

Get Your Students to Improvise!

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Premise/Foundational Beliefs

- Everyone CAN and DOES improvise—every day in conversation, decision-making, moving/walking, etc. It is a natural part of being human.
- Our job as educators is to create a safe climate for kids to experiment, explore and create. Much like learning to speak English, unconventional choices are critical to the learning process. We need to make it OK to try things.
- The best educational activities are often MESSY (in our case, loud or slightly chaotic). Get comfortable with this!

Introductions

The Research

Few if any of the ideas we will share with you today are "original". Many were found in articles by jazz educators on the topic of "how to get beginners to improvise." Most of the ideas seem to fall into two major categories: conceptual (idea-based) and technical (theory-based). Since different approaches work for different students and there is no tried-and-true sequential method for learning to improvise ("improvisation curriculum" is an oxymoron), we like to hit students with a range of concepts. Those who decide to get serious about it will dig deeper into theory—but theory is rarely what "hooks" kids on jazz improvisation and should be introduced in small doses at first. This session will focus primarily on conceptual approaches to improvisation.

Where to Begin? Start with activities that are fun, engaging and relevant for your students. Meet them at their level and choose a lesson that will allow everyone to be successful, then build on that success. Choose an activity that will enhance soloing success on a particular concert/contest selection. Or take Tony Garcia's advice (Director of Jazz Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University): Build your curriculum around the things that ANNOY you in students' solos! Whatever you do, just be sure to do SOMETHING.

Conceptual Approaches to Improvisation

Play by Number! Start Them Young

Starting during the first weeks of Beginner Band, refer to notes in the B-flat scale as numbers (scale degrees). Huge time-saver-- avoids having to transpose notes (Clarinets & trumpets play C, alto saxes play G, flutes, trombones, percussion play B-flat, etc.).

Gradually introduce simple to more complex melodies by number. Great way to add relevance to your curriculum-- POP music! Mix it up—have them learn some by providing only the first note; others could be written in numbers on the board as "mystery melodies". Make sure that ear training is a component; don't be too quick to give away the answer.

Examples: Another One Bites the Dust 2 2 2... 2 2 4 2 5; We Will Rock You 4 3 2 1 2 2;
Firework 5 4 3 2 2—1 3; Seven Nation Army 3 3 5 3 2 1—low 7—; Uptown Funk 2... 2 5 4 2 5
4 1 2; Happy Birthday 5 5 6 5 8 7, 5 5 6 5 9 8, etc.

This lays the foundation for music theory (chord/scale spelling) and transposition (moveable "do"). By 2nd year of playing, we are applying the numbers to several different key centers.

Activities to Remove Inhibitions, Spark Creativity

These activities could be used to start any rehearsal (jazz OR concert band).

- **Gibberish talk/play game** (partners)
1) Carry on a fairly normal conversation; 2) On cue, change to complete nonsense/gibberish; 3) On second cue, return to normal conversation.
Repeat all three steps, this time using your instrument. Note: LOUD is not the goal.
- **Funny face/funny sound contest** (partners)
Goal: make your partner laugh! What better way to loosen up for rehearsal?
- **Play the Face** (partners)
One player makes a strange face, while the other tries to capture it through music. Switch! See if you can embody the implied "mood" using sounds.
- **Name Game** (circle up)
1) Establish a groove, e.g. stomp, snap, clap, snap OR use a medium swing backing track; 2) around the circle, each person says his/her name in rhythm (extremely important) and others must repeat it; 3) next time around the circle, each person claps the rhythm of his/her name; 4) next time around, each plays his/her name rhythm on the instrument. Variations: ice cream flavors, hobbies, words that sound fun in a swing feel, etc. Words become rhythms!
- **Drum circle games**—each student adds a new ostinato that is simple & complementary; take turns soloing once the full texture is established. Provide a signal to be used for ending the piece. When things aren't working well, stop, discuss it and try again. Sample questions: Was anyone playing louder than others? Were there any rhythms that were too "busy" and covered others up? Could everyone hear the soloist? Did your ostinato stay in the "groove" at all times? Did your ostinato complement the music that was already taking place?
- **Movie Trailer**
Four or five players per group. Write scenarios/movie titles on index cards. Each group is given a card and has 5 minutes to prepare a short movie trailer with music (optional narration). Perform for the class and have everyone try to guess the movie title. Examples: Bambi Meets Godzilla; Attach of the Radioactive Monkeys; Pokemon Go: The End of Civilized Culture; He Man and Barbi: A Love Story.
This game is *hilarious*, and helps develop musical creativity and teamwork.
- **Radio Commercial**
Four or five players per group. Write the names of made-up products on index cards. Each group is given a card and has 5 minutes to prepare a short commercial with music and narration. Perform for the class and have everyone vote for the best commercial (for a silly prize). Examples: Powdered Water! (Just Add Water); Death Star Lego Set; Bacon-Flavored Oreos; Toothpaste for Cats.
Similar purpose to Movie Trailer—kids LOVE this game. Be sure to record video!

