to be reinforced during beginner classes. The teachers have the possibility to use this attitude to accelerate the operationalisation of transformative experiences of connection within the group of students. Beginner students seem to be particularly keen in working on dealing with unpredictability and taking risks since they don’t have a background or some developed skills to rely on. The

requirement posed by Improv as an art discipline that relies strongly on spontaneity seems to match with the beginner students' inner drive to develop new skills that help them cope with unpredictable situations.

This result is very much related to our focus group - adults who follow a beginner class based on their own motivation, as a recreation activity - which is to differentiate from art education programmes that are part of a compulsory curriculum for pupils.

b. Factors facilitating resonance

We have detected factors that can contribute for stimulating experiences of resonance during Improv classes on three different spheres: *the teacher, the self, and the group*.

We begin by describing the role of *the teacher* as an essential part of setting the best environment possible for the experience of resonance to occur.

The teacher

Although participants mentioned "stepping out of the comfort zone" as a drive to join an Improv class, the actual level of comfort and safety experienced during class seems to be a fundamental aspect for facilitating resonance. Vulnerability seems to play a big role during an Improv class, so reinforcing safety, and respect between participants during class is one of the primary functions of the teacher, who is responsible for defining clear boundaries and make sure that every student feels supported and comfortable trying things out and making mistakes. One way of doing this is by instructing students to choose archetypes over stereotypes, and categories instead of clichés. Although there is a general acceptance that everybody is entitled to their opinion outside of the class, there is an agreement of staying respectful within the class: "I need to make sure that everybody in this class feels safe and supported and not made fun of, so I'm going to ask to be respectful and not play into stereotype or offensive humour for the sake of comedy" (Teacher A). This first point refers to a "do not harm principle" defined by the teacher. One interviewed teacher mentioned that an important aspect in Improv and of Comedy in general is the concept of *punching up* versus *punching down*. *Punching up* being a way "to point out systemic issues and commenting on a group in power", versus *punching down*, in the case of stereotyping with for instance racist jokes, that simply "add into the collective pile of suffering" (Teacher A). It is also relevant that the teacher guides the students to develop relatable characters in their scenes, as a good improv scene can be seen as a resonance experience between audience (in the case of our research being other members of the group watching the scene) and players.

Flexibility in adapting content to the group is also an important aspect for keeping a high level of engagement and concentration throughout the class, "every single class is a little improvised, you have to go with the flow (...) no class will be the same." (Teacher D). Giving

clear instructions also contributes to a positive dynamic and high level of engagement, as it prevents students from feeling confused and starting to ask many questions, which could lead to a drop in group concentration. Most importantly, the teacher must be capable of redirecting the energy during the class. This is relevant for resonance because keeping the energy up increases interaction and collaboration between participants, creating a willingness for individuals to work together as a group, as seen during observations, for example during the exercise “mind meld”. “Mind meld”, also referred to as convergence, is an exercise where participants use free association until they reach the same word simultaneously, converging at some point.

Another important moment during class are the various forms of positive and often empowering feedback. The teacher aims to give feedback in the form of coaching and re-directing towards the more positive aspects of how the student played in a scene, “You are great at this, you are good at this, I would love to see more of this” (Teacher D). Although the teacher might not always give direct feedback, he/she is responsible for facilitating it, actively requesting participants to comment on the performance of others, for instance at the end of each exercise. These moments create opportunities for peer evaluations in the form of compliments and dialogues, where participants are invited to “name the successes of others”, as observed in the “compliment circle” at the end of each session, a moment of (positive) feedback within the group.

The self

In this category we analyse what is happening on an individual level during class that can have an impact on the possibility of experiencing resonance.

As described above in the part that characterizes the Improv teacher as a resonance facilitator, feeling safe and supported plays a major role in the behaviour of the students during classes. If they feel accepted and supported by the teacher and the group, students are more willing to experiment with new situations and to allow themselves to feel vulnerable during Improv class. Improv is a good way for becoming comfortable with taking risks and exposing oneself in a playful way, becoming more resilient and able to overpass the fear of being judged by others. Interviewees expressed feeling comfortable with failure and making mistakes as an encouraging attitude that can be useful beyond the sphere of the class. This is relevant for resonance because it helps develop a mind-set that embraces mistakes and shortcomings while promoting self-acceptance and respect towards the self and the others.

