

teach through music

MAKING MUSIC IN THE MOMENT

Led by Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance

A course on improvisation for the classroom, building confidence in teachers and exploring pedagogy, progression and assessment. This short course explored the development of musical skills, through improvisation through years 7 to 9. Expect lots of practical experience, a 'toolkit' for facilitating improvisation in a range of musical styles, and opportunities to discuss issues of curriculum planning and delivery.

Course Leaders: Jackie Walduck & Sue Stephens

Teaching Improv at KS3 – the key questions...

1. Where do you use Improvisation?
2. Where could you use it?
3. What are the challenges in your environment?

Starting strategies *Left* column refers to musical knowledge and ideas (e.g. a particular pitch or set of pitches, rhythm, timbre) and *right* column refers to improvisation strategies (copy, contrast, answer etc)

Timbre	Not the same
Pitched	Opposites
Unpitched	Answering contrast – balance
Rhythm	The beat – grounding
Energy	
Movement	Keeping it manageable
Library	

Try one activity in class this week that involves improvisation. Could be a warm-up. Could be a more extended activity. Could be the start of a composing activity. Could be one you have done before. Could be something new.

Reflect on the experiment: How did your students respond? Where did it fit in your lesson plan? What development (progression) did you see e.g. by trying the same activity twice?

Leading Improvisation and Questioning/Moving on

Two Exercises - positive and negative rhythms, and extended exercise on leading improvisation from pulses to rhythms

NB. These are follow-up notes from the session held on 14th Jan 2015.

Exercise: Positive and Negative rhythms

Aim: To focus listening on space around the sounds in a riff.

This exercise is a great precursor to any riff-building task, as it feeds in the idea of listening for space, and placing your idea gracefully against other ideas in a layered riff texture.

- Setting up the exercise.
- Stand in a circle.
- Clap a rhythm that uses quavers and rests (notes and spaces) within a 4/4 time frame.

E.g. X X X O O X O X (where X = clap and O = a space)

Clap this repeatedly, accenting the first beat.

- Have the rest of the class clap in the gaps so that each space in the pattern is filled. If someone stood outside the door it would sound like this X X X X X X X

The group should end up clapping in your gaps like this: O O O X X O X O

A good one to practice and have 3 or 4 goes at. You could have the class work as 2 teams, team 1 decides on a rhythm (as a group) and claps it, the others work as a team and can help each other to find the “negative” of this rhythm. This would also work in smaller groups.

This also works in other time signatures (but is harder, as we know!!!)

Exercise: Pulses-meter-riffs

Aim: To have everyone in the class move from copying a pulse, to feeling a meter, to creating their own pattern, to working as a group to create a riff texture. It's an extended activity (20 mins-around 45min), and once the group gets the hang of it, could be replicable in smaller groups, with a strong leader in each group.

This exercise

- Uses what pupils know (doesn't necessarily feed in new ways of approaching rhythm, or new styles)
- Works well with whole class as well as groups of about 8.
- Encourages peer feedback in ways that builds self-confidence
- Encourages peer learning through copying, appraisal, and teamwork.
- Can work on unpitched percussion and/or any pitched instruments. If using pitch. Limit to 3 or 4 pitches.

How to set up the exercise:

- Stand/sit in a circle

- Have everyone play a pulse in unison.
- Get them to copy you in counting 8's with the pulse, to establish a meter.. Then accent the 1's.
- Play just the 1's and leave the other 7 beats blank, (but still count).
- Stop all together.
- Set up the continuous pulse again with accent on the 1's. Whilst doing this, call out: In your own time find a pattern that fits with the 8 beat cycle – GO!
- Go back to the pulse (especially if the pulse gets wobbly)
- Have another go.
- Everyone should now be playing their own pattern, or possibly copying someone else's pattern. You can now start to “work” the material!

I usually do this first, without saying anything...

Teacher-led interventions (it helps to stand in the centre of the circle and listen to what sounds genuinely good):

- stopping and starting different people, so that you can hear different individual patterns. Start with a confident member of the class who will be OK to continue playing when everyone else stops. Bring everyone else back in after “5-6-7-8” or build up the patterns one at a time. If anyone forgets their pattern it doesn't matter! Make up another, or copy someone else's.
- Stopping everyone except 1 person, and getting everyone else to copy that person. Then go back to their own.
- Hearing 2 patterns that sound good together, then everyone choosing which of the 2 patterns to follow,
- supporting anyone struggling to keep a pulse/riff/pattern – get them to do something simple like the first accented beat, or copy the person next to them.
- Sometimes things don't work because they are too complicated – a good strategy is to get someone to just play the first few notes of their rhythm/pattern.

