

# Using Jazz Improvisation Concepts in Your Classroom

Miles Brown and Jenine Brown

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# Introductions

- Miles Brown
- Jenine Brown
- Elise Eden (bass)
- Renee Kuczeski (drums)

# Today's workshop:

## Literature review

- (11-11:10am)

## Demonstration of improv activities: What is jazz improvisation?

- (11:10-11:40am)

## Breakout group work: How you can you use improv activities in your classroom?

- (11:40am-12pm)

## Discussion

- (12-12:15pm)

- Improvisation (making things up on the spot) is essential to both comedic theater and also jazz.
- What are the benefits of asking to students to participate in improvisation exercises?
  - No literature on applying jazz improv concepts in the non-music classroom.
  - However, there is some literature on applying comedic theater in the classroom...

# Literature Review:

## Comedic Theater Improvisation

- Timpson (2002): Comedic theater improvisation can be used to overcome constraints on creativity and effective learning, such as...
  - Insistence on the “right” answer
  - A preoccupation with what is assumed to be logical
  - A conforming impulse to follow the rules
  - The pressure to stay on task
  - The avoidance of ambiguity
  - The fear of making mistakes
  - **The assumption by many that they lack innate creativity (and it cannot be learned)**

# Literature Review: Comedic Theater Improvisation

- Improvisation games can be used in order to promote:
  - Intuition
  - Spontaneity
  - Interactivity
  - Inductive discovery
  - Attentive listening/learning
  - Role playing
  - Risk taking
  - Team building
  - Creativity
  - Critical thinking

# Literature Review:

## Comedic Theater Improvisation

- Berk & Trieber (2009): Improvisation in the classroom is well-suited because...
  - Improvisation fits Generation Z's characteristics:
    - They learn by inductive discovery (*doing* rather than *being told* what to do)
    - They crave social face-to-face interactions
    - They are emotionally open
    - They respond quickly and expect rapid responses in return
    - They shift attention rapidly from one task to another

# Literature Review: Comedic Theater Improvisation

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  - Improvisation taps into students' multiple and emotional intelligences.

# Literature Review: Comedic Theater Improvisation

- Berk & Trieber (2009): Improvisation in the classroom is well-suited because...
  - Improvisation fits Generation Z's characteristics.
  - Improvisation taps into students' multiple and emotional intelligences.
  - Improvisation fosters collaborative learning.

# Literature Review:

## Comedic Theater Improvisation

- Berk & Trieber (2009): Improvisation in the classroom is well-suited because...
  - Improvisation promotes deep learning by:
    - 1. Developing motivation (the desire to know, make choices, and seek a solution)
    - 2. Learning through activity (remembering the learning process and the discovery of knowledge)
    - 3. Interacting with others (through brainstorming, role-playing, and rapid decision making)
    - 4. Creating a well-structured knowledge base (where content is acquired, reshaped, synthesized, and critiqued)

Rhem (1995)

# Literature Review: Comedic Theater Improvisation

- Examples of comedic theater improvisation games:
  - Spolin (1986, 1999)
    - Provides many improv games that are used for ice breakers or energy builders
  - Berk & Trieber (2009)
    - Describes four improv activities used in an undergraduate course called “Mental Health and Stress Management” at Towson University.
    - For example, when reviewing concepts for a quiz, students must discuss the concept with one another by using only one word, and going back and forth between the group of students until they feel that they have defined the concept.

# Literature Review: Comedic Theater Improvisation

- Takeaways of using comedic theater improv in your classroom:
  - Improvisation can be used to overcome constraints on creativity and effective learning.
  - Improvisation is well-suited to the Generation Z students we now encounter.
  - Improvisation is an active learning activity (Bonwell & Eison, 1991).

# Jazz Improvisation: an overview of the next 30 minutes.

- Like in comedic theater, improvisation is essential in jazz music.
- How is improvisation different in jazz music from theatrical improvisation?
- How is improvisation used in jazz?
- How is improvisation taught?
- How can you use these concepts in your classroom?

# How is improv in jazz music different from theatrical improvisation?

- 1. There are no words during the improvisations.
- 2. The performers are maintaining a set tempo (speed of the beat), requiring the improviser to conform to this speed.
- 3. There are “right” and “wrong” notes, depending on what chords are being played at a given moment.
  - This differs from traditional comedic improv practices.
  - e.g. Tina Fey writes “There are no mistakes, only opportunities.”

## How is improvisation used in jazz?

- 1. Historically, improvisation was used to embellish melodies.
  - Example: Adding notes and changing rhythms in the tune “Happy Birthday”
- 2. By the 1920s, the melodic embellishments became the focus of jazz performances.

**When** is improvisation used in jazz?

Outline of a jazz song:

- 1. The melody is played 2x through.
- 2. Then, players take turns improvising a solo while the other players accompany them.
- 3. Once each person has taken a turn, everyone plays through the melody once more.

