

“Flow-tation”

In Music Education, one of the harder skills to teach is how to spontaneously create a flowing sequence of improvisational activities for a group. Every teacher/facilitator comes to their classes and workshops with a “bag of tricks” of activities to present, but even a great collection of separate activities will not automatically create a smooth flow from one activity to the next. Linking, “flow,” and other elements of sequencing is a separate skill set.

In seeking an answer to “what might come next?” there are a few useful principles to keep in mind that can help keep a facilitator in a receptive mindset, picking up cues from the group’s process, while also following one’s own inspirations and, if applicable, a plan for specific content.

The outline below is a preliminary presentation of “flow-tation” principles and facilitation strategies as I have been applying them in college level classes in music improvisation. One can approach teaching improvisation as an improvisation, with preparation and spontaneity. Just as members of an improvising ensemble approach a blank block of time with receptiveness and boldness when they create music from silence, listening and technique, facilitators can approach their role in a similar way, using activities and interventions like notes, harmonies, contrasts and silences.

The suggestions that follow presume that the reader has some familiarity with music improvisation activities from the following sources: for instrumental and vocal music, *Music for People* (main resource book: *Return to Child* by James Oshinsky); for drumming and rhythm activities, the Drum Circle Facilitator’s Guild (main resource book: *Facilitating Drum Circles* by Arthur Hull); vocal ensembles using layered loops and solos, *Circlesongs* as taught by Bobby McFerrin and his associates (main resource book: *Vocal River* by Rhiannon).

Facilitation and Flow – Creating Improvisation Experiences in Music

(topics: experiential education; improvisation pedagogy; music education; improvisation)

What is flow?

I had the privilege of learning about flow from a master. In the 1980s and 90s, cellist David Darling developed a set of music improvisation activities and a way of presenting them that embodied the best of music education. His activities were accessible and useful at all levels of musical sophistication, from beginners to professionals. His demeanor was disarming, humor-filled, and relentlessly encouraging. And he had a knack for chaining activities together seamlessly, like an FM DJ might string an hour of music together with no distracting talk.

David allowed me to study his approaches, and he reflected on his own teaching in some of the essays we published as part of the *Return to Child* book that *Music for People* uses

in its improvisation training program. Interested readers can go to the “Shadowing David” section of RtC for the most detailed breakdown of David’s teaching style. It is unfortunate that he did much of his teaching in the era before cel phone cameras made video so ubiquitous. But there is an outstanding 3-CD set, *The Darling Conversations*, in which David and composer Julie Weber discuss his work, and a few workshop videos that are searchable on the internet.

When one thinks of a “teacher,” the common image is of a person at the head of a classroom, standing while the students are seated, imparting knowledge through words and engaging lectures or problem-solving tasks. In laboratory learning, students are turned loose to experience physical and chemical processes for themselves. A teacher is needed to verbally instruct the students in what to do, what to look for, and in some cases, how to stay safe around fire, chemicals, and electricity.

The model of a facilitator is fundamentally different from that of a teacher. A facilitator seeks to create experiences for the students with a minimum of setup. The means of engaging the students is through infectious activities that are self-motivating. The aim is for students to learn by doing and reach relatively high levels of sophistication through listening, social responsiveness, and ultimately, self-regulation. The idea is to guide with as light a hand as possible. While the learning experiences can be profound, to an outside observer the activities can look like games. Making learning fun deepens rather than cheapens.

One could lecture on the roles a person can play in a group improvisation – to be the soloist, the person providing harmonic, melodic or rhythmic support, or the one who contributes to contrast by being strategically and attentively silent. Or one could create opportunities for students to improvise together and have them discover these roles for themselves by noting what makes some improvisations exciting, dynamic and interactive, and other improvisations more static and less interesting. The vocabulary can follow the experiences rather than introduce them. If a facilitator wants to “quicken” the participants’ process of discovery, he or she can sneak content into warm-up activities, so that participants are gaining experiences without focusing on them; more on that topic later.

