

**Laughing into Legitimacy: Comedic Improvisation and the Reorganization of
Multicultural Classrooms**

**Rindo rumo à legitimidade: Improvisação cômica e a reorganização de salas de aula
multiculturais**

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ABSTRACT: Highly regulated schooling cultures increasingly equate achievement with correctness, composure, and examinable performance, leaving many learners emotionally guarded and creatively risk-averse. Drama education offers an alternative learning ecology grounded in embodiment, relation, and meaning-making, yet comedy remains undertheorized inside dominant drama-education frameworks, especially across East Asian and Confucian-heritage contexts where humor can be read as disorder or disrespect. This paper theorizes comedic improvisation as a culturally negotiable pedagogical practice that reshapes classroom participation through shifts in recognition, authority, and expressive legitimacy. A qualitative, interpretive secondary synthesis draws on 42 published qualitative sources and 286 analyzable evidence units, including classroom interaction excerpts, teacher reflections, student voice, activity descriptions, applied theatre manuals, and policy-oriented accounts from the United Kingdom, Australia, and China. Analysis combines theoretical thematic mapping with cultural–pedagogical mediation, anchored in Stuart Hall’s account of representation and meaning regulation and extended through Applied Theatre scholarship on participation, co-authorship, and process-led learning. Findings show consistent interactional mechanisms across contexts: collective laughter lowers the social cost of exposure; role-based framing buffers dignity and face-risk; acceptance-driven continuation sustains creative flow; peer repair converts hesitation and error into shared narrative resources; multimodal entry pathways (gesture, chorus, object play, one-line turns) widen access for multilingual and marginalized learners. Cross-cultural comparison clarifies how local seriousness norms and authority optics shape the legitimizing routes

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comedy requires, especially in exam-oriented environments. The paper's main contribution lies in reframing comedic improvisation as semiotic reorganization: classroom competence shifts from correctness toward responsiveness, enabling emotional openness and creative divergence to appear as legitimate participation within multicultural learning.

KEYWORDS: Comedic improvisation, Classroom legitimacy, Multicultural drama education

RESUMO: Culturas escolares altamente reguladas tendem, de forma crescente, a equiparar o sucesso acadêmico à correção, à compostura e ao desempenho mensurável em exames, deixando muitos estudantes emocionalmente contidos e avessos ao risco criativo. A educação dramática oferece uma ecologia de aprendizagem alternativa, ancorada na corporeidade, na relação e na produção de sentido; contudo, a comédia permanece pouco teorizada nos principais quadros da educação dramática, sobretudo em contextos do Leste Asiático e de herança confucionista, nos quais o humor pode ser interpretado como desordem ou desrespeito. Este artigo teoriza a improvisação cômica como uma prática pedagógica culturalmente negociável, capaz de reconfigurar a participação em sala de aula por meio de deslocamentos nos regimes de reconhecimento, autoridade e legitimidade expressiva. A partir de uma síntese qualitativa interpretativa de natureza secundária, o estudo mobiliza 42 fontes qualitativas publicadas e 286 unidades de evidência analisáveis, incluindo excertos de interações em sala de aula, reflexões de docentes, vozes discentes, descrições de atividades, manuais de teatro aplicado e documentos de orientação política provenientes do Reino Unido, da Austrália e da China. A análise combina mapeamento temático teórico com mediação cultural-pedagógica, ancorada na concepção de Stuart Hall sobre representação e regulação do sentido e ampliada pela literatura de Teatro Aplicado sobre participação, coautoria e aprendizagem orientada por processos. Os resultados identificam mecanismos interacionais consistentes entre os contextos: o riso coletivo reduz o custo social da exposição; o enquadramento baseado em papéis protege a dignidade e o risco de perda de face; a continuidade orientada pela aceitação sustenta o fluxo criativo; o reparo entre pares converte hesitação e erro em recursos narrativos compartilhados; e vias de entrada multimodais (gesto, coro, jogo com objetos, falas breves) ampliam o acesso de estudantes multilíngues e marginalizados. A comparação intercultural esclarece como normas locais de seriedade e configurações de autoridade moldam os percursos de legitimação de que a comédia necessita, especialmente em ambientes orientados por exames. A principal contribuição do artigo consiste em reformular a improvisação cômica como reorganização semiótica: a competência em sala de aula desloca-se da

correção para a responsividade, permitindo que a abertura emocional e a divergência criativa se afirmem como formas legítimas de participação na aprendizagem multicultural.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: improvisação cômica; legitimidade em sala de aula; educação dramática multicultural.

Introduction

Over the last decade, global education systems have faced escalating challenges of student disengagement, emotional withdrawal, and declining creative agency (Li et al., 2023; Liang et al., 2025; Saptono et al., 2019). International comparative assessments, post-pandemic learning reports, and youth mental health surveys consistently signal exhaustion within highly regulated schooling cultures, especially where academic success is narrowly equated with compliance, correctness, and examination performance (Sampurno et al., 2020). These conditions have intensified transnational debates on the limits of outcome-driven pedagogy and have renewed attention toward pedagogical models capable of sustaining emotional vitality, cultural responsiveness, and creative participation in classrooms shaped by linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity.

Within this context, drama education has re-emerged as a critical pedagogical site for rethinking learning as an embodied, relational, and meaning-generating process (Zhuang, 2025). Building on concerns about student engagement, drama-based pedagogy offers experiential modes of learning that foreground emotion, imagination, and social interaction as core educational resources (Sun et al., 2025). Recent scholarship increasingly frames drama classrooms as multicultural contact zones in which learners negotiate difference, uncertainty, and collective sense-making through performance (Cheng & Cheng, 2024; Fensham & Upton, 2023; Zhou, 2024). Among the expanding repertoire of drama-based approaches, comedic improvisation has gained particular relevance due to its capacity to activate participation across cultural boundaries, linguistic hierarchies, and affective thresholds.