Student B reflected during the interview on this self-acceptance process:

“What I have learned is that if you let go completely, and you let go every control, actually there is a spontaneous side of you that comes out, which people actually appreciate. And if not funny

they will find it surprising, they will find it interesting, and so that is what I have discovered. I let myself go much more.” (Student B)

Perceiving the class as a “safe space”, staying emotionally present and feeling comfortable to try out something new, or ask for support, are fundamental aspects for the development of experiences of resonance.

Having these preconditions set, students describe experiencing an activation of curiosity and imagination during the exercises and scenes that allows them to interact with others in a playful manner. Based on our interviews, it seems that keeping an open mind to the other and daring to be playful can lead to moments where students experience freedom, joy, fun, excitement, empathy and even friendship. Interviewees also expressed a clear satisfaction in laughing and making others laugh. Particularly during the challenging period of the Covid-19 pandemic, laughter was seen as “a lifeline” (Teacher A).

Improv classes are rich in opportunities for cooperation and interaction, and some of these moments can bring forward transformation, in scenes described by all interviewed teachers and students as “magic”. In Improv participants are reliant on someone else and their *offers*, or bids for interaction. Sometimes “you can tell that the other person gets exactly what you're going for and then you start building something together, it feels like magic, it's so great!” (Teacher A). One student stated that there were people in the class with whom he had a great connection while developing an Improv scene together:

“There were some people that I would never approached normally but when we did end up playing on stage together, magic happened. And therefore, we kept playing together just because we knew from experience that something, something magic happened between us. And that was always very surprising” (Student B)

This type of experience can be related to resonance, as it describes a moment of attunement between people, similarly to when someone breaks through emotionally in a scene and the whole room can feel the change in energy. These fleeting moments are related to the resonance qualities of *affection*, *emotion*, and *transformation*.

Interviewees also reported the feeling of being fully present and focused during the class (“I was so completely invested in it” Student C). This suggests a state similar to the state of being of *flow*, which can be described as “a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4), an optimal experience of action and awareness that delivers a temporary state of consciousness that stands out against the noise of everyday life, as described by Student C who noticed “when I used to go to the Improv

class for three hours I honestly never even checked my phone, I didn't even know what was happening outside".

The group

In connection to what is being experienced on an individual level, there are certain aspects related to group dynamic that also increase the possibilities of resonance. One aspect described by both interviewed teachers and students is that time affects the relationship between participants, and that the feeling of safety, acceptance and social connection are something that develops over time, so the group dynamic is very different on lesson one and for instance on lesson six.

Another relevant aspect is the fact that the more time students spend together, also outside of the educational sphere (described by Student B as "the backscene"), the more connected they feel, and even go on to develop friendships, which in turn can influence their performances. Interviewees have experienced vulnerability as a connection accelerator, which in turn generates feelings of empathy within the group. Interviewees mentioned that shared experiences during the class, especially of vulnerability and humour, contributed to feelings of belonging to the group, as described by Student C:

"I think the beautiful thing about Improv is that when you come in with such vulnerability, you're already setting aside a lot of the social sort of walls that we created in front of us. [...] I think that really really helps create nice bonds". (Student C)

Although depending on the group diversity, humour can act as a shared social reference that can contribute for recognition and connection, also expressed by Student C: "Humour is a fundamental emotion that everybody quickly uses to bond or quickly uses to create social comfort around you"

The active teamwork, cooperation and collaboration present in certain exercises encourage memorable moments of "group mind", also referred to as collective consciousness, a sort of holy grail of Improv practice, when all participants are connected and thinking in the same way while no one is leading. Everyone seems to be together in a state of flow, for instance as observed in the exercise "mind meld" as described above.

c. Factors hindering resonance

We have also detected hindering factors that will make experiences of resonance during Improv classes harder to achieve. These factors can be identified on three different spheres: *the teacher, the self, and the group*.

The teacher

The expectation of some students who join an Improv class to learn how to be funny is the first challenge the Improv educator will have to deal with while creating and preserving a safe learning environment for all students. According to an interviewed teacher, this is something most teachers are confronted with, especially during beginner classes. Some students will clearly express their expectation to “learn recipes” on how to be funny. As Teacher D said, “the students are like “well, I’m coming here to improvise because I want to be funny” but actually as soon as they try to be funny, they’re not”. The Improv educator plays a major role in the readjustment of expectations within the group to make the group dynamic operate.