Whether it is called “scaffolding,” “layering,” using a “platform,” or any other term, each musical activity, once it is securely accomplished by the group, can serve as a backdrop for a new activity. Rich music often has multiple elements occurring simultaneously. We are all able to be drummers and singers at the same time. When we hold a steady beat as a group and listen for calls to respond to with our voices, we are using what some psychologists call “an unattended channel.” The beat gets carried in an automatic and unreflected way, building body memory, much like we can ride a bicycle and look at the scenery at the same time.

Consider the following musical activity:

Four players are sitting in a circle, chamber music style.

Their instruments are capable of sustained tones (think bowed strings or woodwinds, but the activity is adaptable).

The rule of this game is simple - you have one rhythmic figure to play, and it has to be on one note only. All players play the same rhythmic figure.

The first player starts. Let's say he or she plays short-long; short-long, etc. as an endless loop. When the second player enters, that player adds a new note, so there is an interval sounding, in rhythmic unison. When the third player enters, that player adds a new note, so there is (potentially) a chord sounding. When the fourth player enters, there is either a chord or a cluster of notes sounding.

Now it gets interesting.

When it gets back around to the first player, that player changes his or her note to any new note. This changes the harmonic context of all of the other notes. The same is true when the second, third and fourth players change their notes, in turn. All the while maintaining the same coordinated rhythmic figure.

After a few rounds of this game, the players are set free to turn the piece into a free improvisation.

Now, what musical skills have they been practicing?

Which of those skills were learned because they were focusing on the dimension of that skill, and which skills were learned because they were not putting much attention into that dimension?

The activity can be presented as an exercise in rhythmic unison and precise articulation, with lesser emphasis on the changes of notes. In that case, the players focus on rhythm and choose their notes automatically. Yet they are experiencing harmony along with rhythm. Sometimes the channel or dimension that gets less conscious attention is learned by the body in a different way.

Second example, even simpler:

A facilitator has a group keep time by walking in place.

To the pulse of the walk, the facilitator sings out rhythmic "calls" and the group echoes the calls back in rhythm. What is the attended dimension? Echoing the call. What is the unattended dimension? Holding the pulse in the body.

When you want to begin a concert as a listening event, and the concert is staged in a traditional way, the audience has many cues that something important is about to happen. At T-minus five minutes, auditorium lights flash to alert people to take their seats. Closer to the start time, the house lights dim and the stage lighting begins. Ambient music fades to silence. An attentive audience participates in the silence and helps create the ground against which the music will stand out.

The flow from “audience milling about” to “audience is engaged in listening to a concert” is aided by these cues.

But when there is no supporting staff of house managers and lighting or sound personnel, how can you, alone, as a performer or presenter, create and establish a similarly intense atmosphere for listening? After all, the music is as much in the listening as it is in the playing. Many excellent performances are missed by audiences who were not quite prepared to listen and appreciate what was being given them.

Before any musical event, the audience is in a state of relative chaos. I don't mean gross disorganization; but there are hundreds of separate side conversations and foci for people's attention, from the written programs to the theater décor (not to mention the distractions of cel phones). The same holds true in smaller venues, from a coffeehouse to a classroom. The goal of the performer or instructor is to move the audience from multiple and private foci of attention to a single shared focus on the presenter or presenting group.

In drum circle facilitation language, there needs to be an “attention call,” a clear signal that “something is about to happen, so pay attention.” An emcee's introduction is one such “call;” “Ladies and Gentlemen, tonight we are proud to present!” And if there is no emcee?

Flow - what's the big deal?

Last fall, I attended a local music educators conference. I presented a session on improvisation, and I went to sessions on drumming, singing, and curriculum design. Although all of the educators acknowledged the importance of learning by doing, the format of the sessions was mainly lecture rather than live experiences.

Educators can't reasonably be expected to teach content or style that has not been part of their training. We have addressed one of these issues in the current generation - improvisation education in a variety of universities is now taught using the encouraging philosophy of Music for People. But one improv class in a degree program is not likely to be of enough influence to shift how music educators teach in general.