At this stage, you should aim to have everyone joining in with confidence – i.e. knowing what they are doing.

Pupil-led interventions:

Ask: What works? (what's good about our improvisation?) What isn't working? How could we change that?

For **KS3**, you may need feeder questions such as:

- Are we all following the beat? It's hard to do this with a big group. Which instrument is playing a beat that is easier to follow?
- Can you hear everyone's pattern? Who can't you hear? What can we do as a group about this?
- Are there enough ideas? Too many?

Pick out 2 patterns and hear together (i.e. underline 2 patterns that sound good together). Ask the class if they would like to hear any others?

Q for more able musicians: why do some patterns sound good together? (eg variety, mix of long-short, mix of timbres, counterpoint, conversation).

Set up exercise again (or riff patterns). Take on board the group's feedback (and articulate how you are doing this – “David suggested we all play quietly so we can hear the xylophone, so let's halve the volume”) to achieve a better version.

Extension activities:

- 4-bar turnarounds with solos in break

This technique, an introduction to jamming, can generate fantastic group textures, which could be the basis of a more extended composition.

Reflection questions:

1. What strategies are there for intervention/progression that build peer feedback and confidence? (as introduced in the exercise above, hopefully!)
2. What kind of questions do you ask so that students come up with answers?
3. What is the role of a music teacher in this exercise? How much artistic influence can you/should you input?

From Improvisation to composition – structuring ideas.

Once you have a great riff going, what next? Supposing you want to develop this into a longer composition, to make it part of something bigger?

Here's the “Lego” method!

Warm-ups (These were some great warm-ups led by different people in the group, all to get us in the zone and ready to work, but not as a direct precursor to the Lego theme).

Sharing of vocal warm-ups, including breathing, singing phrases up the scale, tongue twisters over backing as a call-and-response, changing the rhythm; telephone blues song.

And this one ... it covers many bases including breathing, diaphragm, lengthening vocal chords, exercising muscles around the mouth. It can be introduced as a magic spell.

To a pulse, do as a call-and response first of all, then see if the class can follow you:

S – F – K – T S – F- K –T

Sh – sh – sh – sh (*turn to your left*)

Ss –ss – ss –ss (*turn to your right*)

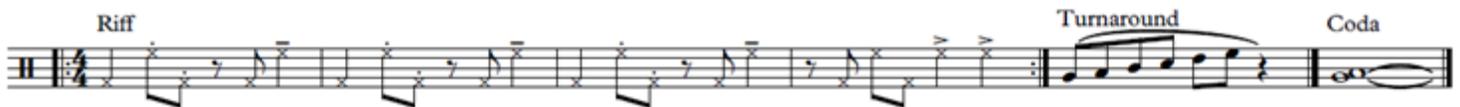
Ft Ft (*throw handfuls of herbs into the pot in the middle*)

Ft Ft

h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h- (fast panting - you eat a hot chestnut)
 OOOOOOOOOOOOOOoooooo (Glissando up and down - spit out the chestnut)
 Mmmmmmm (yum! Look at the steaming pile of chestnuts)
 Bleagh (remember they are covered in everyone's spit - and the bleagh is an excuse to stick out your tongue as far as possible i.e. stretch!)

The **Lego approach** to composition for improvising ensemble: **Riff - turnaround - coda**

Riff-Turnaround-Coda



1. Use these units as building blocks to create a structure. Experiment with the order and number of repetitions. The turnaround can be repeated.
2. The score may be realised vocally, pitched or beatboxed, on untuned percussion or using instruments.
3. Try using as a backbone score - one voice or instrument realises the given line and other layers are improvised.

- Learn Riff (on sheet) aurally as vocal percussion (eg 'N' bass sound for low note and 'Ts' for higher note).
- Learn turnaround as a shaped but not precisely pitched tom tom type sound (dum dum dum dum dum)
- Learn coda as a soft hum on any note.

Think of the riff, the turnaround and the coda as different sized blocks of Lego.

Put together as a structure, keeping the vocal sounds - however you like eg: Riff riff turnaround riff riff coda. *It helps to write the structure on a flip chart/white board so everyone can see it.*

You can play with these blocks *because they all have a really strongly defined function.*

You could also **orchestrate** different versions -

- on unpitched percussion (differentiate between high and low and find a good way to do the six rising tones of the turnaround, as well as the sustained coda. All good unpitched percussion challenges).
- On pitched instruments, define a mode (2, 3 or 4 notes)

This can be done as a whole class, but might be better in smaller groups.

