

Anna: *You're listening to Coffee Talks with NaRCAD. Grab a coffee or tea and join our team as we chat with leaders in the academic detailing space. For more information on academic detailing, visit us at narcad.org.*

Anna: Welcome back to the podcast *Coffee Talks with NaRCAD*. I'm your host, Anna Morgan Barsamian, Senior Manager of Training and Education. With me today, we have Chirag Rathod and Jess Alward, two of our fantastic detailing facilitators at NARCAD. Chirag is an improviser, pharmacist, academic detailer, teacher, and podcast host. Jess is a community theater member, academic detailer, and trainer.

Both of our guests today are passionate about what it means to communicate effectively in their professional and their personal lives. Thank you so much, Chirag and Jess, for being with us today. I know this episode is going to resonate with a lot of our listeners who want to continue to practice their communication skills so that they can have successful visits with clinicians. I'm so grateful that you're willing to share your thoughts with us today. Welcome. Hello, Jess! How are you?

Jess: Hi, Anna and Aanchal. I'm great. Thanks so much for having me. This is going to be fun. Looking forward to it.

Anna: Thanks, Jess. And hey, Chirag. How are you doing today?

Chirag: I'm good. Thanks. This feels a lot like those NARCAD trainings when you say hello to us. It just felt really nice and warm.

Anna: Oh, good.

Jess: Comfy and familiar, right?

Anna: Happy to have you both here. Let's jump right in. Jess, you and your family have been involved in community theater for many years. How has this background in theater influenced your AD work and the position that you're in right now?

Jess: What I get out of community theater is the ability to really pay attention to what's going on around me, regardless of what is going through my head at any given moment. When we go into a detail, we've practiced and we've memorized and we've done all our homework about all the clinical stuff.

We can't necessarily anticipate the other things that may pop up during a detail, whether that's a provider's background and deeply held beliefs that maybe shock us or the fact that you're maybe in a conference room and there are other people coming in and out or somebody's eating their lunch. All of those things can be really distracting, but also offer a lot of information.

If you're in your head all the time and only thinking about the clinical topic, you don't get all of that information, right? Being able to read the environment, pay attention to the cues and signals that are being given to me, and then react accordingly is key. In the theater we say acting is reacting, so this seems to have good application to detailing too.

Anna: Awesome. Thanks, Jess. I know that you've recently directed a play as well. Is that correct?

Jess: Yeah, I've directed a whole bunch, actually. I'm going to be doing a brand new original short play here this summer that's going to be done in conjunction with our local Audubon camp for kids. So that should be a lot of fun.

Anna: Thanks for sharing! Chirag, I know improv is an important part of your life. How have you used this to your advantage as a detailer and a trainer, and how has it influenced your work?

Chirag: Improv has shaped everything I've done since I took my first class, which is going to be 10 years in May. It was really a wild experience because I'd done no performance or improv before taking my first class, but it's really shaped my approach to honestly everything that I've done. I have more joy in the things that I do.

Improv has shifted the way that I present and allowed me to feel comfortable enough to integrate my personality more into presentations, which makes them feel like conversations. The same goes for detailing. One of the things that's really powerful about academic detailing is the ability to bring your own personality and life experiences into the conversation.

Your team will create this material and you'll go out there with this united message, but there's this really cool opportunity to bring yourself to that interaction, which leads to being able to build stronger relationships with prescribers and institutions and whoever you're detailing. It creates this very vivid picture of what detailing is and what an educational conversation can be.

That's, for me, what came through with improv - being able to be comfortable in myself and understand the power of effectively putting yourself out there. I'm not telling prescribers all of my secrets, but it is nice to connect on a more personal level. That has resonated through trainings that I do, actual detailing presentations, everything, but it's really part of every approach I've taken or everything I've done since I took my first improv class.

Anna: Thanks, Chirag. Stepping back a little bit and building off of that, how do you think that improv can be used to shift communication techniques? You touched on this a little bit, but can you speak a little more to that?

Chirag: We keep saying improv, but I think a lot of this resonates with performance and stage performance at large. Really what you're watching within an improv show are people who are trying to effectively communicate with each other. That means being mindful of themselves and the words that they're saying, the tone, and listening to what the other person is giving you.

That resonates with communication at large. So much of communication is being mindful of the way that you're putting things out there and listening to what people are giving you and deeply paying attention to every interaction that you partake in.

Anna: I appreciate that. Jess, do you have anything to add in terms of how theater can be used to shift communication techniques?