In contrast, I was recently at a workshop given by master singer and composer Bobby McFerrin and his colleagues who teach an ensemble improvisation form called Circlesong. There were 150 attendees in a large hall. There was a stage, but no curtain and no emcee. The morning's first presenter was there to facilitate a whole group warm up that would get everyone moving their bodies, everyone warming up their voices, and everyone cooperatively and attentively interacting with their peers. What she did to transform the room from 150 individuals, each in their own private worlds to a coordinated group looked like this: she stood on the stage with a microphone in her hand. She quietly began singing a short, simple melody, repeating the phrase over and over. With patience and insistence, she continued presenting her sound until more and more people in the group joined her. Eventually (but fairly quickly), the whole group had transitioned from

milling about to standing still, facing the stage, and singing what she was singing. A seamless transition.

She used the initial song to gather attention, so the melody was simple and the energy was gentle. From this, she transitioned into a warm-up that involved the body, the breath, the resonant chambers of the face, and the articulation muscles of the mouth. A full, sophisticated vocal preparation warm up. But it did not come across as instructional; each activity was presented as a guided invitation. The relaxed manner made it easier for people to get immersed in each activity, without worry that they were doing it wrong.

Principles That Support Flow:

1. Use what they give you

Examples of Use What They Give You

Scenario: you are starting a session at an improvisation workshop for adults. The room has a piano in one area, a large circle of chairs that incorporates the piano, and a sound system with a wireless microphone. As you enter to size up the space, there is a group of participants around the piano, jamming. They are taking turns soloing over a jazz standard.

You have a variety of tasks to accomplish in getting your session off the ground: you need to help the participants who are just entering the room orient themselves as to where to sit and what to pay attention to; you need to establish yourself as the facilitator of the session so that when you direct an activity, the group follows your instructions; you need to make all of the participants feel comfortable, including the ones that are currently playing. What do you do?

Here is one possible solution: First, signal the group clustered at the piano to keep playing. By doing this, you are establishing your leadership – they are now playing because you have asked them to. Your next direction to them may be to modify their playing, or stop, but they now will follow you.

Use the mic and body language to orient the new people. Adjust the chairs so that the circle will be no more than 5-10% larger than the number of people you expect. Remove excess chairs and position the chairs so that people will be close enough to hear each other easily.

Find a role for the “rest of the circle (ROC).” In this case the ROC will be everyone who is not playing near the piano. If the group is playing a sophisticated tune with complicated chord changes, the ROC can most readily join in on mouth and body percussion. Have the ROC take on the sounds of a drum kit – brushes on a snare, sticks on a cymbal or high hat, bass drum pulse or rhythm, and occasional fills or flourishes. If the tune is well known, have the ROC sing long tones that go with the melody. If possible, subdivide the

ROC to sing long tones in harmony. Start and stop the singing to mimic the way a horn section "hits" its stacked harmonies in rhythm.

Alternatively, you could invite additional players from the ROC to join the group around the piano in the role of featured soloist. You would need to know the skill level of the players you invite so as to not over-stress anyone or put them in a position beyond their ability.

2. Be sensitive to natural transition points

Examples of Natural Transition Points

When a "piece" has ended, there is an opportunity to step in as facilitator and guide the group to the next activity smoothly. Timing is everything. Step in too soon and you are diminishing what may still be in the process of ending. Step in too late and you encourage mild chaos, which can lead to attempts by multiple people to get something new started.

In the class or workshop setting, let's say a small ensemble is finishing its improvisation. For the purpose of this example, envision a class with 30 total participants having just listened to a 3- minute improvisation by a quartet of players. As the group is ending, the facilitator can be thinking – "what kind of energy might follow this group?" "does the ROC (rest of the circle) need to be immediately involved, or do they have the focus and patience to listen to another small ensemble right now?" and "do we need to deepen a mood, or go for a contrasting mood?"

Let the group that is playing finish and let a period of silence "bracket" their piece. If your decision is that the whole group will now play, you can cue them to be ready by using large gestures that everyone can see. By using body language alone, you are not "breaking the spell" of silence and flow. If you intend for a new group to follow the first group, you need to decide the composition of this new group sooner and prepare the new group earlier, before the first group has come to silence. Within 30 seconds of the anticipated ending of the piece, make clear eye contact with the players you wish to have in the next ensemble. Use hand gestures to cue them to be ready to go on your signal. In order to be decisive and clear about exactly who you are selecting, you may need to move about the room somewhat to have straight sight lines. Be unambiguous as well as kindly in your gesturing. If flow is your goal, try to avoid selecting players who have logistical needs - nothing kills momentum as much as plugging in, tuning up, or moving across the room to the location of the piano and rearranging chairs. Electric instrument players and pianists can easily be incorporated into the flow by inviting them to be the players in a segment of class that takes place near the beginning, when there is an expected transition from milling about to starting up.

