

# Using Improv to Increase Student Engagement & Confidence

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- A 30-Minute Interactive Workshop
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**ST. JOHN'S**  
UNIVERSITY





# Why Improve in Legal Education?

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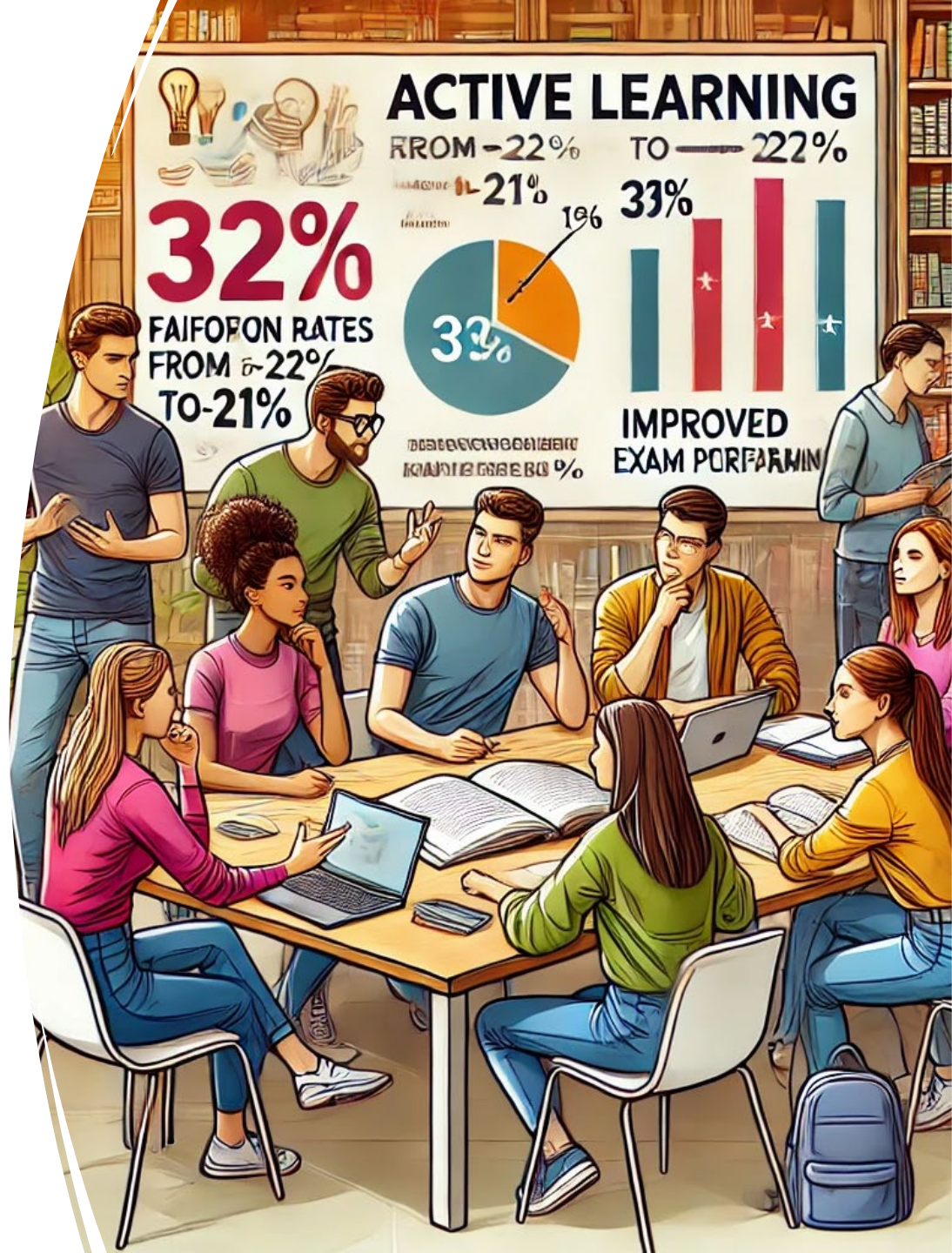
- • Enhances quick thinking and adaptability
- • Builds confidence in oral communication
- • Prepares students for real-world legal interactions
- • Makes learning fun and engaging
- • Aligns with active learning strategies proven to improve student performance





# The Science Behind Participation & Improv

- A meta-analysis of 225 studies found that active learning:
  - Reduces failure rates from 32% to 21% - Improves exam performance
- Citation: Freeman, S., Eddy, S. L., McDonough, M., Smith, M. K., Okoroafor, N., Jordt, H., & Wenderoth, M. P. (2014). Active learning increases student performance in science, engineering, and mathematics. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(23), 8410–8415
- Play-based learning fosters engagement and deeper immersion
- Citation: Martlew, J., Stephen, C., & Ellis, J. (2011). Play in the primary school classroom? The experience of teachers supporting children's learning through a new pedagogy. *Early Years*, 31(1), 71–83
- Improv techniques create a safe space for student participation
- Citation: Lloyd-Smith, M., & Meyerson, J. (2015). Serious play: Play-based learning for the adult learner. *Journal of Adult Education*, 44(1), 26–33.