# Duke Ellington's "C-Jam Blues"

CEG

FAC

CEG

CEG



● FAC

FAC

CEG

CEG



● DFA

GBD

CEG

GBD



# How is improvisation taught?

- Improvisation using only rhythms (clapping)
- Improvisation using short melodies
  - Blues scale
  - Call and response
- Improvisation using knowledge of chords

# Rhythmic improvisation exercises

- Call and Response
- Yes, and...

# Duke Ellington's "C-Jam Blues"

CEG

FAC

CEG

CEG



● FAC

FAC

CEG

CEG



● DFA

GBD

CEG

GBD



# Melody improvisation: Using notes from “the blues scale”:

If the song is in C Major, those notes are:

C          E-flat          F          G-flat          G          B-flat          C

# Blues scale: C, Eb, F, Gb, G, Bb, C

CEG

FAC

CEG

CEG



• FAC

FAC

CEG

CEG



• DFA

GBD

CEG

GBD



# Possible debriefing questions for students:

1. What new information have you learned?
2. If you could improvise again, what would you do differently?
3. What insights did you learn about letting go of the result?
4. How did you handle information that seemed questionable?
5. How is this activity like teamwork on a job?
6. When and why did you hesitate?

# Possible ways to use these concepts in your classroom:

- Call and response exercises, where students are only allowed to respond given certain parameters
- Require students to “perform” (write, discuss) on-the-spot or given a time limit in class

# How these concepts are used in MUS 100 here at OU:

- After learning the definition of musical terms:
  - Play a short movie (3') for the students on silent. Ask students to write prose that would describe music that could accompany the scene. Play the movie 3x. Reflects knowledge of musical terms (instruments, melodic terms, rhythmic terms, dynamics, textures, etc.).
- After learning about a historical period or event that has affected music:
  - Ask students to role-play a historical scenario in real time. Reflects knowledge of dates, historical figures, situation...

# Break-out group discussion:

- Intros (Your name and what/where you teach)
- 1. Go around and describe some improvisation activities that bolster learning in your classroom (specific to your course content). Try to ask each person to share!
  - Class title or discipline:
  - How many students in the classroom?
  - Pedagogical goal of the activity?
  - Describe the improvisation activity:
- 2. Pick 1 or 2 of the best activities to share with all of us.
- 3. (if time) What are some of the benefits of improvisatory activities?
- 4. (if time) What are some of the critiques of this approach?

# Large group discussion

1. Sharing our findings from our break-out groups:
2. Other ideas/questions?

Improvisation activities that you created and shared will be posted to:

<http://padlet.com/jeninelawson/7a49hl1e5nf4>

## Take-aways (slide 1 of 3)

- Whereas comedic improvisation often is used in collegiate courses for ice-breakers or energy builders in class, we assert that improvisation (jazz, theater, etc.) also has pedagogical benefits, including such activities as...
  - Timed, on-the-spot exercises
  - Spontaneous creativity given set constraints by the teacher
  - Collaborative experiences

## Take-aways (slide 2 of 3)

- Jazz improvisation pedagogy includes:
  - Activities that restrict the performer to respond given a certain set of parameters
  - The notion that there are better improvisations than others (musical responses that are more correct in relation to the scale used throughout the song, etc.)

## Take-aways (slide 3 of 3)

- Pedagogical goals of improv exercises could be implemented to:
  - Reinforce/review course content
  - Develop ideas
  - Create a project
  - etc.

## References:

- Applying comedic improvisation in the classroom:
  - **Berk, R.A. & Trieber, R. H. (2009). Whose classroom is it, anyway? Improvisation as a teaching tool. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 20 (3): 29-60.**
  - Gwinn, P. (2003). *Group improvisation: The manual of ensemble improv games*. Colorado City, CO: Meriwether Publishing, Ltd.
  - Spolin, V. (1986). *Theater games for the classroom*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
  - Timpson, W. A. (2002). *Teaching and performing: Ideas for energizing your classes*. Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing.

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- Using improvisation in the music classroom:
  - Hinz, B. (1995). Helping students master improvisation. *Music Educators Journal*, 82 (2): 32-36.
  - Kratus, J. (1991). Growing with improvisation. *Music Educators Journal*, 78(4): 35-40.
  - Whitcomb, R. (2013). Teaching improvisation in elementary general music: Facing fears and fostering creativity. *Music Educators Journal*, 99 (3): 43-50.
- Pedagogy in general:
  - Bonwell, C.C. & Eison, J.A. (1991). Active learning: Creating excitement in the classroom. *ASHE-Eric Higher Education Report No. 1*. Washington, DC: The George Washington University, School of Education and Human Development.
  - Rhem, J. (1995). Close-up: Going deep. *The National Teaching & Learning Forum*, 5(1): 4
- For fun (also includes rules of comedic improvisation):
  - Fey, T. (2011). *Bossypants*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.

# Discussion? Comments/questions?

Miles Brown, D.M.A.

Assistant Professor of Music (Jazz and Bass), Oakland University

[brown239@oakland.edu](mailto:brown239@oakland.edu)

Jenine Brown, Ph.D.

Special Lecturer (Music), Oakland University

[brown211@oakland.edu](mailto:brown211@oakland.edu)