- **One-note copycat, One-note soloing** (teacher calls & students repeat); students play one-note solos focusing on rhythm as the variable; gradually increase note choices (copycat, group improv, trading)

Activities that Emphasize Artistic Freedom

- **Drone improvisation** Use “cello drones” on iTunes or youtube. Provide a few note choices (see “**Cool Scales**”); start in groups; teacher demonstrates, then asks for volunteers to take a 5-10 second solo.
- **Free improvisation** Put random images (modern art, etc.) on the screen. Ask students to play whatever comes to mind. Goal: sense of artistic freedom or license to create without limits or boundaries. Use any sounds at your disposal. Option: use a drone.

Activities that Build Ensemble/Arranging Skills

- **Guess the Machine** (Depiction Game)
Break into groups of 4 or 5 students. Give each group a card with the name of a machine on it (e.g. electric pencil sharpener, rocket ship, sports car, clock, toaster, espresso machine, tractor, Mars rover, photocopier, etc.). Groups have 5 minutes to come up with sounds that depict their machine (band instruments, vocal effects, “found sounds”—anything except spoken words/lyrics). “Perform” for the class—others must guess the machine.

Follow-up questions: What did you like about this game? What was the purpose? Did any leaders emerge? Did you know that you are allowed to “mess around” with music in this way? Can you picture yourself creating music for other situations?

- **Riff Game**
1) Player 1 plays a catchy blues/funk riff; 2) Player 2 adds a complementary part; 3) Player 3 adds a bass line; 4) Player 4 adds a rhythmic drone; 5) Player 5 adds rhythmic accompaniment; 6) Players take turns soloing; 7) Try again, switching roles.
This game is great for teaching students the art and “etiquette” of jamming with other people.

Concepts & Activities for Developing Jazz “Instincts”/ Vocabulary

- **Breathing/Posture** Find your “center.” Breathe deeply. Use strong posture.
- **Jazz Articulation/Style** (see “**Common Swing Rhythms**”) Take time to demonstrate & have students repeat various rhythmic figures; memorize a few basic “truisms” for correct swing style.
- **Syncopate or “Rag” a Melody** (see handout) Memorize a simple melody (Second Line/ Joe Avery’s Blues, When the Saints, a folk song); syncopate the melody in a swing feel--making it your own. Later apply the same concept to jazz standards. The melody becomes your solo.
- **Timbrel effects & ornamentation** The lost tools of modern jazz; a way to add personality to your playing. Flutter tongue, vibrato, bend, scoop, fall, glissando, growl, mordent, turn, trill, grace note, shake, doit, bisbigliando (false fingerings).

- **Intensity Techniques** Consider ways of grabbing the audience's attention! Examples: playing in the high register, fast notes (double time), extreme range/dynamic contrasts, repeating a simple motive, one-note rhythmic soloing, playing a sustained note, using dissonance or doing something "unpredictable."
- **Compositional Techniques** (see handout). Create a 3-4 note idea, then develop it in the style of Miles Davis. Craft ideas out of a simple motive, using melodic and/or rhythmic variations. A concept taught by David Baker.
- **Transcribe Yourself** Loop a 4-bar chord cycle, sing ideas that come to mind, record your voice doing it, then try to figure out how to play those ideas on your instrument. This can often lead to some of the best ideas, as it removes mechanical constraints.
- **Group Transcription Project** Pick out a relatively simple head melody and solo (e.g. Miles Davis on a blues chart) and have the entire class learn to SING and PLAY it. Writing it down is less important, but an option. Consider making it a contest, video recording each student singing or playing along with the original track (prizes). Use accuracy, time feel and soulfulness as judging criteria. We recently held a Scat Singing Competition for both middle and high school students using Jackie McLean's "Greasy" head & first two solo choruses.
- **Play/Rest Concept** On a familiar progression (blues, etc.), designate specific measures NOT to play-- ask students to solo and leave space in those spots. Reinforces the concept of phrasing (taking breaths) and internalizes the form.
- **Solo Composition Project** Ask students to create and write out a one-chorus solo for a specified chart. Examples: rhythm changes, There Will Never Be Another You, Autumn Leaves, a blues chart, etc.
 - 1) Students must memorize and be able to sing and play the melody from start to finish.
 - 2) Ask students to analyze the chords and write out chord tones on staff paper.
 - 3) Ask them to play arpeggios, ascending & descending, according to Rob Tapper's "Learning a Tune" steps.
 - 4) Alternate between arpeggios and scales to create smooth, arch-shaped lines.
 - 5) Sing/play your own ideas over iReal Pro loops (small chunks at a time).

