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LIFESTYLE

Alan Alda's Solution to Eroding Trust in Science: More Improv

'M*A*S*H' star's program to help researchers overcome their communication challenges now draws thousands. We sat in on a class.

By Peter Loftus

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Josh Rice, a theater actor, helped run the two-day workshop in May. PETER LOFTUS/WSJ

ALBANY, N.Y.—Neuroscientist Annalisa Scimemi is in her element at her laboratory, where she works with mice and sophisticated instruments to better understand brain cells.

So she was well outside of her comfort zone on this May afternoon when she had to improvise a pitch for a made-up, nonsensical product called a “hammer humidifier.” It was part of an improv exercise aimed at helping scientists amp up their presentations.

“It’s the top-rated humidifier in Arizona!” Scimemi exclaimed as she leapt forward,

earning a big laugh from a classroom full of colleagues. “And it can be used for self-defense!”

Trust in science has plummeted. Can improv turn the tide?

Scimemi is one of more than 35,000 scientists and researchers who have taken classes led by professional actors to help them earn their audiences’ trust and understanding.

It’s the brainchild of Alan Alda, who helped start what is now called the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science at Long Island’s Stony Brook University more than 15 years ago. After his run playing surgeon Hawkeye Pierce on “M*A*S*H,” Alda eventually shifted his focus from acting to science.



Alan Alda auctioned off the boots and dog tags he wore in ‘M*A*S*H’ to help fund the improv program.

CBS PHOTO ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

While hosting “Scientific American Frontiers,” Alda noticed some scientists he interviewed would go into lecture mode when the camera was rolling, but were more engaging in natural conversation. He figured improv could help.

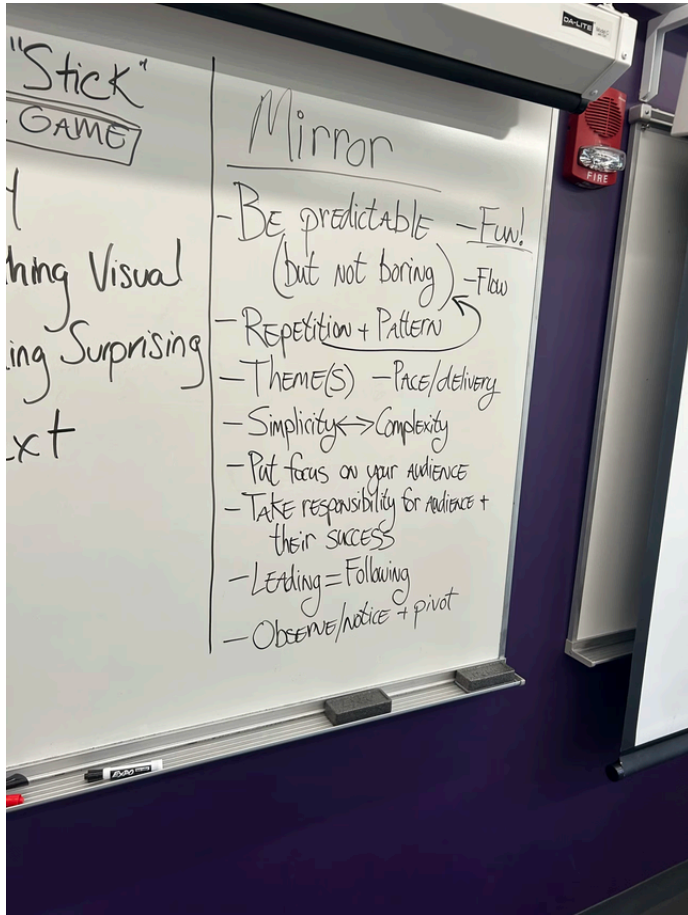
“It’s such a good tool for creating an empathic relationship between people,” he said. He shopped the idea to universities. Stony Brook signed on.

Alda has helped fund the program, including by auctioning off the boots and dog tags he wore on M*A*S*H for \$125,000.

Interest has been rising. There’s usually a monthslong waiting list and instructors travel the world to conduct them, said executive director Laura Lindenfeld.

Clients include Stanford, NASA and drugmaker AstraZeneca.

Josh Rice and Kim Stauffer, theater actors and Stony Brook faculty, ran a two-day workshop at the University at Albany in May.



A whiteboard offers tips for an improv training exercise. PETER LOFTUS/WSJ

what was the point. “What are we going to achieve?” they said. “Trust us,” Rice responded.

They paired up for a fast-counting exercise where partners took turns counting to three as fast as they could, then substituted claps or foot-stamping for numbers. If they messed up, which many did, they had to raise their arms and say “Ta-da!”