Your goal in a certain session is to teach a new skill to the whole group, then have them practice that skill in smaller groups. In many cases, the composition of the smaller groups can be random. You can create smooth transitions if you engage the whole group in a warm up, segue into your teaching content via call and response or modeling, break the group in half to create contrasts between sound and silence, and continue subdividing

until you reach the desired size for your breakout group practice, or showcase the smaller groups one at a time. Then the groups get their practice with the players that are in their last subdivision.

3. Emphasize contrasts

Flow is the opposite of stagnation. A facilitator is sometimes needed to nudge a group out of playing patterns that have become stale and repetitive. The experience is re-enlivened when the facilitator steps in and highlights new things to listen for. For example, if you step in and conduct changes in loudness level, the group is reminded to do this on its own after you step out of the facilitation role. Similarly, if you sculpt the group to emphasize instrument groups with specific timbres (all the shakers, all the acoustic guitars, just the flutes, etc.), the group will better be able to pick those timbres out in the overall mix of sound once they resume playing in a self-regulated way. And the easiest and most profound contrast is between sound and silence. If you initiate a stop cut, the group does not just stop playing – the sounds and rhythms remain in auditory memory, vividly. They are continuing to listen and to have a shared listening experience even in the silence. Bringing the group back in to the groove after a stop cut is an experience in bonding – the contrast highlights the coordination and cohesiveness of the group.

4. Be ready to play chord changes for the group to blend with and solo over

Some class experiences are for subsets of the whole group – the activity calls for a sequence of quartets to play, or a small group is momentarily featured. There is always a challenge to keep the ROC listening actively when these participants are not directly involved in the music making. One way of engaging the whole group after a period of passive listening is to offer a repeated set of chord changes that invite harmonic blending and melodic exploration. If you are an experienced piano player or guitarist, you can do this yourself, using more calming or more energizing moods as needs be. But if you are not able to play a chording instrument, then what? You can have prerecorded “loops” of chord progressions available, although the mechanical aspect of the recording may be an issue at times. But if you are good at using your sound system, you will know when to strategically fade out the backing track and let the group experience their unaccompanied music and their own creations. If your group includes reliable players, you can request that a participant lay down repeated chord changes, freeing you to facilitate without having to tie up your hands and limiting your physical location in the room.

5. Be ready to start strong rhythms for the group to add layers to

Sometimes you may decide the best transition is not to a melodic/harmonic activity, but to a predominantly rhythmic one. In the example above, the facilitator provides a chord progression – hopefully with reliable rhythm and the right level of complexity to invite the group to join in, and neither bore nor overtax their instrumental and listening skills. Similarly, it is helpful for a facilitator to be a good enough drummer to provide a strong

and sustained groove on the kinds of hand percussion that invites the group to join in. To be heard over a large group of players, it is useful to have drums with a penetrating and deep sound, such as a surdo, dun-dun or djembe. Leading while drumming, however, presents the same challenges as leading while playing piano or guitar in that the leader's hands are occupied and any other conducting has to be done with more limited body language or with words. If the group is able to sustain listening at lower volume levels, then the facilitation can be done with quieter and more subtle percussion, such as a shaker or bell. Leading with body percussion and vocalizing percussion sounds provides more options and sources of contrast, as well as being a good transition to "sing what you play," and the reintroduction of melody through singing.

6. Be ready to start strong melody lines that can be repeated

Sometimes the choice of transition is to an activity that allows for harmonic exploration. If you offer a simple melody line, without any chord arrangement, you are leaving space for the group to invent its own harmony.

7. Involve the audience

Anytime the whole group is not actively playing, there is a distinction to be made between the players and the rest of the circle (ROC). The ROC is sometimes in the passive role of being an audience, and they are at risk of becoming disengaged if left in that role too long. Involving the audience can take the form of incorporating them as a large pipe organ, singing drone notes that complement the group actively playing. Or inviting the ROC to be the rhythm section with mouth percussion sounds. Call and response and the interval activity called Sah will also engage the ROC long enough to renew their patience for hearing additional small groups.