Comedic improvisation involves spontaneous, ensemble-based performances shaped by immediacy, responsiveness, and shared authorship (Stamatiou, 2022). As a form of drama-based pedagogy, it highlights openness, contingency, and relational attunement as core learning conditions (J. H. Xu, 2008). In multicultural classrooms, students show varying communicative confidence, culturally influenced emotional norms, and different tolerances for uncertainty (A. M. Xu, 2025). Improvisational

comedy allows expressive legitimacy to be shared, helping students from diverse backgrounds participate without needing mastery of language or theater (Z. Zhang et al., 2022).

In culturally heterogeneous classrooms in Western, East Asian, and Southeast Asian contexts, students face structural pressures that limit expressive risk-taking (Cheng & Cheng, 2024; Ferrer, 2021; C. De Liu, 2015). Research from China, South Korea, Japan, and parts of Europe shows how norms about discipline, emotional restraint, and academic precision often sideline affective and creative aspects of learning (Alexiadou & Rambla, 2023; Hu et al., 2016; Matsuura & Nakamura, 2021; Shen, 2019). These pressures grow in multicultural settings where students navigate overlapping expectations about humor, authority, face-saving, and emotional display.

Chinese school systems have recently reformed their curricula to value creativity and holistic development (Lee & Halse, 2021). However, classroom practice still focuses on accuracy, standardization, and teacher-centered authority, especially in exam-oriented environments (Aini et al., 2024). Drama education is inconsistently applied. It is often used mainly for moral instruction or aesthetic presentation, which limits playful and dialogic engagement. Similar challenges exist in other Confucian-heritage educational cultures. In these cultures, humor and spontaneity are often seen as disruptive to academic seriousness and order.

These conditions raise an urgent pedagogical question about how can drama education cultivate emotional openness and creative agency without destabilizing cultural expectations around discipline, respect, and collective harmony? Comedic improvisation offers a productive entry point into this question, given its structured informality and reliance on shared play rather than individual display. Meanwhile, educational research increasingly identifies psychological safety as a prerequisite for meaningful participation, particularly in classrooms shaped by cultural, linguistic, and social difference (Aziz et al., 2022; Marsico & Dazzani, 2024). Extending the previous discussion of expressive risks, emotional expression, however, remains unevenly distributed across cultural contexts. In many East Asian settings, public emotional exposure carries social risk, linked to concerns over judgment, loss of face, or disruption of group cohesion (Johansen, 2023).

Comedic improvisation introduces humor as a culturally adaptable mediating mechanism that reframes emotional expression as collective exploration (Horton, 2023). Laughter functions as a social signal that softens hierarchy, redistributes attention, and legitimizes vulnerability through shared amusement (Kunze, 2014). Improvisational comedy amplifies these effects by externalizing emotion

through exaggerated action, role-play, and absurd narrative logic (Birch, 2022). Emotional expression becomes performative and relational, reducing personal exposure while sustaining affective engagement.

Empirical studies in drama education demonstrate that improvisation-based activities enhance emotional articulation, empathy, and interpersonal sensitivity among students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Biasutti, 2017; Sowden et al., 2015). These outcomes carry particular significance in multicultural classrooms, where students often hesitate to speak, act, or express emotion due to linguistic insecurity or cultural misalignment with dominant classroom norms.

Creativity research increasingly recognizes divergent thinking as a socially situated and culturally mediated capacity (Zenk et al., 2022). Linking back to the previous discussion on experiential and relational learning, divergent cognition emerges through play, uncertainty, and relational responsiveness rather than through isolated ideation. Improvisational comedy operationalizes these principles by embedding creative thinking within ensemble interaction, narrative emergence, and embodied response (Keates & Beadle-Brown, 2022).

The foundational “*yes, and*” principle cultivates associative thinking by requiring participants to accept contributions as culturally valid and extend them collaboratively (Horton, 2023). In multicultural contexts, this practice carries pedagogical significance as it models inclusive meaning-making and counters exclusionary evaluative norms. Students learn to respond to differences as generative material rather than as deviation from correctness.

Despite growing international interest in applied theatre and improvisational pedagogy, there is limited systematic research on comedic improvisation within Chinese and broader East Asian school contexts. This gap limits understanding of how comedic improvisation might address emotional and creative educational goals highlighted as urgent in preceding sections. Existing literature prioritizes scripted drama, moral pedagogy, or aesthetic appreciation, offering minimal engagement with humor as a pedagogical force (Hurley, 2021; Karim & Hue, 2022; Xuan & Yichun, 2023). Cross-cultural comparative studies addressing how comedic improvisation mediates emotional expression and creative cognition across educational cultures are particularly scarce.

Improvisational pedagogy without a culturally grounded analysis may be misperceived as mere entertainment, disruption, or cultural inappropriateness. Thus, scholarly attention is needed to show how comedic improvisation serves as a culturally negotiable, pedagogically structured method that fosters emotional safety and creative participation in multicultural classrooms. Therefore, this study examines comedic improvisation as a drama-based pedagogical strategy situated within multicultural educational

contexts, focusing on its affective and cognitive dimensions as interrelated pedagogical forces. Attention is directed toward how improvisational comedy enables emotional expression and emotional literacy among students whose cultural backgrounds shape differing norms of communication, humor, and emotional display. At the same time, the study explores how improvisational practices stimulate creative thinking through divergent, embodied, and collaboratively negotiated processes that unfold within ensemble-based drama classrooms. Pedagogical applications are examined across selected cases from the United Kingdom, Australia, and China, enabling a comparative analysis of how comedic improvisation operates within distinct educational traditions, institutional cultures, and sociocultural expectations regarding learning, authority, and expression. Through theoretical synthesis and qualitative classroom analysis, the study engages with ongoing scholarly conversations in drama education, applied theatre, and multicultural pedagogy, advancing an understanding of improvisational comedy as a structured educational practice rather than an incidental classroom activity.

