Live! From New Orleans! It’s accounting class!

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Professor of Practice Tim West, a graduate of the Second City in Chicago, uses his improv training to teach students real-world communication skills.

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

In addition to holding a PhD in accounting, West, a professor of practice at the Freeman School, 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. 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 because they’re the skills you need to make an immediate impact.”

Executive MBA student Matt Burton, managing director of an automation engineering firm in Mobile, Alabama, so enjoyed the improv games he learned in West’s class, he began incorporating them into the interactive planning sessions he leads for clients.

“I actually used several improvs directly from his class to loosen people up and get them talking,” says Burton. “Everybody is always flabbergasted with where I come up with this stuff, so I had to give Tim credit — ‘Yeah, I got this out of my MBA program.’”

The credit is nice, but West says he gets more satisfaction from knowing his students have the tools they need to stand out in a crowded job market.

“Listening effectively, moving the conversation forward, being comfortable with not being the star — employers are going to hire those skills in a heartbeat,” West says. “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.”