An interviewed teacher shared a memory of a class where the energy level and the comedy spirit was so high so it felt as if there was no space whatsoever to teach anything. The motivation of the students to join the Improv class was strong, but the “pressure of being funny” and making laugh the whole group as much as possible left no room for interpersonal connection and awareness. The strong Comedy drive can also lead a group of students to show an excess of confidence. In this moment, the teacher did not see any possibility to facilitate experiences of collective and transformative connections within this group and had to switch to a different teaching style, more related to the individual performance skills and less on cooperation and group mind.

Another element that can compromise the role of the teacher as a resonance facilitator is the heterogeneity within the group, both in terms of expectations and of personalities and backgrounds. This is particularly relevant to the beginner level with no pre-requirement to join the class.

The teacher must pay great attention to the different learning tempos within the group and adapt the structure of the course according to it. Some students might be faster and ready to contribute to transformative experiences in a short time, while others will need more time and as such might slow down the group dynamic. Both interviewed teachers shared examples of students who seem to behave very differently in and outside of the class, and it is very important as a teacher to observe this transformation happening during the class without judgement and to allow the students to go back to more introvert attitude once they leave the class if they feel so. Here again the teacher plays a major role in creating a safe space to all students. The Improv class should remain a friendly environment especially for some more introvert students, or adults who struggle with low self-esteem or social anxiety. The teacher should be aware of any elements that can make students uncomfortable, especially in comparison to some others within the group who might seem more at ease. Students who suffer from social anxiety might have developed some inhibitive or self-censorship strategies to avoid unpleasant situations. These students might rely more on the teacher as a facilitator to make them try out things they wouldn’t do outside of the class.

The self

Although participants have decided to join the class voluntarily, it doesn't mean that they don't feel any fear of the stage. During the interviews participants often talked about fear, insecurity, discomfort, stress with strong words such as "terrifying" or "torture". During the classes we observed, we could also notice some signs of anxiety like voice stress for some students. Many of these unpleasant emotions seem to be related to a fear of losing control that is activated during the Improv practice, since the scene is without script and requires the students to react on the spot. This can also be interpreted as a fear of failure, which is related to the pressure of being funny and to the perception of the students of what Improv should be and what a successful Improv looks like. The fear of failure is also strongly related to a fear of judgement and can reveal that the group hasn't been perceived as a safe environment where to act free of judgement.

All these findings reveal the level of vulnerability that is asked from the participants while joining an Improv class. Some interviewees mentioned a tendency to avoid vulnerability during certain scenes, which was identified by the participants themselves as a clear hindering factor to experiences of belonging within the group. Showing some vulnerability seems to be a precondition to allow transformative connections to happen. Yet some students following a beginner level develop rigidity early in the course of lessons, which can be interpreted as a way to avoid change and any transformative experience. In that sense, the level of vulnerability required by certain exercises suggested by the teacher is determinant to allow and facilitate or on the contrary jeopardize the operationalisation of resonance.

Another interesting finding is related to self-awareness. Some interviewees discussed how the process of self-awareness that takes place during some Improv scenes can sometimes backfire and enhance the feeling of insecurity while performing. The self-awareness skill developed through Improv is a tool that paradoxically don't make it easier to go on stage and improvise. Less self-awareness seems in some occasions to help some students to take more risks during the Improv class. Regarding humour, the awareness of the self-desire to be funny will often be experienced as an internal pressure. Student B shared his experience of going from the state of pressure to a form of liberation: "The moment that actually I realized I don't need to be funny, then maybe I noticed that I started to be funny".

Another important result is that some students have difficulties to understand the exercises suggested, and if by fear of judgement they don't dare to ask more explanation from the teacher, their poor comprehension of the instructions will hinder connection with the other students while performing. A lack of comprehension is something common during beginner courses, especially in Improv since this is an art discipline that is less mediatized than others and that often is not part of a school curriculum, which means that many adults walk into their first Improv class with very little to no idea of what an Improv exercise looks like. This lack of

pre-knowledge can reinforce an introvert behaviour and as such complicate the participation in the exercise and slow down the learning process. During the observations we could notice that some participants seemed to experience a threshold by going into the stage, which would directly impact the dynamic of the exercises.

The last result identified as a hindering factor, or at least as a sign of the elusiveness of resonance, is the feeling of not belonging. Some interviewees shared the experience of not feeling comfortable within the group of their Improv class which led them to withdraw into themselves and avoid deeper contact with other participants.