At a broader level, the paper advances a discursive argument concerning the place of humor, play, and affect within contemporary education. In classrooms increasingly shaped by cultural plurality, emotional regulation regimes, and performative accountability, comedic improvisation functions as a pedagogical site where cultural difference, uncertainty, and creativity intersect. The improvisational space reconfigures authority, redistributes expressive legitimacy, and invites learners to negotiate meaning through relational responsiveness rather than predetermined correctness. Such conditions carry significant implications for how education conceptualizes participation, creativity, and emotional life across cultural differences. Comedic improvisation, when thoughtfully integrated into drama pedagogy, emerges as a practice through which education may reimagine learning as a shared, affective, and culturally negotiated process, offering a critical response to the narrowing pedagogical imaginaries that dominate contemporary schooling.

1. Positioning Comedic Improvisation within Contemporary Drama Education Research

Recent scholarship in drama education increasingly frames learning as an embodied, relational, and culturally negotiated process shaped by affect, imagination, and social interaction. Drama pedagogy has been widely recognized as a site where learners engage with uncertainty, identity, and collective meaning-making through performative action (Celume et al., 2020; Dutton & Rushton, 2022; Feng, 2022). Within this expanding field, improvisation occupies a distinctive position due to its emphasis on emergence, responsiveness, and ensemble authorship. However, comedic improvisation, by provoking

laughter and managing uncertainty through humor, uniquely empowers learners to renegotiate group dynamics, build resilience, and foster creative agency. Yet, despite growing attention to improvisational practices, comedy, like particularly comedic improvisation, remains conceptually marginal within dominant drama education literature.

Existing reviews tend to subsume humor under broader notions of play, engagement, or motivation, leaving its pedagogical specificity insufficiently theorized (Meier, 2019; Pollio, 2018). Consequently, comedic improvisation is frequently discussed in instrumental terms, associated with ice-breaking, confidence-building, or classroom atmosphere, while its distinctive potential to facilitate critical reflection, social connection, and risk-taking through laughter and shared incongruity is often overlooked (Araki, 2025); thus, its epistemic, affective, and cognitive dimensions remain underexamined. Responding to this gap, this literature review traces how drama education theory, creativity research, educational psychology, and applied theatre studies have approached improvisation, emotion, and creativity, while identifying the absence of a sustained, cross-cultural analysis of comedic improvisation as a pedagogical strategy.

2. Drama Education as Embodied, Relational, and Culturally Situated Practice

Drama education has long drawn on experiential learning theory and social constructivist epistemology, positioning learning as a process that emerges through action, reflection, and social interaction (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Deweyan notions of experience foreground continuity between action and meaning (Dewey, 1938), while Vygotskian perspectives emphasize learning as a socially mediated process shaped by cultural tools and interpersonal engagement (Vygotski, 1998). Drama classrooms operationalize these principles through role-play, narrative construction, and embodied exploration, enabling learners to negotiate meaning collectively.

Foundational work by Heathcote & Bolton (1995) conceptualized drama as inquiry rather than representation, emphasizing ethical reasoning, social imagination, and lived understanding through role. Subsequent scholarship expanded this framework toward issues of identity, empathy, power, and cultural participation, framing drama education as a site of social and cultural negotiation (Sugawara, 2022; Zhuang, 2025).

Despite these advances, comedy occupies an ambiguous position within drama education theory. While playfulness and imagination are frequently valorized, the mechanisms through which humor operates, such as incongruity, exaggeration, emotional displacement, and collective laughter, receive

limited analytical attention, even though these mechanisms uniquely enable learners to safely challenge norms, embrace ambiguity, and connect through shared emotional release (Embalzado & Sajampun, 2020; Lovorn & Holaway, 2015; Robinson et al., 2024; Tong & Tsung, 2020). As a result, comedy often appears as an affective byproduct rather than as a pedagogical structure. This absence becomes more pronounced in East Asian scholarship, where drama education discourse prioritizes moral development, aesthetic cultivation, and social harmony, thereby leaving humor under-theorized as a pedagogical force (Eriksson, 2011). Taken together, this theoretical gap signals the need for a focused interrogation of comedy as an embodied, relational, and culturally mediated educational practice that offers distinctive ways of engaging students.

3. Comedic Improvisation, Affect, and Emotional Mediation

Comedic improvisation is distinguished by its reliance on spontaneity, relational responsiveness, and collective authorship. Improvisational frameworks prioritize presence, acceptance, and relational attunement, creating learning environments structured around uncertainty and emergence (Keates & Beadle-Brown, 2022). Educational psychology literature increasingly emphasizes emotional expression, emotional literacy, and psychological safety as central to meaningful learning (X. Chen et al., 2024; Garaigordobil, 2023). Psychological safety refers to shared perceptions that interpersonal risk-taking is acceptable within a group, enabling learners to participate without fear of embarrassment or exclusion (Jensen & Szulevicz, 2025). Humor plays a significant role in establishing such environments by diffusing tension, softening hierarchy, and reframing vulnerability as shared experience.

Studies examining humor-based pedagogy report reductions in anxiety, increased motivation, and strengthened peer relationships (Gallo, 2016). Within drama education, comedic improvisation enables emotional externalization through fictional roles, exaggerated action, and absurd narrative structures (Darwich et al., 2024). Emotional expression is displaced onto the performative frame, allowing students to explore affect without direct personal exposure. Empirical research in Asian contexts suggests particular relevance for learners shaped by cultural norms of emotional restraint (Berra & Yang, 2012). Yao et al. (2025) demonstrate improvements in emotional articulation and peer interaction among adolescents participating in improvisation-based drama programs. L. Chen & Yang (2023) identifies humor as an affective mediator in Chinese classrooms, lowering resistance to expression and participation. These findings point toward comedic improvisation as a culturally negotiable mechanism for emotional

engagement, yet existing studies remain fragmented and lack integration into a broader pedagogical theory.