Use a solo critique sheet (see handout) to evaluate/assess the quality of the solo. Mark "X" on the sheet in any bar where the student's ideas do not make sense with the chord progression so they can go back & make edits. Then give specific written & spoken feedback. Allow classmates to give **positive comments only** (compliments) based on specific criteria (did the solo include repetition? Phrases? An intensity technique? etc.).
- Emphasize **LISTENING** to the great players-- do not try to learn the language of jazz in a vacuum. Students who actually listen to great jazz recordings SOUND more authentic and develop much faster than students who don't. Make this a weekly expectation.
- **Jazz Heroes Project** Ask each student to research a great player on his/her instrument, then give a 5-10 minute presentation about the player's career, famous tunes/recordings/ collaborations, wrapping it up with a great sample YouTube video highlighting a representative work. Exposes students to major figures in jazz.

Concepts & Activities for Mastering the 12-Bar Blues Form

- **I IV V Basic Blues** with a long ii-V turnaround
Everyone sings the chord numbers, then plays them. Do this repetitiously so they memorize the form, the progression and the way it sounds. Be creative—"Raise your hand when you hear the turnaround," etc.
- **12 Bar Blues Warm-Ups** (see handout)
Teach two chord formulas: Dominant 7th chord and minor 7th chord.
Arpeggiate chords of a basic I IV V blues (1 3 5 7b7). Play, sing the numbers, etc. Switch the order of scale degrees (b7 5 3 1, 5 3 b7, etc.). Eventually have the kids try creating solos using arpeggios & their own rhythm choices.
- **Blues scale** Provide scale degrees – 1 b3 4 b5 5 b7 8.
Not the first thing to teach, nor the only thing-- but it has a place. Introduce it by ear then relate to scale degree numbers, then do lots of call & repeat, group improvisation and experimentation w/backing tracks, then trading 2's. Point out that the note "4" is not a great note to stay on for very long. Mess around with (bend) the blue notes. Let kids experiment with how "gritty" that sounds.
- **Blues Duets** LISTEN, INCORPORATE, COMPLEMENT
First Challenge:
1) Partner Up, trade 2's twice over the first 8 bars; 2) Play simultaneously during the 4 bar turnaround. Teacher provides visual cues: count aloud & use hand gestures to show 2 bar segments, make "lasso" motion to show the 4 bar turnaround. Start out with the entire class doing this at once (safety in numbers) over a fairly loud backing track.
Second Challenge: Ask the students to really "LISTEN to your partners' ideas and try to INCORPORATE some of those into your own short solos while you trade 2's."
Demonstrate, give examples. "Ready, GO!" 2-3 choruses.
Final Challenge: "This time, I want you to continue to LISTEN and INCORPORATE, with one added challenge. I want your playing during the 4-bar turnaround to COMPLEMENT your partner's playing. For example, if your partner is playing something busy in the upper register, you might play longer notes or leave more space in the lower register. The goal is to sound GREAT together! Ready, GO!" 3-4 choruses.
- **Blues QQA phrases** (see handout)
Phrasing in this way forces you to 1) think about what you are playing (must memorize the first idea), 2) internalize the blues form and 3) think in musical phrases with breaks in between. Start by referring to blues songs with lyrics that follow this model (Bessie Smith, Robert Johnson, etc.). Have kids write a blues song; sing their lyrics for the class over a backing track OR accompany on piano/guitar (FUN, creative activity).
- **Long ii - V turnarounds** (see handout). Introduce the concept of playing a melodic line that connects these chords on the "Answer" phrase in a 12-bar blues. Provide some commonly used melodic phrases that they can "plug in". Try them out over a 4-bar

backing track or use your rhythm section to play **ii V I I OR ii V I V**. Great way to reinforce/continue to internalize "where" the turnaround occurs. Gateway to more sophisticated soloing.