# Research on Student Participation

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- Strategies to Increase Participation in Cooperative Learning Groups (Maher, 2010)  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED512114.pdf>
- Techniques from WashU and Waterloo teaching centers  
<https://ctl.wustl.edu/resources/increasing-student-participation/>
- Importance of structured participation and role assignment
- Improv supports collaboration and non-judgmental learning environments





# Key Strategies for Engagement

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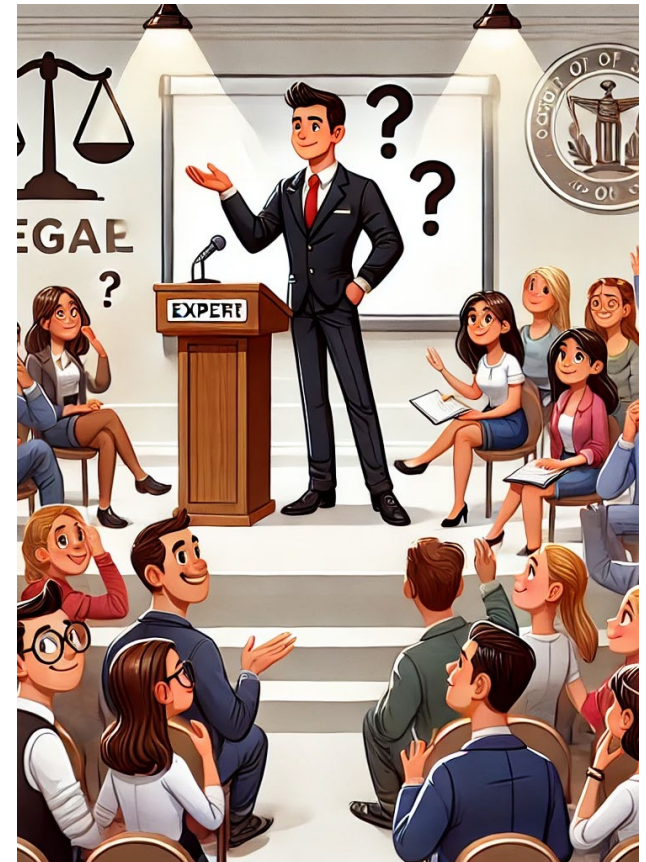
- Encouraging all voices in group work
- Structuring interactions to ensure participation
- Using active learning techniques like improv
- Assigning roles to balance contributions



# Activity 1: The Expert

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- One volunteer will be 'The Expert' on a random legal topic
- Participants will ask questions, and the expert must respond confidently
- Builds public speaking skills and adaptability
- ♦ Volunteer needed! Who wants to be the expert?



# How 'The Expert' Improves Student Learning

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- Builds confidence in public speaking and professional communication