4. Improvisational Comedy and Creative Cognition

Creativity research increasingly conceptualizes creativity as a relational, process-oriented phenomenon emerging through interaction rather than individual ideation. Divergent thinking, cognitive flexibility, and imaginative recombination are understood as socially situated capacities shaped by context, collaboration, and affect (Chadwick, 2016). Improvisational comedy exemplifies these dynamics by requiring participants to generate meaning in real time through collective negotiation (Lockyer, 2015).

Sawyer's concept of distributed creativity emphasizes how improvisational groups generate ideas through mutual responsiveness, shared constraints, and emergent structure (Sawyer, 2004). Comedy intensifies this process by mobilizing incongruity, surprise, and absurdity, which function as cognitive disruptors that invite reinterpretation and reframing (Sawyer & Henriksen, 2023). Errors and unexpected contributions become generative resources within the improvisational ecology.

Empirical studies in secondary and higher education contexts associate improvisational drama with increased originality, problem-solving capacity, and cognitive flexibility (Goodnight et al., 2023; Norris, 2020). Within exam-oriented educational cultures, such as China, creative risk-taking remains constrained by fear of error and evaluative pressure (Wang, 2010), related to comedic improvisation as a rare pedagogical space where mistakes acquire positive value, contributing to creative engagement under restrictive conditions. Despite these insights, creativity research rarely addresses how humor interacts with cultural norms of learning, authority, and evaluation.

5. Applied Theatre, Comedy, and Cross-Cultural Practice

Applied theatre provides a broader framework for understanding comedy as a socially and educationally purposeful practice. In community and educational contexts, humor has been employed to facilitate dialogue, reduce resistance, and support participation across differences. *Theatre of the Oppressed* integrates parody, irony, and play to invite critical reflection while maintaining accessibility and relational engagement (Boal, 2013).

In the United Kingdom and Australia, improvisational theatre with strong comedic dimensions has been incorporated into formal and informal educational settings, supporting communication skills, wellbeing, and social inclusion (Dutton & Rushton, 2022). Studies report improvements in student

confidence, collaboration, and emotional resilience. These practices are supported by institutional cultures that recognize drama as a legitimate pedagogical modality.

In contrast, applied theatre practices in China remain limited in scale and scope, often concentrated in pilot programs or extracurricular initiatives. Existing studies emphasize scripted performance, social themes, or moral instruction, offering minimal engagement with humor as a pedagogical strategy (Luo & Lau, 2020; Na et al., 2024; Xing et al., 2024). Comparative perspectives reveal a structural imbalance in how comedic improvisation is theorized and practiced across educational cultures.

6. State of the Art and Research Gap

The literature reveals three interrelated gaps that define the research frontier of this study. *First*, drama education theory lacks a coherent framework for conceptualizing comedic improvisation as a central pedagogical methodology that integrates affect, cognition, and cultural negotiation. Comedy remains peripheral within dominant models of drama pedagogy. *Second*, empirical research on improvisational comedy in education remains fragmented, short-term, and context-bound. Longitudinal and comparative studies examining sustained emotional and creative development across cultural contexts remain scarce. *Third*, scholarships from East Asian contexts remain underrepresented, with limited theorization of how humor operates within educational cultures shaped by norms of discipline, restraint, and evaluative pressure. The interaction between comedic improvisation and multicultural classroom dynamics remains largely unexplored. These gaps underscore the need for theoretically informed, culturally sensitive research that situates comedic improvisation within contemporary debates on drama education, creativity, and multicultural pedagogy.

7. Methods

7.1 Research Design and Epistemological Orientation

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and theory-driven research design to examine comedic improvisation as a drama-based pedagogical practice operating within multicultural educational contexts (Atkinson & Delamont, 2012). The design is grounded in the premise that emotional expression, creativity, and participation are culturally mediated phenomena, produced through socially regulated meanings of humor, authority, appropriateness, and expressive legitimacy. The methodological approach is characterized as a secondary qualitative synthesis with cross-cultural comparative interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study reconstructs and explains pedagogical mechanisms by analyzing

documented classroom practices and their reported interpretations across contexts. A comparative, case-informed strategy is employed to examine how comedic improvisation becomes pedagogically consequential across distinct educational cultures, particularly where norms of discipline, emotional restraint, and performative accountability shape classroom participation. The cross-cultural design supports the study's central analytic concern about how comedic improvisation functions as a culturally negotiable pedagogy that reorganizes legitimacy, recognition, and participation under conditions of cultural plurality.

7.2 Data Sources and Units of Analysis

The study draws on a curated corpus of secondary qualitative sources consistent with theory-building and interpretive synthesis in arts and cultural education (Boddy, 2016). The corpus includes: 1) Peer-reviewed empirical classroom studies on drama education, improvisation, affect, creativity, and multicultural pedagogy; 2) Drama education policy documents and curriculum guidelines relevant to arts, creativity, and holistic learning; 3) Improvisation manuals and applied theatre handbooks used to clarify pedagogical principles and classroom structures; and 4) Documented reflective accounts, practitioner narratives, and classroom observation excerpts embedded in published sources.

This strategy is justified on two grounds. *First*, comedic improvisation often occurs in settings where access for sustained ethnographic observation is restricted, especially across multiple countries and schooling systems. *Second*, the study aims for theoretical articulation of mechanisms rather than program evaluation; interpretive synthesis of existing qualitative materials is appropriate for generating conceptually rigorous, culturally grounded claims.