David Darling would have his groups create a vocal groove by improvising over pre-recorded music samples. Then he'd take the recording away and keep the group doing their thing. He'd bring a mic around and hold it up close to a person's mouth so it would highlight individual grooves while the larger group kept their patterns going. When he found an improvisation from an individual that especially interested him, he'd have the group imitate it and then jam on it. This was empowering to the person whose groove was chosen for highlighting, and it was presented in a musical way, seamless and fun. A real connector for the group.

Creating flow using group size

Sometimes an activity works with groups of varying size, and the facilitator can keep energy flowing by transitioning through various combinations. One can sequence from whole group to partial group to pods (large to small), or build from duets to quartets to octets to pods to whole group (small to large). No matter whether the content of the activity is moving to a rhythmic melody or harmonizing, these transitions also have the

effect of being a social mixer, allowing changing interactions among the participants as they recombine in new ways.

8. Limit questions and verbal analysis; keep the music coming

Dead Air and Energy Drains

Announcements. At every workshop or class, there are key pieces of information to impart. These may involve assignments, logistics, meals, transportation, or schedule changes. No matter how important the content, announcements interrupt the flow of musical listening. It is a worthy challenge to balance informational and musical experiences.

In general, a good rule is to limit announcements to two minutes or less. Put key information onto posters that have large enough fonts to be easily read by multiple people at once. Another option is to distribute information via downloadable pdf files. Again, fine print tends to require more effort to read; make the most important details large, distinctive and attractive.

If you choose to make verbal content announcements and you don't want to "buzzkill" the listening experience, try embedding your announcements in a rhythmic call and response activity. This way, your verbal information takes place in a "cool down" period that remains musical.

Set up a pulse or a rhythm on body percussion – hand claps, and lap or chest drumming. Conduct the volume level down so you can speak and be heard over the rhythm. Give a few melodic or rhythmic calls so your audience is attentive and engaged. Then cue them what is coming next, for example, a call: "I'm gonna tellya" (answer: I'm gonna tellya) call: "how to find the lunch room" (answer: how to find the lunch room) call: "it's through the double doors" (answer) call: "and then the second left" (answer) The whole group has now has a body memory of identifying where the lunchroom is. While it takes practice to become adept at phrasing your information to fit a call-and-response format, it is definitely worth learning.

Another way of maintaining an atmosphere of musical listening is to make your announcements over a group drone, or with a soloist playing musical snippets in between your pieces of information. For the drone, you can always use the Music for People "Sah" activity, where the whole group drones on one note, and creates contrast when they are guided to slide up or down by a half step or other interval. The speaker can conduct the volume of the group down to a level where the announcements can be heard over the drone. In between bits of information, the leader can sustain interest by using different intervals in the "Sah" game. The goal is to have the activity be familiar but not overly predictable.

Too Much Talk

Once the leader shifts from musical facilitator to imparter of verbal info via talk or lecture, some audience bad habits can emerge. Some people will think “the musical part of the session is over” when the music making stops, so they may feel free to pack, move about, and otherwise distract from the focus on the verbal information. Presenting the information in a musical form makes it clear the session is not over yet and keeps everyone’s attention.

Talking can also trigger more talking. It is common for some participants to want the opportunity to make their own announcements, about travel needs or self-promotion of events. Maintaining a musical setting minimizes the opportunities for other people to elongate the talk time or sidetrack the session to a personal agenda. At every event there may be a need to communicate about such things as lost items, ride shares, and events of general interest, but plan ahead – having a designated poster area for such things will keep the info out of the listening atmosphere you are trying to establish.

9. Breathe/release is a legitimate activity

There is an interesting story to how David Darling came to use the “release” gesture that was always a frequent transition technique in his workshops. While David most often appeared to be a master of program sequencing, in point of fact he was a dedicated improviser, and sometimes needed to stall for time while figuring out what would best happen next. At such times he would have his group follow him in the “release” gesture, moving his hands from the top of his head up to the sky while modeling a deep inhale and exhale. He would repeat this until the next inspiration came to him for a new activity.