Backboning is a method in composing for improvised ensemble in which one part is worked out (the backbone) and others are added through improvisation.

There is a definite method for fleshing out a backbone.

- Work in sections (riff or turnaround or coda – one section at a time).
- Listen to the backbone.
- Try out ideas - cycle the riff and add parts one by one. It may help to define a harmony (mode!) and a feeling or image.
- Refine ideas – simplify, make changes, alter the balance, generally apply the leading tools from session 3.
- When you are happy with the Riff section, move onto the next section and repeat the process of listen-try-refine.
- When all the sections have been worked, join them up and play as a realised structure (this is challenging and may take a few goes)

Different kinds of building blocks:

You could use any of these listed below in structuring a class composition – eg you have a great riff, but could add a drone section for the introduction, then a unison break at the end.

Remember: The blocks work because their functions are clear.

Building blocks (on which to build your improvisation)	What's a good one?	What not to do:
Riff	Short, repetitive, leaves space, rhythmic	Change it – keep it constant.
Turnaround	Direction – propels to end of bar to re-start the riff; short, not repetitive	Hard to get this wrong!
Coda	Short. Unlike what has gone before	Overcomplicate, or repeat earlier material

“B” riff	Contrast – different harmony, shape, rhythm, mood	Make it like you're “A” riff. Make it completely unrelated.
Drone	Quiet continuous sound or note	Move it around, put gaps in
Texture	Homogenous, lots of people doing the same thing	
Break/unison	Strong rhythm	Compromise in any way – everyone plays this together.
Head (tune)	(there's a good question ...) Can be long or short – longer than a riff (eg 2 bars plus)	

Rhythmic improvisation and progression

Progression in improvisation, see as a frame of reference for coaching improvisation.

Beginner	More experienced	Advanced
On-beat	Faster notes, tempi	More daring use of silence
Simple rhythms	More division (i.e. semi quavers etc)	Cross rhythms
Repetitive	Tuplets	Polyrhythms
Longer notes	rests	Irregular meter/rhythm/changing meter
Small range of notes – eg crotchets and quavers	Accents	Additive rhythms
	Begins to use a wider range of note values	Range of tuplets
	Syncopation	Mixes tuplets, ties, additive rhythms

What we might expect a student to be able to do *rhythmically* at various stages of improvisation experience:

Rhythmic improvisation “studies”. These are studies for individuals wanting to develop their improvising. Some *may* be appropriate for classroom use with more able students.

For the following use a backing track OR click/metronome.

On untuned percussion or body percussion, then on an instrument (pick a 4 note mode...)

- Play for exactly 1 bar: start on the downbeat and stop at the END of the bar. Rest for a bar. Repeat: bar on, bar off.
- Start on any other beat than the downbeat. Finish at the end of the bar. Rest for a bar. Repeat the pattern. Experiment with different starting places.
- Start in bar 1 - play to LAND on the first beat of bar 2 – rest for the rest of bar 2. Repeat the pattern. Experiment with different starting places.
- Play for a bar. Rest for a bar. Play for a bar. Rest for a bar. Play for 4 bars. Rest for a bar. Repeat the pattern. Experiment with phrase lengths in the 4 bars.
- Try the above in different meters (5/4, 7/8 etc).

Table showing elements of *melodic progression* from beginner to pro! What we might expect melodically from improvisers as they make progress:

Beginner	More experienced	Advanced
Use 1 or more pitches (say up to 4) Begins to explore different octaves	Use a range of pitches – eg a mode in different octaves	Uses extremes of pitch when affected
	Begins to explore “blue” notes. May begin to explore tension	Controlled use of dissonance (including tension/resolution)

	and resolution within a mode or by using “blue” notes.	
Some differentiation between “solo” and “background”	Begins to explore more than 1 tone or colour	Explores a range of tones/instrumental colours/extended techniques
Uses very short motifs	Motivic development Uses longer more complex motifs	Motivic development becomes extended and more complex (might develop in different ways simultaneously)
Begins to express mood or image	Focus on expressive qualities of intervals or notes within a mode	Clear choice of pitch to express mood/image, ability to hold this image across a wider range of notes
	Evokes mood or image or atmosphere	Evokes one or more moods. Expressive use of intervals, consonance and dissonance,
Able to find an end to solo	Controls endings of solos, begins to develop ways of “winding down” and “building up”.	Able to build structure, climax, wind-down through use of pitch, rhythm, colour, tessitura etc. over extended periods.

Use as a reference for coaching and identifying steps for further development.