- **Bass Basics** (Rob Tapper)
Use dowels or yard sticks to teach the basic left hand position on a bass guitar. Teach students how to locate the "root" notes for a basic I IV V blues in B-flat, "playing" 4 quarter notes per bar. Students take turns transferring that knowledge to the actual bass guitar.
- **Bass Line Project & Blues Duets**
Every student must write out a 12-bar blues bass line using set criteria (place chord tones on Beats 1 & 3, passing tones on beats 2 & 4, etc.). Provide examples so they can hear what an effective bass line sounds like. Have them perform their own bass lines for the class and turn in the written work for feedback. In performance, choose a moment on a blues chart for the rhythm section to drop out and highlight a blues duet (e.g. alto sax & trumpet). One player provides his/her bass line while the other solos, then switch roles.
- **Drumset Swing Basics** (Rob Tapper)
Students sit in a row of chairs with another row of chairs facing them. Everyone gets a pair of drum sticks. Teach a basic swing pattern using the seat as snare drum, top of chair as ride cymbal, foot stomps for kick & hi-hat. Be sure to connect the role of the ride cymbal (right hand) with the role of the bass (right hand) in providing continuous legato quarter notes.
- **3rd-to-7th Interchange** (see handout). Review the formulas for dominant & minor 7th chords. Starting on the 3rd of the "I" chord, show them how to navigate through the entire progression while highlighting the basic guide tones (3 resolves to b7, b7 resolves to 3, etc.). Point out how these tones "pull" into the next. Improvise solos (group, small groups) using this concept.
- **3rd/7th Two-Note Chord Voicings** (Guide Tones)
Use mallet instruments and/or keyboards. Have every student take a turn playing a 12-bar blues progression using these simple 2-note voicings on a Charleston rhythm (Doo-dit). The goal is to get their ears wrapped around the basic voice leading/guide tones.

Basic Blues Progression:

I IV I I IV IV I I ii V I V

Play these stacked intervals for a blues in B-flat:

D Db D D Db Db D D Eb Eb D Eb
Ab G Ab Ab G G Ab Ab Bb A Ab A

- **Blues Role Playing**
Once every student can demonstrate the above skills, have them rotate between the following "Stations": bass line (bass guitar?), drum set, keyboards/mallets, backgrounds, improvised solos. Everyone learns each role.

Intended Outcomes:

Students will have the 12-bar blues-- including the chord progression, arpeggios, rhythm section roles, phrase structure and guide tones-- SO deeply ingrained in their minds that the learning becomes permanent. Solos will sound more thoughtful and intelligent, with more chord interaction. Students will no longer get lost in the form and start/end solos at incorrect times. Ideally, students will be able to HEAR, understand and memorize the 12-bar blues structure.

Jazz Theory 101

Erica von Kleist

This is some basic information on jazz theory that can be taught to your students by ear. You can work on one concept at a time as a band warm-up or as a full class or class series. This knowledge can be applied to much of the chords you and your students will encounter in jazz band music.

Basic Chord Theory

- The importance of knowing all 12 major scales when studying chord harmony
- Chord "formulas" (SPELL, SING, PLAY)
- Major 7th chords (1 3 5 7)
- Dominant 7th chords (1 3 5 b7)
- Minor 7th chords (1 b3 5 b7)

Joe Avery's Blues (Second Line)

- Basic I IV I Blues form, easy to teach and to learn by ear

Improvising based on chord tones

- The importance of the 3 and the b7
- Chromatic "approach" tones
- Bebop Scale (lines chord tones up on downbeats and adds a chromatic)

Other scales...

- The Blues Scale (to be used sparingly. NOT a cure-all)
- The dorian minor scale (Flat the 3 and the 7 of a major scale, can be used over minor tunes)
- The dominant 7th scale (Flat the 7 of a major scale. Good over bluesey tunes)
- The "Bluesey" Scale (1 2 b3 3 5 6 1. Also good over bluesey tunes)

Circle of 4ths and 5ths

- Jazz and western harmony is cyclical. The circle of 4ths is crucial.
- iimi V7 I progressions. Where do they come from and how do they function?
- Some basic "licks" to play over cyclical progressions

More Activities to Introduce Basic Theory Concepts

- **Sad Times** Take a common folk song in a major key and ask students to adjust pitches so it is in minor. Good way to reinforce the differences between major and minor scales.
- **"Start Seeing ii-V's"** (more advanced): Explain how to spot a ii-V and a ii-V-I. Movement in ascending 4ths; a minor 7th chord followed by a dominant chord. Have students "bracket" any ii-V's they see in a given chord progression. Then provide a simple background loop using iReal Pro and have them sing/play/write melodic ideas that "fit" in

that key center (the major scale that corresponds with the "I" chord). This can demystify intimidating chord progressions (see Tony Garcia's "Cutting the Changes").

- **Chord "Spelling Bee"** Buy some dollar store prizes and hold a spelling bee (20-minute activity). Kids must "spell" a chord by naming the notes out loud, then playing the arpeggio or chord. Eliminated when they make an error, but have them continue to take notes/write each chord down as the game continues.

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