7.3 Cultural-Pedagogical Mediation as Analytical Framework

The analytical framework is organized around cultural-pedagogical mediation, combining a cultural theory of meaning with an arts education lens capable of explaining how classroom practices become socially intelligible, emotionally permissible, and pedagogically consequential across educational cultures. The primary theoretical anchor derives from Stuart Hall's theory of culture, representation, and meaning-making, developed in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997). Hall (1997) conceptualizes culture as a field of meaning production in which practices such as language, humor, performance, and embodied action operate as signifying systems structured by codes, conventions, and power relations. Meaning cannot be assumed to travel intact across contexts; it emerges

through culturally specific interpretive frameworks for analyzing comedic improvisation because laughter, emotional display, timing, and “appropriateness” function through shared cultural intelligibility and regulated boundaries of expression. Based on Hall (1997) emotional expression is therefore analyzed as culturally coded, and humor is examined as a negotiated signifying practice, so classroom interaction is treated as a site where representation and regulation shape what becomes legitimate participation.

To translate cultural interpretation into pedagogy-sensitive analysis, the study integrates Applied Theatre theory as articulated by Nicholson (2010) and O’Connor and Anderson (2014). Applied Theatre conceptualizes performance as socially situated, participatory, and transformative, emphasizing process-centered learning and relational engagement (Anderson & O’Connor, 2014; Nicholson, 2010). This framework supports analysis of comedic improvisation as an ensemble practice that redistributes classroom authority through co-authorship. It redefines emotional legitimacy through performative framing and shared laughter and enables culturally negotiated participation by lowering barriers created by hierarchy, linguistic insecurity, and fear of error. Then, data analysis proceeds through a theoretical thematic mapping approach that combines inductive thematic analysis with deductive cultural interpretation (Figure 1).

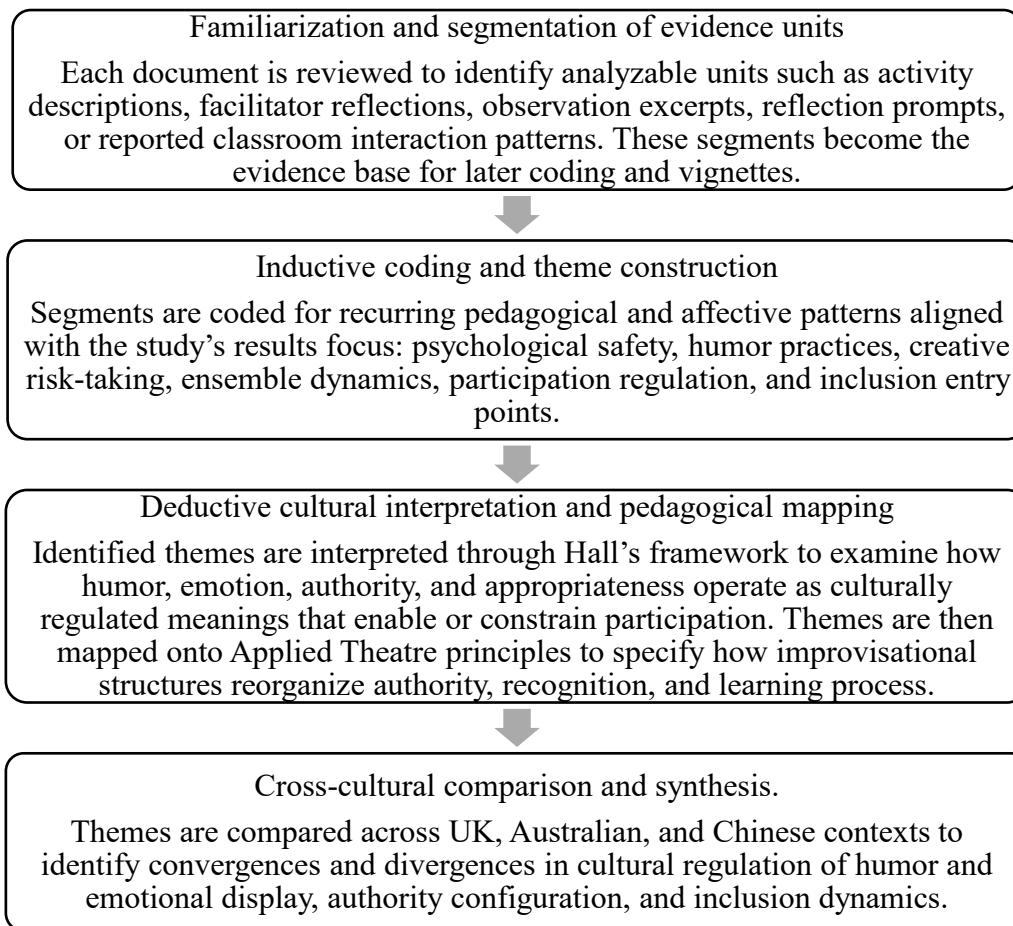


Figure 1. Qualitative Analytical Workflow for Cross-Cultural Interpretation of Pedagogical Evidence

This analytical strategy is justified because it generates explanatory power about how and why comedic improvisation produces pedagogical effects under different cultural conditions, enabling mechanism-based interpretation rather than listing outcomes.

8. Results

The curated corpus consisted of 42 secondary qualitative sources, including peer-reviewed classroom studies, practitioner case narratives, applied theatre manuals, and drama education policy documents. From these sources, 286 analyzable evidence units were identified. Evidence units included classroom interaction excerpts, teacher reflections, student interview quotations, activity descriptions, and reflective commentary embedded in published texts. The analytical density of the corpus allowed repeated

comparison across contexts, enabling identification of convergent pedagogical mechanisms alongside culturally specific negotiations.

Context cluster	Sources (n)	Evidence units (n)	Dominant classroom setting
United Kingdom	14	98	Multilingual secondary drama
Australia	13	87	Upper primary and secondary drama
China	15	101	Exam-oriented lower secondary
Total	42	286	

Table 1. Corpus Distribution and Evidence Units

The relatively even distribution of evidence units across contexts supports cross-contextual synthesis without privileging a single educational culture (Table 1). The Chinese corpus contained a higher proportion of teacher reflections and policy-referenced narratives, while the UK and Australian corpora featured more student-voice material. This imbalance itself became analytically relevant, revealing different regimes of expressive legitimacy and documentation practice.