- Encourages students to think on their feet and articulate responses clearly



- Strengthens research skills by requiring quick application of knowledge

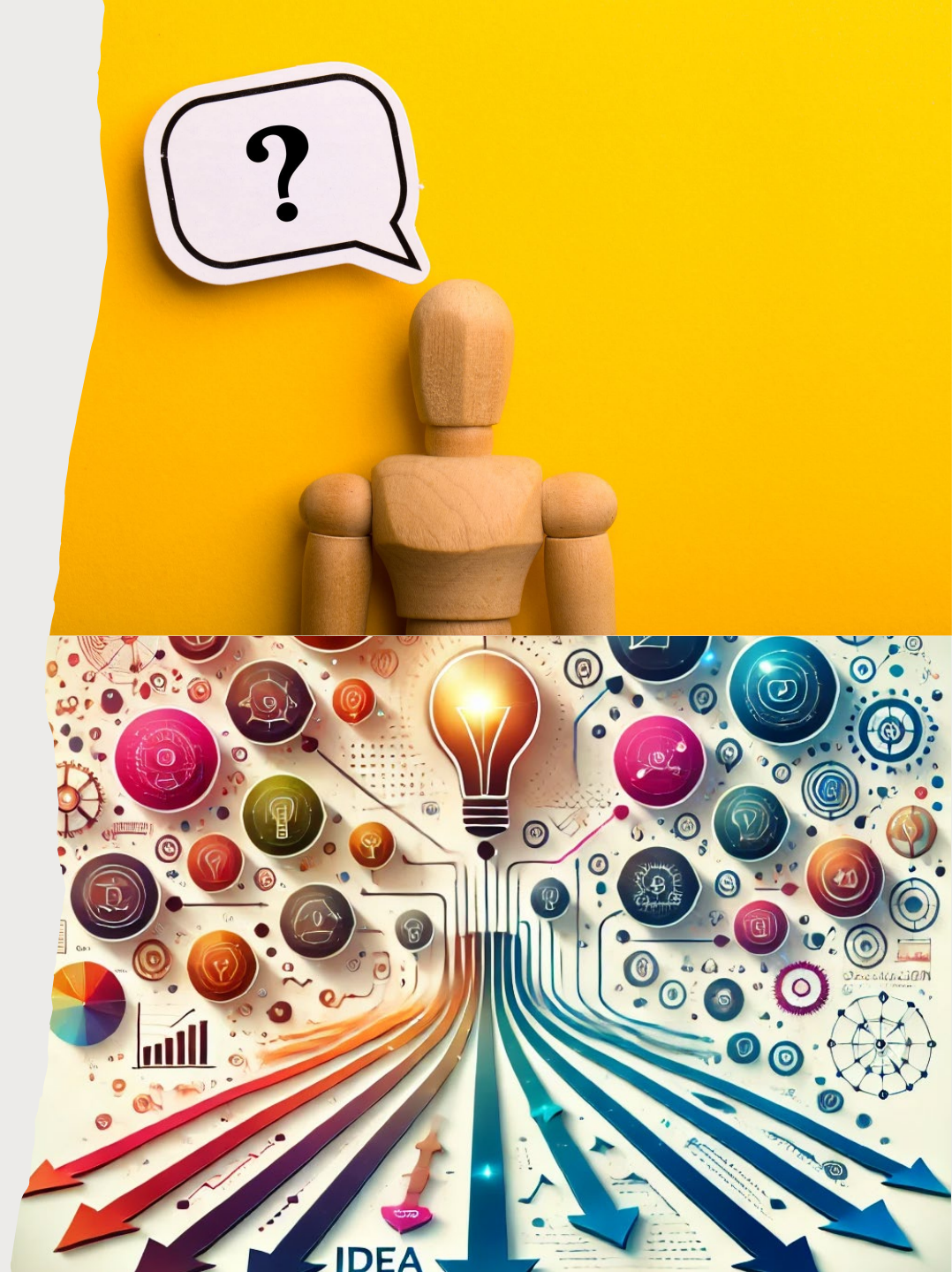


- Develops adaptability in answering unexpected legal questions



# Activity 2: Yes, And...

- Each person builds on a statement by saying 'Yes, and...'
- Encourages collaboration and flexible thinking
- ◆ Let's try: 'Yes, and legal research is essential because...'





# How 'Yes, And' Improves Student Learning

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- Enhances teamwork and collaboration through active listening
- Encourages creative problem-solving and open-minded thinking
- Reinforces the importance of constructive dialogue in legal discussions
- Helps students practice expanding on ideas to build stronger arguments

# Activity 3: Silly Arguments

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- Participants debate absurd legal arguments (e.g., 'Should cats be allowed in courtrooms?')
- Focus on persuasion and logical reasoning
- ♦ Who wants to argue for and against a silly legal topic?





# How 'Silly Arguments' Improve Student Learning

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- Develops persuasive reasoning and logical structuring of arguments
- Encourages students to think critically and defend a position effectively
- Helps overcome fear of public speaking by making debates fun and low-stakes
- Enhances rhetorical skills and adaptability in argumentation

- One person speaks in gibberish about a legal topic
- Another translates it into a coherent explanation
- ◆ Who wants to be the gibberish legal expert?



# How 'Gibberish Translator' Improves Student Learning

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- Reinforces the importance of clear legal communication



- Encourages students to break down complex ideas into simpler terms



- Develops quick thinking and adaptability in explaining legal concepts



- Strengthens non-verbal communication skills through observation and interpretation

# Activity 5: Story Spine

- Create a legal case narrative using: 'Once upon a time... Every day... One day... Because of that... Until finally...'
- ◆ Let's build a case story together!





# How Story Spine Improves Student Learning

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- Provides a structured framework for legal storytelling
- Helps students organize facts and arguments logically
- Enhances cause-and-effect reasoning in case narratives
- Strengthens critical thinking and persuasive communication
- Makes legal concepts more engaging and easier to remember
- Prepares students for real-world legal writing and courtroom advocacy

## Research Connection: Maher (2010)

- Maher's study on group learning found:

- Assigned roles increased participation

- Checklists helped track engagement

- Gender-balanced groups had mixed results

- How can we apply this to improve activities?



# Best Practices from WashU & Waterloo



- Encourage structured participation



- Use varied formats for engagement (debate, improv, roleplay)



- Balance spontaneous and guided activities



- Give students ownership over discussions

# How Improv Supports Legal Skills



- PUBLIC SPEAKING: HELPS STUDENTS GAIN CONFIDENCE IN ORAL ARGUMENTS



- ADAPTABILITY: PREPARES STUDENTS FOR UNEXPECTED LEGAL SCENARIOS



- PERSUASION: ENHANCES LEGAL REASONING AND RHETORICAL SKILLS



- COLLABORATION: ENCOURAGES TEAMWORK IN CLIENT INTERACTIONS AND LEGAL PROCESSES



## Takeaways & Discussion

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- How can you use improv in your teaching?

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- What challenges might arise?

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- Any other engagement techniques to share?

Thank You!

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QUESTIONS