10. Let people move

If you are a dancer, then you likely have a good internal sense of how much sitting around is tolerable before you need to reenergize, stretch and move. Even great playing and singing needs to be bracketed with opportunities to move the whole body, not just the music making parts. So if you are not a dancer, try to be mindful of other people’s need to move when you are leading events and work in whole body activities in every half hour of class time.

11. End with a drone or rhythm that keeps going

If an activity does not have to end in silence, end it with an ongoing sound such as a drone or a repeated rhythm. It is much easier to modify an existing group sound than to “restart the engine” and get a group into a coordinated activity from scratch. This also will give you time as the facilitator to reset the layout of the room, choose specific players or equipment, etc., without there being “dead air.” In Drum Circle trainings, there is a tradition of facilitators taking turns leading the group. They always end their sequence of

facilitation by having the group return to an ongoing groove so that the next facilitator has an easier time stepping in. They call this practice “jump time.”

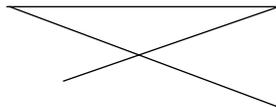
12. How to use silence

Some experiences will naturally end in silence. In many ways, the depth of the experience will be reflected in the depth of the silence. A profound silence indicates that deep listening was going on. To keep the flow of the overall class going after such a silence, have the group do something physical together, in silence. The simplest such activity is to breathe, or to breathe and make a gesture of “release,” inviting change and openness to something new. Having the next ensemble or activity staged will make it easier to transition from silence back to sound. However, if that is not the case, the “go-to” activities that will work to bring the group back to sound are: call and response, body percussion, vocal drone, and Sah (drone, move up or down, return to original note).

Leading Lab challenge – the “Card Game”

In the formative years of Music for People, we presented a challenge to leaders-in-training: can you find a way to link together any three activities from the Music for People teaching blocks (Return to Child activities) without relying on verbal instructions, with one activity flowing into the next? As with a connect-the-dots-in-one-continuous-line puzzle, sometimes it is necessary to go outside the box and add an activity or two to create a smooth flow.

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How would you link the following three activities/content areas?

- a) Solo/drone; harmonizing in thirds; even-handed drumming
- b) Important contribution of silence/space; yea! energy; descending scale

The use of cards made for some very random combination of activities; these were useful challenges to push the creativity and resourcefulness of the trainees. In common workshop situations, these exact activities might not be juxtaposed; more often, the activities in a segment might have one theme in common; for example, support skills on piano, or using odd meters.

Example of flow using three random activities:

Combination a) Solo/drone; harmonizing in thirds; even-handed drumming.

Rhythm is a very useful skill area to start a teaching segment. Getting the group into a common groove helps solidify the group rapport and bonding. To start even-handed drumming, I might begin with the room pre-staged to have a hand drum at every seat.

Start by modeling a strong, simple rhythm, and invite the group to join in however they choose to. After a few minutes of letting the groove get established and “simmer,” I might move my own drumming into an even-handed “go-do-go-do-go-do” pattern with no breaks or accents. If I use gestures to invite the participants to mirror me, many will, and some may remain on contrasting rhythms. If needed, I might speak the drum syllables out loud to get the whole group drumming even-handedly.

From here, there are many drumming variations that could be introduced. But to focus on evenness, I might model playing just the right hand for a while, then just the left, and invite the group to listen deeply and strive to make the same sound with either hand. Then we can return to even-handed alternating hands, and then to another drum jam. When the new groove is established, I can give a vocal call over the groove and invite an echoing response. I can signal for the group to loop or repeat the vocal phrase over the ongoing drumming. I can then ask the whole group to continue drumming, and ask half the group to also continue the vocal phrase. Then I can give a new vocal phrase to the other half of the group. This new phrase will be a harmony part, perhaps the same melody moved up a third.

Now the group is drumming and singing in harmony. I can reinforce the listening to harmony by bringing the group to unison singing on either vocal melody (original or harmony), and switch the groups back and forth between the two parts multiple times. Having established the concept, we can repeat this activity with a new melody and harmony, and add contrast by cutting out the drums and singing a cappella from time to time. Lastly, to bring the group energy back down after energetic drumming and singing, I could bring the drumming to silence and bring the singing to a continuous drone. Over this drone I could invite a few soloists. Next, I could ask the soloist to end his or her solo on a new drone note and ask the group to join (quietly) the new drone. Lastly, I might invite two experienced players to demonstrate solo-drone in duet format, fading the group drone out so the duet is all that remains.