Student B joined two new groups as replacement class (one session each time) and noticed how different both experiences of joining a new group were, the second time being particularly difficult and unpleasant:

“There was one group on Wednesday in which I felt immediately connecting with perfectly. And they also said it, they made those comments, like waw. You just arrived and immediately I was part of the group. They felt it. And there was another group in which I felt extremely uncomfortable.” (Student B)

The group

The level of energy present in the group, as a whole or coming from one or more students, can support or on the contrary prevent some experiences of resonance to happen. Teacher D mentioned that a low level of energy in the group can have a negative impact on the Improv practice. This energy might be different each lesson, this is why the educator has to constantly adapt the programme of the class depending on how the energy within the group build up.

Especially for a beginner course, the group is composed of individuals coming to the class with different expectations and different ideas about Improv. These differences can slow down the process of building strong bonds within the group, since each participant might first try to navigate through the class and learn to react to this heterogeneous environment. The more heterogeneous these expectations and ideas within the group of students are, the longer it might take to create a stabilized safe environment, developed below as a requirement to allow transformative connections to happen. This is something we could notice during our observations.

The cultural context in which the Improv class takes place can play a major role in the group dynamic. If humour can be used to reveal shared references, it can also reveal a gap between cultural references known by a part of the group but not by all participants. This is particularly relevant for our focus group being a group of internationals with different cultural backgrounds, sharing English as a second language. Humour is indeed closely linked to the cultural context, but also to moral standards. The areas of humour can differ from a cultural context to another

depending on certain social norms, and an Improv group composed of people who grow up in different countries can be enriching but can also be a challenge for the group dynamic. Student B mentioned a few students of his group who would pay great attention to “political correctness” and by doing so restricted the area of humour perceived as acceptable within the group. In this example, the ambition of social connection within the group would backfire to a form of social pressure that will operate within the Improv practice on stage. These moments of tension can generate experiences of disconnection, between individuals but also between the whole group. Last element discovered in this research project related to group dynamics: while a group following the Improv class is most of the time perceived as an entity, some students will develop some new behaviours accordingly to this new reference.

Student C admitted trying to hide some interpersonal preferences he had during the group because it was perceived as a rule to be open to act with anyone:

“You also don't want to appear like you are doing selecting, you don't want to appear like oh I'm waiting for that person to get up. At least I did not do that. I was like, I want to be very fair. I know that I don't work well with some people, but I don't want to like make it a public thing. So, I always used to get up randomly, and often it would happen that I would end up with some person whom I don't share the best dynamics with on stage.” (Student C)

This willingness could be interpreted as a facilitating factor. Yet in this case trying to overlook personal preferences led this participant to get distracted from the lesson by thinking only on how to best compensate an expected “lack of dynamics” with the other person to play with. The learning process initiated by the teacher can sometimes suffer from internal dynamics within the group which will keep some students distracted from the instructions or from an exercise.

To close this last part, several key elements of Improv such as humour or the group mind first seem to fully contribute to the operationalisation of resonance. Yet our field research showed that in some situations the Improv practice can also lead to a lack of connection between students or even an experience of disconnection. Therefore, it is necessary to remain very precise on which elements do facilitate experiences of resonance during an Improv class, and how *the teacher*, *the self* and *the group* are co-composing for this fertile environment, dealing with several possible hindering factors mentioned above.

5. Discussion

The inner drive to join an improv class can be interpreted as a desire to reach out and be affected by the environment, a propensity toward attunement that Coburn (2001) refers to as *emotional resonance*, which is related to the quality of *affection* from Rosa's theory. By choosing to join an improv class, participants shared certain expectations regarding social skills and a willingness to develop transferable competencies such as feeling confident or develop a better ability to listen, which can be applied in many different situations outside of the Improv practice. This result is directly related to the criteria of resonance of *transformation*. Participants have responded to their environment and experienced some level of transformation by reporting new perspectives on how to relate socially to others, beyond the context of the classroom. This is one of the reasons why Applied Improv has become popular in other fields besides the performing arts, as a tool to improve communication skills, creativity and problem solving (Schwenke et al., 2020), especially among adults. Recent research from Felsman et al. (2020) concludes that doing improv also promotes divergent thinking, effective well-being, and tolerance of uncertainty.

Improv practice is guided by rules and practices, and some of them, such as the "yes, and..." premise, can be seen as a practice of acceptance, as participants must agree with each other's starting point and co-develop the Improv scene, never really knowing what the scene partner will do next. This setting has proven to enhance each other's ability to be creative, take risks and exercise self-efficacy, even if that implies experiencing some level of vulnerability.