Jess: When we think of improv, we think it can really be used to learn how to be in the moment that you're in right now and meet somebody human being to human being, right? It's not about the 17 things you have to do when you get back to the office or what you have to do when you get home. It's about being really invested in the time that you're spending with that human being in the room to do this work in order to help them be a better clinician, a better patient care provider, and feel more comfortable in their own skin.

You do that, like Chirag said, by being genuine. That starts with being open enough to share yourself. We do that on the stage too. If we don't come to a role with our own experiences and our lived truth behind us, what we do comes off as disingenuous and fake, and we don't want that in a detailing session either. We want to be genuine and live and share our truth.

Anna: It's so important to be authentic during detailing visits - it really helps build that trust with clinicians.

You both co-hosted a breakout session for the NARCAD conference back in November of 2023 on this exact topic. Can you both share some reflections from this session with listeners who weren't able to attend? Chirag, I will pass it over to you first to share some of your reflections and then we'll hear from you, Jess.

Chirag: I smiled when you said that because it was a very exciting moment. I've been working in this space and doing improv for so long, so to be able to get these opportunities and collaborate with Jess to combine forces was special. Thank you to NARCAD for allowing us to do that.

The joy of being able to do improv with a group of people is thrilling. One of the fun things is it takes people outside of their normal modes of living. It can be really fun to experience what it's like to almost break away from your normal thought patterns and do something where you're completely out of your element. It can create some really powerful experiences.

Taking it into the academic detailing context, so much of detailing is about communication and how to effectively communicate with a lot of different people. Being able to share that with the team was great and people come from such varying experiences. We got to run through a couple different exercises with the detailers that focused on various elements of communication. For example, telling a story one sentence at a time as a large group while focusing on what you can build if you say "yes" in a conversation versus saying "no" in a conversation.

Being able to take participants through that and having them come away with their own discoveries about what it's like to collaborate was powerful. People left with little takeaways about how to link more closely with themselves and their teams. To be able to do that in a 75-minute session was really cool. I think a lot of people came in not knowing what this was and that was on us to "trick" people into taking risks.

There was a moment at the end where it looked like we were at some kind of religious or spiritual ceremony because we had everyone running around and creating a machine where everyone's hands were up in the air. Just getting people to experience something outside of themselves and, you know, connect it to how that can be utilized in academic detailing was an awesome experience.

Anna: We got some really great feedback from the folks who were able to attend that session - thank you again to both of you for facilitating that. Jess, do you have any reflections you want to share from the conference?

Jess: We had the best time, and it was so good to get out of our kind of academic headspace a little bit and move around. I think that the people who attended really discovered through those 75 minutes that it was okay to be clunky, right? That it was okay to try something you've never tried before or maybe mess up your words or not even necessarily know what you're supposed to

do next and just go with it and let the people in the room help you and support you. People seemed to be having a great time. Everything that I heard on the way out the door proved that people seemed to appreciate it. I would do it again in a second - it was awesome.

Anna: Maybe we can do it again at the 2024 conference! Chirag, you alluded to this a little bit, but can you walk us through an example of one of the improv activities that you did during the conference session?

Chirag: At the core, what we try to do in these workshops is use improv exercises that would be traditionally seen in an improv class, which is removed from our traditional role as a pharmacist or an academic detailer. The exercise has nothing specifically to do with what you'd be doing in an academic detailing visit. We have a conversation after about how we link the skills in that exercise to our professional life and personal life.

One of the exercises is called *Paired Conversations*. As a quick aside, I want to give credit to two individuals, Katie Watson and Belinda Fu. Katie Watson is a teacher at Northwestern University who teaches medical improv to medical students. Belinda Fu is a physician who collaborated with Katie Watson and essentially coined the term of medical improv. This is an exercise that I learned from their training.

At the core of improv is “yes” terminology. What you're seeing in an improv show is people building on ideas and collaborating. This leads to these beautiful, fanciful scenes with deep characters and environments. But at the core, people are just agreeing with this idea that was put forth.

If someone says, “hey, there's a banana on the floor”, the idea would be to say, “oh my gosh, there is a banana, and I don't want to slip on it” and you build on that. In this exercise, we do three rounds of conversations where people add one sentence at a time.

In the first round, you use “yes” to build momentum. You'll plan a birthday party and you'll say, “today's my birthday” and your partner will say, “yes” and you'll say, “and I'd like to go to the park” and your partner will say, “yes” and you'll say, “and I want there to be balloons” and you just see where that takes you over the course of about two minutes.