Across the corpus, emotional safety did not appear as a pre-existing classroom atmosphere (Table 1). It emerged gradually through repeated improvisational encounters that normalized uncertainty, hesitation, and expressive risk. Emotional openness increased when classroom participants observed consistent responses to awkwardness, error, and hesitation. Improvisational routines structured around continuation, acceptance, and collective laughter altered how emotional exposure was interpreted. Emotional display shifted from a personal risk to a shared process enacted within a performative frame.

Indicator category	Interactional description	Evidence units (n)
Acceptance responses	Peer extensions without correction	74
Error normalization	Laughter followed by scene continuation	61
Authority softening	Teacher participates as player	43
Face buffering	Emotion expressed through role	58
Peer repair	Group rescues stalled performer	50

Table 2. Emotional Safety Indicators Identified in Evidence Units

The presence of these indicators across contexts suggests that emotional safety formed through predictable social responses (Table 2), especially when students repeatedly observed that hesitation

produced laughter rather than sanction, participation thresholds lowered. This pattern appeared consistently in student interview narratives.

“When I forgot what to say, nobody stopped the scene. They laughed and kept going. After that, I felt okay trying again.” (SA1, Australia)

“In other classes, silence feels heavy. In drama, silence became funny, so it did not feel embarrassing.” (SU2, UK)

“I was nervous because classmates were watching. Playing a role made it easier to show emotion.” (SC3, China)

These excerpts illustrate how emotional exposure became socially manageable once framed as part of the improvisational contract. Emotional safety was demonstrated through action. It related to humor that operated as a central mediator translating emotional risk into acceptable classroom behavior (X. Yue et al., 2016). Laughter functioned as a collective signal indicating that emotional expression fell within legitimate boundaries (Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2017). This signal mattered acutely in multicultural classrooms where students navigated divergent norms concerning seriousness, respect, and emotional restraint. In UK and Australian contexts, humor was introduced early and broadly, often without explicit justification (Table 3). In Chinese contexts, humor entered more cautiously and frequently required pedagogical framing to maintain academic legitimacy (Table 3).

Dimension	United Kingdom	Australia	China
Humor initiation	Student-led	Mixed	Teacher-led initially
Emotional range	Wide	Moderate	Gradually expanding
Classroom seriousness	Flexible	Contextual	Strongly regulated
Laughter tolerance	High	Moderate	Conditional

Table 3. Cultural Regulation of Humor Across Contexts

Teacher reflections from Chinese contexts frequently referenced concerns over order and seriousness.

“Students enjoy humor, but they need to understand its purpose. When they see it as learning, they relax.” (TC1, China)

In contrast, Australian teachers emphasized humor as a social connector.

“Comedy gave students a common language, even when their spoken English differed.” (TA2, Australia)

They reveal how humor required different legitimizing pathways depending on cultural expectations surrounding discipline and authority. Cultural-pedagogical mediation clarifies how laughter becomes intelligible through locally regulated codes. A recurring mechanism across evidence units involved emotional displacement onto fictional roles. Exaggeration and absurdity created emotional distance, allowing students to explore fear, frustration, and joy without direct self-exposure. Students consistently reported greater emotional freedom when emotions were performed *“as someone else.”* This finding held particular significance in contexts shaped by face-sensitivity.

“When the character was angry, it felt safe. It was not me being angry.” (SC2, China)

“I could shout because it was funny. In real life, I would not shout.” (SU2, UK)

Role-based exaggeration therefore functioned as an emotional buffer, enabling exploration without personal consequence. Emotional literacy developed through enactment with creative cognition emerged across the corpus as a collective, time-based process unfolding through interaction (Dequine & Pearson-Davis, 1983). Evidence units repeatedly showed that ideas surfaced through relational responsiveness, bodily timing, and mutual attunement. Improvisational comedy intensified this process by encouraging surprise, exaggeration, and playful disruption of narrative expectation.

Within classroom scenes, creative movement occurred when one student’s contribution altered the interpretive horizon for others. The scene advanced through rapid reinterpretation of offers rather than through pre-planned invention. This pattern appeared consistently across all three contexts, though the tempo and visible confidence differed (Table 4).

Creative move	Description of interactional action	Evidence units (n)
Offer initiation	Introduction of new narrative element	82
Reinterpretation	Shift in meaning assigned to an element	67
Narrative escalation	Heightening through absurd logic	59
Motif recall	Reuse of earlier scene material	41
Generative repair	Mistake transformed into story engine	55

Table 4. Creative Cognition Moves Identified in Evidence Units

The density of offer initiation suggests a classroom ecology in which ideas were treated as provisional and expandable (Table 4). Reinterpretation followed closely behind, indicating that creativity operated through meaning negotiation. Student interviews described this process in explicitly relational terms.

“I did not think of an idea alone. I heard something strange, then my body reacted.” (SA2, Australia)

“Someone said something wrong, and suddenly the story became better.” (SU3, UK)

“My idea appeared after I watched my classmate move.” (SC3, China)

These accounts point toward creativity as situated responsiveness, grounded in attention to others rather than self-expression alone. A salient feature of comedic improvisation involved the revaluation of error (Y. Zhang et al., 2022). Errors lost their punitive meaning and gained narrative value. This shift mattered strongly in exam-oriented environments, where error typically signals deficiency. Evidence units showed repeated instances where forgotten lines, linguistic slips, or awkward pauses triggered laughter and prompted narrative redirection. Creative momentum followed, supported by peer collaboration.