There is a clear interest in developing spontaneity and using improvisation to deal with uncertainty, which can be linked to the context of social acceleration that characterizes modern societies obsession to make the world "controllable" as developed by Rosa: "The driving cultural force of life we call *modern* is the idea (...) that we can make the world controllable. Yet it is only in encountering the uncontrollable that we really experience the world." (Rosa & Wagner, 2020, p. 2). The findings related to what is happening at the spheres of *the self* and *the group* are intrinsically related to this quality of *elusiveness*, or the uncontrollability of resonance: "Resonance cannot be manufactured or engineered (...) which means there is no method, no seven- or nine-step guide that can guarantee that we will be able to resonate with people or things." (Rosa & Wagner, 2020, p.36) Since the occurrence of resonance and its transformative effects can never be predicted or composed, the experience of resonance defies the modern need to control the world from unstoppable escalation and optimization.

Nevertheless, we have identified factors that contribute for students to feel connected and responsive, which can help to operationalise the experience of resonance.

Improv can be seen as a specific teaching style, where the constant adaptation from both teacher and student creates an open learning sphere of curiosity and creativity, in a never-ending interactive process of tolerance, acceptance and improvisation. By creating a feeling of safety, respect, and cooperation, and by staying flexible and adapting content, the role of the teacher is fundamental for facilitating the occurrence of experiences of resonance.

On an individual level, there are several aspects that can contribute to the experience of resonance during an Improv class: feeling safe and supported, daring to interact and play, experiencing fun and excitement, laughing and making others laugh, experiencing self-efficacy and being in flow. The experience of flow is related to an abstraction from the self, directing the subject outwards (Schmitz, 2020), which can generate a sense of fulfilled “presentness” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Sawyer describes the phenomena of group flow as a moment when “everything seems to come naturally; the performers are in interactional synchrony. In this state, each of the group members can even feel as if they are able to anticipate what their fellow performers will do before they do it.” (Sawyer, 2014, p.44). However, to Rosa, *flow* refers to individual moments of happiness, which is to be distinguished by a broader relationship to the world (Rosa, 2019).

There are also several factors that can facilitate connection within a group such as the development of trust, respect (for self and others), and acceptance, which can lead to the development of relationships and consequent belonging, all contributing to the experience of magical moments of group mind. Although these moments of group mind can contribute for facilitating group connection and experiences of resonance, we also point out to the controversy of this concept, as it assumes that the collective mind can become powerful enough to override and overwhelm the psychological experience of the individual, which would turn out to be a hindering factor instead.

Humour also plays an important role in the practice of improv, with participants describing it both as “a lifeline”- a very important aspect of their lives - and as a socially attractive characteristic to master. This resonates with a recent increased interest in applied forms of Improv coming from the field of psychology, where group interventions use Improv exercises in a therapeutic manner (Kristin R. Krueger, Jonathan W. Murphy & Andrea B. Bink, 2019). The development of methods such as Comedic Improv Therapy (CIT), an approach that combines multiple modalities of therapy focused on (a) group cohesiveness, (b) play, (c) exposure, and (d) humour can contribute for the treatment of some forms of depression and social anxiety (Phillips Sheesley et al., 2016). The rise in popularity of Improv, together with the vast amount of comedy events and sitcoms are an indication of contemporary western societies’ need to laugh (Rosa, 2019), that appeared during the interviews.

Research from Louie et al. (2016), Savage et al.(2017b), and Szabo (2003) consistently refer to the health benefits of laughing. From a pedagogical point of view, laughter is now seen as

a powerful educational tool that can enhance learning and reduce anxiety, which is particularly relevant if we think about education not only in terms of content but also about building relationships and strengthening connections (Savage et al., 2017), important aspects that can lead to belonging and social resonance.

If being funny has been discussed earlier as a factor of connection within a group, surprisingly humour has been also identified as a possible hindering factor to experiences of resonance. A popular view is that a greater sense of humour enhances both psychological well-being and physical health. The empirical evidence for this general facilitative effect of humour is quite equivocal, however, with only some research being supportive (Kuiper et al., 2004). To Rosa it is possible to laugh without resonance, the so-called nervous laugh, in moments of desperation, "in which laughter gives expression to a state of profound alienation" (Rosa, 2019, P.79). So, although humour and comedy seem to be significant aspects of Improv, and indeed the process of improvisation has an inherent quality to evoke comic amusement, it can also be used to create other responses besides laughter (C. Canonne, 2021). In the words of improviser and director Michael Such, "I wish there were more improv shows which left me feeling sad, horrified or even bored" (Such, 2018).