This sequence is not perfect; it is actually a spontaneous thought-experiment response to the three random activities I happened to pick when I was writing earlier this afternoon. But it is workable and flexible; all three activities are covered, and the introduction and sequencing of the activities is done with a minimum of verbal instruction and no down time. If this group session were followed by a break-out period, the participants would have three distinct new skills that they might work on in the smaller group context.

The point is that this kind of linkage is possible with literally any three (or more) activities. The emphasis for one person might be whole group inclusion, for another person the emphasis might be on drawing out more expressive solos over the drone. No matter what the content, the manner of presentation can feature seamless flow from one activity to the next. There are a few collateral benefits to this approach. For one, there is often an

“unattended dimension” of practice. In the example above, while the group is both drumming and singing melody lines in call and response fashion, the group is actively attending to the new melody – this is necessary to recall and repeat it. They are not attending to their own drumming, which goes on simultaneously, automatically, and unconsciously. That is a deep practice, like riding a bicycle while looking at the surrounding scenery. Presenting activities that flow one to the next also maintains high energy and engagement among the participants.

Flow and Lesson Plans

Lynn Miller's *Spirit Arts* book details paths to personal expression in music, visual art and movement that draw on shamanic practices for accessing deep unconscious sources. This approach is about as far to the “intuitive” side as one can get, where the guiding principle is “trust the process,” and outcomes can be surprising when elements of the conscious self are bypassed.

In some improvisation workshop settings and in most educational settings, there is an expected content to be delivered that might not be reached via intuitively-led activities alone. The practice of Music for People has long been to present its content in distinct “teaching blocks.” The quarterly workshops emphasized Melody, Rhythm, Ensemble and Leadership, although there was always a good deal of repeated and overlapping activity. But even when a session was publicized as having a list of skills to “cover,” the path the facilitators took through the content was always improvised and rarely repeated from one session to the next, even when the content was identical. I suppose the guiding principle here might be “trust yourself” as a facilitator. The list of activities that make up the content of a session can be treated as a checklist rather than as a firm sequence. With an emphasis on flow, it does not much matter which activity is presented in which order. The teaching model is not strictly linear. There are always rhythmic aspects to melodic and harmonic activities, and melodic aspects to rhythmic activities, etc. This means one can introduce content in many different ways – all of the doors lead into the same house.

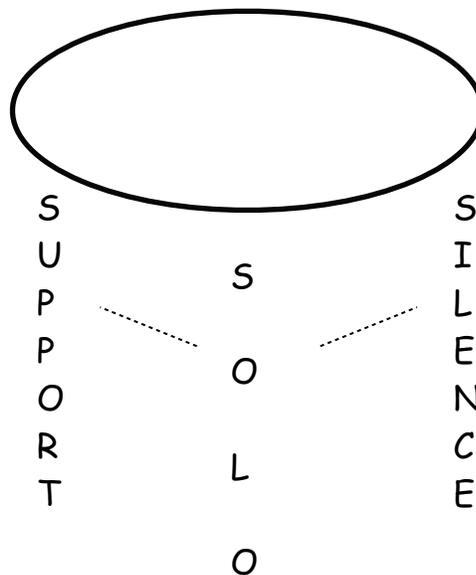
Having specific content to deliver puts the facilitator in a mindset that contrasts with pure trust in intuition. There is a role for intuition, to be sure, and there may be moments of not explicitly knowing why you are choosing this activity at this moment. But there is also another paired layer of mindfulness that includes goals – “I know I want to cover (this concept) before this session is over.” In order to get to a place of trusting yourself to be flexible, creative, sensitive and accurate in communicating your content, a good deal of personal preparedness is needed.