“When a student made a mistake, the class turned it into the reason for the scene.” (TC2, China)

“Mistakes gave us something to work with.” (SA2, Australia)

The transformation of error into generative material reconfigured evaluative norms. Creative cognition expanded once students recognized that deviation carried possibility rather than sanction. Participation widened through diversified entry pathways that reduced reliance on linguistic fluency and cultural familiarity. Improvisational comedy opened access through gesture, sound, repetition, and spatial positioning. This expansion proved significant in multilingual classrooms where students held uneven confidence in the dominant instructional language (Table 5).

Entry mode	Observable classroom function	Participation effect
Physical action	Storytelling through movement	Earlier engagement
Chorus speech	Group vocalization	Lower exposure risk
One-line turns	Minimal verbal demand	Increased turn-taking
Role masking	Fictional identity	Emotional release
Object play	Shared focal point	Collective invention

Table 5. Participation Entry Modes Observed

“Students who never spoke started acting.” (TU2, UK)

“The quietest student became very active once movement was allowed.” (TA3, Australia)

Participation thus expanded through modal plurality. Improvisational comedy redistributed expressive legitimacy by loosening conventional hierarchies of correctness. Contributions gained value through responsiveness rather than polish. This redistribution carried particular weight for students positioned at linguistic or cultural margins. Evidence units revealed that students who entered scenes physically or through chorus later transitioned toward verbal contributions, suggesting a graduated participation trajectory.

“I started by copying movements. Later I talked.” (SC3, China)

Such trajectories illustrate how improvisational structure supports inclusion without forced exposure. Short, scripted fragments functioned as cultural anchors that framed humor, authority, and

identity. These texts served as shared reference points that stabilized improvisation while allowing reinterpretation (Table 6).

Script ID	Context	Excerpt	Classroom function
DR-01	UK	“ <i>Why are you shouting?</i> ” “ <i>Because nobody listens when I whisper!</i> ”	Authority inversion
DR-02	Australia	“ <i>I am the boss today.</i> ” “ <i>Only until lunch.</i> ”	Status negotiation
DR-03	China	“ <i>This is serious work.</i> ” 「这是很严肃的工作。」 “ <i>Then why is everyone laughing?</i> ” 「那为什么大家都在笑？」	Discipline reframing

Table 6. Classroom Drama Script Excerpts and Functions

These fragments staged tensions familiar to multicultural classrooms, like voice, power, seriousness, and recognition. Humor enabled exploration of these tensions without confrontation (Table 6). Students reflected on the safety created by fictional framing.

“It felt easier to talk about power when it was a character.” (SU3, UK)

Script use therefore supported emotional distance while sustaining relevance to lived classroom dynamics. Across all contexts, three mechanisms consistently appeared that 1) collective laughter reduced emotional threat; 2) role-based framing protected dignity; and 3) acceptance-driven continuation sustained creative flow. These mechanisms operated regardless of cultural setting, indicating shared pedagogical dynamics grounded in interaction rather than ideology.

Negotiation zone	Observed tension	Pedagogical scaffold
Seriousness norms	Fear of disorder	Clear task framing
Authority optics	Teacher role ambiguity	Structured participation
Face sensitivity	Public exposure anxiety	Chorus and role masks

Table 7. Cultural Negotiation Zones and Scaffolds

Scaffolds allowed improvisation to function within culturally intelligible boundaries (Table 7). Comedic improvisation reorganizes classroom participation, emotional expression, and creative cognition

through ensemble interaction, humor-mediated safety, and culturally intelligible structure. Emotional openness emerges through collective permission rather than personal confidence. Creative thinking unfolds through relational divergence supported by acceptance and repair. Participation widens through diversified entry pathways that respect linguistic and cultural difference.

These mechanisms operate across multicultural classrooms while remaining responsive to locally regulated norms concerning authority, seriousness, and emotional display. Comedic improvisation functions as a structured pedagogical practice that enables shared meaning-making under conditions of cultural plurality.

9. Discussion

Across the analysed classrooms, comedic improvisation did not function as a motivational add-on or affective embellishment. Its pedagogical force lay in how it reorganised the conditions under which classroom meaning became recognisable, permissible, and consequential. Laughter emerged as an interactional threshold through which participation shifted from a regulated performance of correctness toward a shared economy of responsiveness. What changed was the criteria by which behaviour acquired value.

The comparative pattern across the United Kingdom, Australia, and China indicates that humor cannot be treated as a universal emotional trigger. Instead, laughter operated as a culturally governed signal whose meaning depended on how seriousness (Marsudi et al., 2024), authority (Ai, 2025), and exposure were locally organised (Chan, 2017). In settings where drama already occupied institutional legitimacy, comedic play circulated with minimal justification (Weaver, 2010). In more regulated environments (Price, 2013; X. D. Yue, 2011), humor required visible framing, temporal boundaries, and pedagogical rationales before it could be tolerated. These differences distinguish regimes governing when play may appear without threatening order.

The results in the section before show that comedic improvisation exerted pressure on these regimes by altering how expressive acts were read. A hesitation, linguistic slip, or pause, typically marked as a deficit in outcome-oriented classrooms, acquired alternate readings once laughter sustained the interaction. These moments stopped functioning as signs of individual failure and began operating as collective resources (G.-H. Chen et al., 2013). Competence was no longer indexed primarily by fluency or speed, but by contribution to scene continuity, which represents a reorientation of classroom legitimacy.

This reorientation had particular consequences for students positioned at linguistic or cultural margins. Multilingual learners and quieter participants entered interaction through gesture, chorus, object play, and minimal verbal turns (Peng, 2022; Yu et al., 2025). These modalities did more than reduce anxiety (J. Xu, 2022); they expanded the semiotic bandwidth of participation (Liyanawatta et al., 2022). Bodies, rhythms, timing, and relational attunement began to count as intelligible contributions. As recognition diversified, peer hierarchies softened, and participation ceased to hinge on mastery of dominant language forms and became distributed across ensemble responsiveness.