6. Conclusion & recommendations

Our field research has shown elements that can facilitate the operationalisation of resonance during Improv practice, and how these elements are contributing to transformative connections. In conclusion to our research question “How can Improv classes help stimulate experiences of resonance within a group?”, we highlight four closing findings brought by this empirical qualitative research that bring forward Improv as a resonance medium:

1. The principles of Improv can, when competently facilitated, be beneficial to art education in general, as in its spontaneous and flexible nature lays the premise of creativity. By activating a “Yes and” mindset, teacher and student become open to input, energy and emotions brought by the other. This opening up denotes an outward movement, a responsive attitude, which is related to the qualities of *affection* and *emotion* from resonance - one feels a call and is moved and affected by something. Another key aspect related to self-awareness and acceptance is feeling safe and supported. Fear and social anxiety have been identified as potential obstacles to learn, participate freely in Improv scenes, and ultimately to respond and feel affected, relevant aspects of resonance. The pre-disposition to cooperate in a spontaneous way, to take risks, and to experience self-efficacy, is highly dependent on the level of safety that will be experienced by the student during class. The Improv educator has a major role in the construction of this safe and accepting environment. This finding, which also takes the form of a recommendation, can be seen as a pre-requisite for any fertile educational environment.
2. There are certain social competencies identified as desirable that can be accomplished through the practice of Improv. These are often transferable skills that students wish to improve, and that end up playing a role in their personal lives outside of the educational context. From this perspective, Improv classes are a fertile ground for resonance as participants find themselves effectively responding to the class environment through a continuous interchange of new perspectives and competencies, which can be linked to some level of *transformation*. Art education, as all learning, is a transformative process. The Improv philosophy, applicable through several principles developed above, seems to illustrate an educational method applicable to other art disciplines in which *transformative experiences of resonance* can happen.
3. Humour can be beneficial on many levels and is regarded as an important social tool to master, but it should be properly mediated in a group setting, as it can also create tension according to conventions depending on a specific social context. Humour is directly related to cultural and socio-demographic contexts and as such we recommend Improv educators

and other art disciplines using humour to develop their awareness of cultural and social diversity among the group of students to guarantee a safe environment that works for all students, independently from their cultural and social background. This can be enhanced by the strong emphasis on active listening developed through the Improv practice.

4. Although the principles of Improv can generate moments described as magical, it is never certain that resonance will occur. One might have all the correct ingredients for resonance to happen in any practice, but because of its elusive character, it is never certain that it will actually happen. Our modern obsession with making the world more controllable, such as our original research idea of designing an improv class focused on achieving resonance, is elusive on itself, as it would only add up to modernity's endless to do list of things to achieve and master, backlashing on the very essence of resonance - staying open and having a responsive relationship to others and the world.

7. Limitations

The findings of this study should be interpreted with consideration to some limitations.

- The setting for this study is restricted to the Boom Chicago Academy in Amsterdam, a setting that is strongly related to the Stand-up Comedy tradition of Chicago, in the United States of America, with its own cultural specificity. We do not present a comparison to other forms of Improv where comedy is less central, or to any other forms of applied theatre, where similar exercises are also used.
- Partly due to the Covid pandemic that had an impact on educational programmes in the Netherlands between December and January 2022, the sample of interviewees for this study is limited to 4 people. This represents a limitation of our research and there is a need for a broader sample to further explore the possibilities of resonance during Improv classes.
- The sample for this study can be seen as a rather homogeneous group in terms of age, education, and social context, since most participants are “internationals” living in Amsterdam, who joined a class in English, which is in most cases not their native language. Possible new research could be conducted in a more socially heterogeneous and diverse group.
- Following up on the previous limitation, the impact of the use of English as the common language among the group with various nationalities and native languages hasn't been investigated in this research. Using a second language while practicing Improv might have some impact on the interpersonal connections happening during the Improv class. English didn't seem to represent an obstacle to communication or even to the use of humour. A new study could investigate further the function of English as a common language, or the use of other second languages (not being English) and investigate to which extent the language used can have an impact on the development of Improv scenes and Improv classes in a broader sense. A less fluent level of language might suggest a different emphasis on other Improv modes of expression such as body language, emotions, situation-based scenes rather than relying first on the accuracy of the spoken language.
- The sample is made of beginner students. Therefore, further research could investigate how the level of Improv impact the operationalisation of resonance.

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