The lessons: Be an active listener, and if you make a mistake, move on.

Everyone had to introduce themselves in a circle by stating their hobby and coming up

Their 16 students included professors of atmospheric science, biology, engineering and quantum physics.

The goal, Rice said, was to get them to consider “who is your audience and how do you reach them and make it matter to them, as opposed to what you want to do.”

A core concept of improv is “yes, and,” which means each actor should agree with the improvised dialogue of scene partners and respond in a way that builds on it rather than contradicts or blocks it.

Some students questioned this approach, saying it seemed insincere to say something just to appease someone.

During one exercise, a scientist asked

with a nonverbal gesture to demonstrate it. Melonie Walcott, an HIV researcher, held an imaginary fishing rod and motioned reeling in a catch. The point: People will remember physical gestures and personal details.



The 16 students included professors of atmospheric science, biology, philosophy, engineering and quantum physics.
PETER LOFTUS/WSJ

A “half-life” exercise required students to cut their elevator pitches to one minute, then 30 seconds, then 15. They also paired up for “mirroring,” where one person makes movements that a partner has to mimic. The goal was to get so synchronized that an observer wouldn’t know who was leading. Some doubled over laughing.

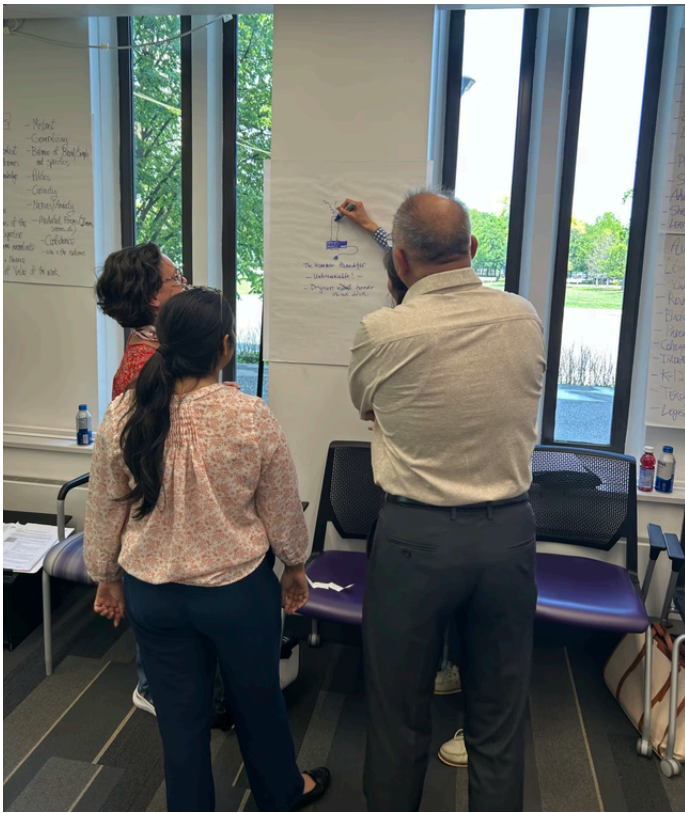
For a time-traveler drill, professors had to pretend to be from the past and a partner had two minutes to explain what a cellphone was. Kendra Smith-Howard, normally immersed in 20th-century environmental history, chose the 1500s.

Her partner, atmospheric-scientist Kristen Corbosiero, explained that humans invented a device to send their voices to anyone in the world “through the air.”

“Like a bird?” Smith-Howard said without missing a beat. The purpose, said Stauffer: “Anyone who is not in your direct line of research is a time traveler.”



Alda says the stakes have gotten higher



Students sketched out a sales pitch for a fictional product called a 'hammer humidifier.' PETER LOFTUS/WSJ

amid growing distrust. “We can’t agree on basic facts that are vital to our health and safety,” he said.

It isn’t clear if the classes are helping. Some 61% of Americans say science has had a mostly positive effect on society, a January poll from Pew Research found, down from 73% in 2019.

Lisa Baranik, who researches chronic pain, says she used to dump her knowledge on people, once even scaring off a yoga instructor by giving unsolicited advice on back pain. She plans to use the “yes, and” concept and keep conversations going even when there’s disagreement.

“Now I talk to more people about chronic pain,” she said, “and if something doesn’t go the way I hoped, I just, quietly to myself, say ‘Ta Da!’”

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Peter Loftus is a reporter for The Wall Street Journal in Philadelphia covering the pharmaceutical and medical-device industries. He has written about Covid-19 vaccines, advances in cancer treatments, drug shortages and the use of mobile devices in healthcare. Peter is the author of “The Messenger: Moderna, the Vaccine, and the Business...

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