Emotional safety, frequently treated in educational literature as a psychological precondition, appeared here as an outcome of symbolic reorganisation (Simatupang & Sampurno, 2024). Students did not first feel safe before participating and became safer once classroom responses consistently treated exposure as workable material (Hatton & Nicholls, 2018). Laughter marked that reclassification and signaled that emotional display had entered an acceptable register, buffered by role, exaggeration, and fiction (Pauwels, 2021). Emotional expression was more of a performative action governed by shared rules (Blustein et al., 2024; Schechner & Brady, 2017).

This mechanism proved especially consequential in classrooms shaped by strong face-sensitivity. Role-based distance allowed emotions to appear without attaching them to personal identity. Anger, fear, and frustration could be enacted without social penalty because they belonged to the scene (Celume et al., 2019). Over time, repeated enactment stabilised this interpretive frame. Emotional intensity stopped signaling risk and began signaling engagement and the classroom's affective economy recalibrated through practice.

Authority was neither dissolved nor opposed through comedic improvisation. Instead, it was reconfigured, because teachers who entered play redefined it (D & N Shende, 2022). Authority migrated from enforcement of correctness toward maintenance of conditions that allowed interaction to continue (Chang, 2025). Where this shift remained intelligible through precise framing, time limits, and consistent structure, teacher participation enhanced legitimacy. Where framing was absent, the same actions risked appearing unserious. Authority thus emerged as a representational effect, sustained through recognisable pedagogical signals.

Creative cognition unfolded as a visibly collective process through reinterpretation, escalation, and repair; what mattered was responsiveness in time (S. Liu et al., 2022). The ensemble listened for possibilities inside the disruption. Mistakes became narrative engines, that once deviation lost its punitive meaning, divergence expanded (Xiao et al., 2025). Attention reorganised itself around what could be built.

This dynamic exposed a moral economy embedded in many schooling cultures, particularly in exam-oriented contexts (Aini et al., 2024), where error carries ethical weight. Comedic improvisation interrupted that economy by transforming deviation into value through shared continuation (Yang, 2023). As students observed peers being rescued, risk became collectively carried. Repair demonstrated inclusion more powerfully than reassurance ever could.

Scripted fragments played a stabilising role in this process they anchored it. Scripts functioned as cultural reference points that rendered play intelligible, especially in contexts where humor required justification (Martadi & Sampurno, 2025). At the same time, scripts imported their own codes. Lines that staged authority, audibility, or seriousness opened space for critique without accusation. Fiction allowed sensitive dynamics to be explored obliquely, containing conflict within performative distance.

However, humor remained ethically ambivalent (Kanuck, 2019; Shuster, 2013). Laughter redistributed legitimacy only when its targets did not reproduce existing hierarchies. When jokes aligned with stereotypes or marginalized identities, redistribution collapsed into reinforcement. The results underscore that appropriateness is an ethical negotiation enacted moment by moment. Facilitation required attentiveness to who was recognised, who absorbed discomfort, and whose contributions gained traction.

Taken together, the findings indicate that comedic improvisation operates beyond an affective or relational method. It intervenes in the symbolic circulation through which classrooms authorise visibility, voice, and competence. Legitimacy adheres to fluency, composure, speed, and alignment with expectation (Marsico & Dazzani, 2024; Mo & Chan, 2021). Improvisational comedy destabilises that alignment by allowing alternative signs, such as timing, responsiveness, and collective attunement to carry value (Edge, 2010). Once these signs stabilise through repetition, legitimacy no longer flows solely through correctness.

This process can be understood as semiotic reprogramming as classroom meaning-making shifts from mastery-centred visibility toward contribution-centred participation. Emotional safety follows redistribution, and creativity emerges as access to circulation. Teachers become custodians of symbolic flow (Martadi & Sampurno, 2025), shaping frames within which meaning can travel in different ways. Such reprogramming is particularly relevant in multilingual and Confucian-heritage contexts, where linguistic precision and emotional restraint serve as moral indicators (Kim, 2023; Zhai & Tang, 2023). Comedic improvisation offers a culturally negotiable pathway for redefining merit without direct ideological confrontation. Change occurs through enactment. Resistance diminishes as new signs become intelligible and productive.

Conclusion

The opening question asked how drama education can invite emotional openness and creative agency without breaking culturally valued expectations around discipline, respect, and group cohesion. Evidence across UK, Australian, and Chinese clusters supports a clear answer: comedic improvisation achieves that balance when classroom meaning becomes reorganized around shared recognition. Laughter operates as a permission signal; it marks expressive acts as acceptable inside locally intelligible boundaries. Emotional exposure becomes manageable once roles, exaggeration, and fictional distance protect dignity and face, while ensemble norms treat hesitation as workable material.

The study set out to explain how comedic improvisation mediates emotion and stimulates creativity in multicultural classrooms shaped by uneven linguistic confidence, divergent humor codes, and contrasting authority traditions. Results show that emotional safety emerges through repeatable interaction patterns involving acceptance responses, non-punitive continuation, and peer repair, and that this is more than teacher reassurance. Creative cognition appears as a group process that depends on offers, reinterpretations, escalation, callbacks, and generative repair. When error gains narrative value, evaluative pressure loosens, especially in exam-oriented settings where mistakes often carry moral weight.

A broader claim follows. Comedic improvisation functions as cultural technology: it recalibrates what counts as competence, shifting visibility from polish toward contribution to collective continuity. Pedagogical travel across cultures becomes feasible when core mechanisms remain stable while surface scaffolds adapt to local seriousness norms, authority optics, and face sensitivity. Future work can deepen the account through longitudinal classroom studies that trace how new recognition patterns stabilize over time and how ethical boundaries around humor get negotiated in culturally diverse groups.

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