

Live from New Orleans, it's a Tulane accounting class!

December 14, 2017 12:00 PM Mark Miester
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Tim West, a professor of practice in the A.B. Freeman School of Business, center, leads his Advanced Managerial Accounting students in an improv exercise that strengthens their ability to work in teams. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Comedy isn't something you typically associate with accounting, but Tim West isn't your typical accounting professor.

In addition to holding a doctorate in accounting, West, a professor of practice at Tulane University's [A. B. Freeman School of Business](#), is a graduate of [The Second City](#), the famed improvisational theater in Chicago that launched the careers of John Belushi, Bill Murray, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler.

In an effort to merge his two loves — teaching and comedy — a few years ago, West began incorporating improv exercises into his courses.

A typical class might start with a game like “String of Pearls,” in which students call out random sentences that become the first and last lines of a story. The rest of the class then fills in the story, one line at a time, in an attempt to connect the first line to the conclusion. The laughs come from the story’s improbable twists and turns, but West says there’s a message to the madness.

“People think improv is just comedy, but that’s actually secondary to how you communicate,” West says. “Improv teaches staying in the moment.”

Staying in the moment is just one of lessons students can learn through improv. West says it also teaches students to act as an ensemble, to focus on others, to reserve judgement, to fail without fear, and to simplify the conversation — communication skills increasingly valuable in today’s business environment.

“Don’t ever call these soft skills,” West says. “I call them impact skills. Listening effectively, moving the conversation forward, being comfortable with not being the star — employers are going to hire those skills in a heartbeat. As a manager, I’d rather have that package of skills than your ability to reconcile cash. Eventually, artificial intelligence is going to be able to reconcile cash. It won’t be able to do those other things.”

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