

ECO-IMAGINING: Psychology

Implementing Improvisation in Psychology Courses to Advance Climate Change Understanding and Initiative

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Background

In their research study, “Climate Anxiety in Children and Young People and their Beliefs about Government Responses to Climate Change: a Global Survey,” Hickman and colleagues surveyed 10,000 children and young people, ages 16 to 25, from ten different countries, about their perceptions of climate change. The results indicated that nearly 84% of participants were at least moderately worried about how climate change is impacting the environment. Furthermore, 50% stated feeling “sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, and guilty” (Hickman et al., 2012). Generalizing this research, we could conclude that students at CU Boulder are likely experiencing similar unsatisfied and anxious emotions about climate change.

In agreement with our class discussions, Schwenke and colleagues hypothesize that improvisational theater has a positive impact on creativity and acceptance. They defined improvisation as “a form of theater where dialogue, characters, and story are created spontaneously by its players on stage” (Schwenke et al., 2020). Schwenke and colleagues described the ‘Yes And’ exercise, which we explored in class, as a critical component of improvisational impact, as it allows for a continuous stream of accepting others' ideas. After conducting a pretest-posttest study where participants engaged in a 6-week improvisation intervention, their results indicated that improvisation can foster creativity, self-esteem, and psychological well-being (Schwenke et al. 2020).

Utilizing both Hickman et al.'s and Schwenke et al.'s research, we hope that our improvisation exercises will allow students to explore their own feelings about climate change and understand how it connects to their psychological well-being.

Warm-Up - What Came to Mind?



- Ask everyone to find groups of four.
- Once everyone has their groups, explain that for this activity, you (as the facilitator) will assign a collective one-word. Within each group, participants will share the first things that come to mind with that word. Emphasize that there is no right or wrong answer, simply what that word made the person think of.
- Execute the activity with the word being “Mountain.” Give each group about 3 - 5 minutes to share what “Mountain” made them think of.

**This warmup is intended to get people thinking creatively about nature. Additionally, it allows people to get more comfortable with sharing their thoughts with the collective. To reflect on this activity, ask people what they noticed came up in their discussion. What theme possibly emerged between your group's thoughts?*

Short Form Improvisation - Free Association and 'Yes And' in Relation to Climate Change



- Now we will advance this warm-up into a full free association task concerning climate change. For context, Free Association is a psychological technique where people express thoughts that come to mind without censorship or judgment (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2023).
- On a Whiteboard/Projector, the facilitator will create three columns. In the three columns, the words 'Sustainability,' 'Mental Health,' and 'Climate Change.' Below is an example:

Sustainability	Mental Health	Climate Change

- Starting with the first word, have participants call out anything that comes to mind when they hear this word, and the facilitator writes it down. This will be done in the collective.
 - Ex: “Call out any word that you think of when hearing the term ‘sustainability.’”
 - Allow students to free associate for 1 minute.
- Then, proceed with the same exercise with the next two words.
- ‘Yes And’: In groups of 3, have each person select a word from one category (all categories are covered) and create a ‘Yes And’ Skit that connects these three words. Refer to the video for guidance on how to do ‘Yes And.’

**This short form improv exercise allows participants to unconsciously reveal their feelings and emotions about climate change. It allows the group to first verbally improvise and think about how climate change and sustainability connect with psychology/mental health. Then, doing a ‘Yes And’ exercise helps people understand what words other people were drawn to without judgment.*

<https://vimeo.com/1125313972>

Long Form Improvisation - Image Theatre based on Free Association Prompts



- This long-form improvisational performance is done with groups of 3-5 people (different from those they were with in the short-form theater).
- With these groups, share the word each person used in the 'Yes And' Short Form.
- Then, combine your words and discuss together how these words connect.
- The group will collaborate to create an image summarizing the words they chose. The image requires movement, conversation, and creativity. Overall, allow the group artistic freedom in creating what they feel best represents the words. Each group will get five minutes to create its image.
- Then, each group will share its image with the class. Have observers give comments about how the three words connect.
- As a class, discuss how all the groups' images best illustrate the relationship between psychology and sustainable/climate change. Then, brainstorm ways that sustainability can help psychological well-being!

**This long form improves exercise, allowing participants to embody how the class feels about the connection between psychology, sustainability, and climate change. Overall, helping everyone realize that climate change has an impact on human well-being while allowing for collaboration and creativity.*

Link to Vimeo showing the physical embodiment of tasks:

<https://vimeo.com/1125313972?share=copy>

References

APA Dictionary of Psychology. (2023). *APA Dictionary of Psychology*. Apa.org.

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