Then, you have a similar conversation where instead of saying “yes”, you say “yes, but” and you try to plan a vacation or something else, and you see where that takes you.

Then on the last round, you say “no” to planning something else and you get to see how that takes you to different places. It allows for a conversation about collaboration and building momentum. When you block individuals, you can see how that can be challenging to build momentum.

With detailing, the idea is to build a relationship with an individual, build a relationship with a prescriber, or build a relationship with an institution. A lot of it is thinking about how you build momentum in that space. This exercise shows you ways to build it quickly and ways to block momentum by saying “no.”

This fosters an interesting conversation about how to effectively use “no” in things that are incorrect or don't work for you. It isn't an exercise to highlight that you need to say “yes” to everything a prescriber puts forth, but more so understanding that you need to think about the energy you put out there. You can feel bad sometimes when you say “no” during the exercise. I

like when people have almost visceral reactions to some of this stuff - it can allow for really powerful responses, like, "well, that didn't make me feel good" or "I felt like I was being really difficult with this person." The idea is that when you get to a detailing visit, you can think about how you can collaborate effectively.

Anna: Jess, do you have anything to add to that?

Jess: The only thing I would say is that from the detailing point of view, we have to remember what the, "to collaborate" means.

It takes two people to collaborate. When we go visit providers, many, if not almost all of them, have no idea what detailing is in a lot of cases. When we meet with providers we may have never seen before or only met once or twice before, it's still up to us to make sure that providers understand that we want this to be a two-way street.

We don't want to come in and do all of the talking and all of the sharing. This is an exercise that you can use to figure out how to get providers to understand that we need as much coming from them as we do coming from us. You want to go into a visit and say, "you know, these visits are not all about me, they're intended to start conversation between me and you and your practice and your staff" - doing this exercise can help you figure out how to do that effectively.

Anna: If detailers don't have the two of you to lead them through a workshop, how would you suggest they incorporate improv into their detailing practice or into their teams? Jess, I'll hand it to you first to reflect and then throw it to Chirag to wrap up.

Jess: One of the reasons we picked this exercise is because it's one that we think teams can do most effectively, no matter if they're a team of one or a team of 30, like Chirag has out there in Chicago. What you have to do is put it into context of your programmatic environment and think about how you would do this exercise.

If it's just you, you can think about what a provider might say to you that could pull you off script. Then, you could give yourself a couple of opportunities to think about two ways you could react to that.

If it's you and a program manager, you might have your program manager be the provider. You could practice the skill of continuing a conversation and what to do if somebody puts a hard stop on it with a "no", or what to do if somebody says something to you that is just so unbelievably wrong that you have to find a way to keep going, even if you absolutely disagree with them.

This is a good exercise to start with, but there are a lot of great videos out there too. Do a little bit of research and you can surely build on this starting exercise to see how you can use it.

Anna: Chirag, take us home!

Chirag: There's so much unknown. You prepare for the material, but there's always this unknown element of detailing. My biggest takeaway with improv is it's helped me become comfortable with the unknown. Every interaction, even interactions of speaking to people that you've known forever, there's an unknown element to it. We think we know people that we've been with for 20 years, but we don't know the words that they're going to say. Improv has put me in the mindset of anticipating the unknown.

Detailing is, by nature, full of unknowns, especially those early visits where you don't know what you're walking into. You don't know what the individual's day has been like. You don't know how busy the clinic is. There's so much uncertainty with that.

Improv for me is thinking about how I get myself in a state of mind where I'm prepared for the unknown. That's what detailing is at the core. How do we train? How do we prepare? How do we role play? How do we do all these things to be ready to go in whatever direction that's being thrown at us? There's always an element of unknown. Improv for me has been a way to prepare myself for that.

We're already doing it as detailers. You're already doing improv as you're driving to a clinic and you're thinking about how you're going to talk to this prescriber. You're doing the "yes" and "no" while you're preparing for barriers. It's just adding a little bit more context and focused effort to integrate this approach. I feel like everybody's already an improviser - we just haven't accepted that yet.

Anna: Or unlocked that skill! Both new and experienced detailers can continue to work on getting comfortable with the unknown and you and Jess have given us the tools to get started. Thank you both so much for joining us today and we'll talk soon!

Jess: Thanks. It's been super fun!

Chirag: Thanks!