

**DELPHI STUDY SUMMARY**  
**APPLIED IMPROVISATION NETWORK, 2014**  
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**What is a Delphi Study?**

A Delphi study is a research method aimed at generating consensus or shared meaning from a group of experts about a particular topic. In a Delphi study the opinions of the experts are sought through multiple rounds of questions, with each round becoming more and more specific. Round one assess the general (broad stroke) understand of a given concept. Subsequent rounds are developed inductively based on the analysis of the responses from participants. Each round of questions works to further refine shared opinions and decrease divergent views.

**AIN's Delphi Study**

In 2014, AIN set out to understand some of the fundamental definitions, principles and practices of applied improvisation. "Experts" were solicited based on meeting three (3) of the following four (4) criteria:

1. Written a book, published an article, conducted extensive research or completed a PhD or Master's thesis explicitly exploring/addressing the topic of Applied Improvisation
2. Presented a minimum of 10 Applied Improvisation trainings in organizational or public contexts, during the past 5 years. These do not include AIN conferences, meetings, or events. They must be at least 1 day in length. AI training for this purpose is any training that includes 'improvisation' explicitly in the title or description, and is not aimed at performance improvisation **OR** conducted AI work as a significant part or all of your work for 5 years. This means you can cite at least 3 client who have hired you to deliver AI work (as defined in the first part of this criterion)
3. Served on AIN Board **OR** participated for a minimum of 5 years as a member of AIN and attended at least 3 world conferences
4. Currently teach at least one AI class per year within a university setting or business school

The call yielded 27 participants, from around the world, who were eligible and willing to participate. The study consisted of 3 rounds of questions. Not all participants participated in every round.

- Round 1: 24 participants
- Round 2: 17 participants
- Round 3: 18 participants

**Results**

The results from the study yielded, 1) a general definition of AI, 2) a description of a non-linear process that AI practitioners tend to use, 3) a list of the most commonly utilized AI elements, and 4) 9 themes about AI work with additional questions that we suggest the AI community continue to contemplate and discuss. These results will be outlined below.

### **Shared Definition of AI:**

The use of principles, tools, practices, skills and mindsets of improvisational theater in non-theatrical settings, that may result in personal development, team building, creativity, innovation, and/or meaning.

### **Non-Linear Process of AI**

- 1) Teaching or demonstration of the skill
- 2) Experiential application by the participants
- 3) A reflection or debriefing that leverages the experience to improve other areas or develop new insights/meanings

### **Top 10 Elements of AI** (in order of the number of respondents to mention these)

- 1) Making your partner look good
- 2) Yes... And
- 3) Atmosphere of play
- 4) Curious listening
- 5) Complete acceptance
- 6) Flexibility/Spontaneity
- 7) Focus on the here and now
- 8) Risk taking
- 9) Personal awareness/mindfulness
- 10) Balance of freedom and structure

### **General Themes and Additional Questions**

- 1) **Implicit vs. Explicit:** Two-thirds of participants agreed with the following statement about how you describe the use of improvisation in their work:
  - *“Implicit when you talk about your facilitation style and methods or when considering the underlying principles of what you are doing. Explicit when specifically asked about what you do when clients come to you specifically for AI or in marketing efforts.”*
    - **Questions to consider:**
      - Are we trying to legitimize AI or not? Or are we on more of a stealth mission?
      - Should we be deliberate about naming what we are doing? Why or why not?
      - What are the benefits and challenges of naming AI openly?
- 2) **AI Mindset:** Nearly unanimous support that the following components captured what an AI mindset is.
  - Integrating the principles into your own daily life
  - Making sure to stay in the moment during work with clients

- Holding a stance of complete acceptance and support—The word *complete* was challenged by some
  - Balancing structure with flexibility
  - Take Risks/Be willing to experiment
    - **Questions to consider:**
      - Are there other things necessary for an AI mindset?
      - Is an AI mindset critical for good AI work? Why or Why not?
- 3) **Safety and/or Comfort:** Many agreed that safety was important, but some mentioned this was not the case. It was clear that safety and comfort were seen as two different concepts.
- Some suggestions for increasing safety included
    - 1) Be explicit about the process of the session,
    - 2) Trust the participants
    - 3) Activities should move from low risk to higher risk
    - **Questions to consider:**
      - Are there other, important ways to build safety?
      - How do you know when things are safe and when they're not?
- 4) **Planning/Structure vs. Freedom:** Nearly unanimous agreement with the following statement developed from participants' responses: *"It seems that planning and structure come before the actual meeting with clients and is the responsibility of the facilitator to design a program that will help meet the clients' needs, while freedom comes during the actual work with clients and may mean that the previously developed plan is altered or abandoned based on the clients who are present and what they are telling you they need in the moment."*
- **Question to consider:**
    - Are there ways to enhance our understanding and practice of the balance between structure and freedom?
- 5) **Level of Experience:** *Completely unanimous results*—Level of experience makes a significant difference especially when balancing freedom with planning and structure.
- **Questions to consider:**
    - How do we help people get experience or evaluate where people are in this process of gaining experience?
    - Do we need to help people or evaluate progress in gaining experience?
- 6) **Goal Achievement:** Great discrepancy of responses
- Generally agree that goals should be negotiated overtly with clients before the work begins.

- Goal achievement is assessed by seeking direct feedback from participants or can be assessed informally by the facilitator
  - A couple of people mentioned that they never talk about goals
    - **Question to consider:**
      - Are there particularly useful ways to work with goals of AI activities that still allow for freedom, spontaneity and the AI mindset?
- 7) **Surprise and Discovery:** Vast majority responded that insight/discovery came during the debriefs and reflection periods, while surprise often came during the experiential component. With the exception of one participant, all participants mentioned that surprise was not a required component of AI.
- **Question to consider:**
    - Other than debrief and reflection, are there other ways to enhance the discovery and insight component of AI work?
- 8) **FUN:** Fun came up multiple times and many participants mentioned that this was a central component of the AI process. However other disagreed and commented that fun was a byproduct of the AI process, but not a requirement of AI.
- 10 participants agreed that fun was a necessary component of AI as well as a byproduct
  - 7 participants thought that fun was merely a byproduct but not a necessary component of the process
  - 1 participant stated that fun was not necessary at all
    - **Question to consider:**
      - Should we talk about fun? How and when?
- 9) **Should AI be distinct from other forms of improv?**
- Nearly three-fourths of participants agreed that a distinction between AI and other improv was necessary.
  - *Five participants overtly stated that this kind of distinction was not necessary or important.*

## Conclusion

This study brought some consensus around a definition, topics within AI, and the AI process. However, there is some disagreement with the AI community around how to balance structure and flexibility, if safety is necessary, if AI should be standardized or regulated in any way and even if AI should be distinguished from other forms of improv. We are hopeful this study will propel the community forward towards greater consensus, and will encourage more meaningful conversations about areas of disagreement.