For many years, my role within Music for People was “scribe.” I watched how David Darling and other leaders ran their sessions. I took notes and worked out a shorthand system (similar to the one Arthur Hull uses in the Village Music Circles facilitator training program) to capture the nouns and verbs of facilitating MfP sessions. The easiest things to see were the activities – the whole group is walking in place; the group is divided into quartets, the leader does call and response, etc. The subtle things took longer to

conceptualize – what were the specific calls that the leader gave? How did those calls incorporate the musical concepts that the leader was going to expand on as the session progressed? For example, although call and response is a worthwhile activity for its usefulness in emphasizing listening skills and imitation, and its whole-group format makes it anonymous and generally non-threatening to participants nervous about making mistakes, it is also a great way to create an “overture” for a session, where the participants get subtle practice at the same skills the leader will introduce later on. For example, if one of the activities in the workshop is slated to be “solo over a descending scale,” it can be useful to give the participants experience with a descending scale by incorporating it into your calls. This is the heart of experiential learning – the participants don’t need to know that they are singing a “descending scale,” they are gaining experience by imitating the model that the facilitator provides with his or her calls. Later on, the leader can label the concept “descending scale,” but only after the participants have lived through the experience of it.

I was fascinated with the sequences in David Darling’s teaching that embodied “flow,” and it was also obvious when flow was interrupted. Talk generally killed flow. This was hard for me to accept for a long time, since I was very interested in understanding and analyzing processes, and it was helpful in a training setting to provide some feedback in words to the trainees. But what I had to learn was both patience and memory. To capture what happened when, the shorthand symbols were a great help. Then I had to learn to wait until the group was ready for a break from making music to take up the “let’s look at what happened” process. In keeping with a supportive way of operating, we often asked “what worked, what needs work, and what would you do differently?” We also asked, “how did it feel?”

Transitioning into small ensemble improv skills with beginning improvisers



The three-legged stool: Cohesive group improvisation rests on the three pillars of solo, support and silence. Balance these roles and all players benefit.

Free Improv in Quartets

Improvisation rests on a three-legged stool of solo, support and silence. To create an improvisation from silence, members of the group have to start something. Once started, other members need to jump in and contribute contrast and support. With an improv ongoing, players will interact and converse, and at times surrender the central focus to allow for a solo statement. The soloist will be flexible and morph back to a support role when his or her statement is over. The group members can contribute additional layers of contrast by judiciously using silence, dropping out and returning to make the size of the group one of the elements of the music.

For beginning improvisers, I begin with mainly rhythmic forms and present four roles to choose among. We teach and practice each role before combining them:

Start Something

Jump In/Join In

Support What You Hear

Stand Out/Solo

(from the MusicConstructEd.com website, part of a lesson plan called "In The Groove," covering the scaffolding and sequencing of skills for group improvisation.)

To help focus a group of novice improvisers around a common mood to express, it can be helpful to give them a word or an image that they can interpret in music. In the past I have used "pick a card" techniques in which I had cards printed with a variety of emotion words, or common social expressions, or unusual and evocative pictures. The players have a minute or so to view the card before starting a group improvisation based on their reactions to what the content stimulates.

Logistical Concerns - how to present cards to a quartet

Some years ago I pieced together a gizmo that has four document clips facing the four directions. It fits on a mic stand and will hold 4 cards, each facing a different member of a quartet. I put four cards in the holder and let the players read them briefly before starting an improv. The players see only their own card.



This led to the development of a card deck (*Music Doctor Improv Cards and Picture Prompts*) to reinforce improvisation concepts. The 54 cards have evocative pictures on one side and suggestions for what role to emphasize in the improv on the other. The roles include ways of supporting playing partners, ways of standing out via silence and drama, ways of incorporating a variety of musical styles, and the basic improv skills in the Return to Child book. Most often I use the cards in small ensemble format, such as quartets where there is room for a variety of interleaved and flexible roles.

Consolidating the learning that comes from experience

When the players have the freedom to improvise with each other, they explore and uncover their own working strategies and frustration points. They naturally find the playing principles that make small group improv work in a coordinated and satisfying way:

be bold, offer something for your partners to work with

be consistent, make your playing easy for others to follow and join

be unselfish, hear what the piece sounds like without you now and then

be connected, play with what your partners give you

They may also uncover more specific roles that work:

be the drummer, provide a steady pulse or rhythm

be the bass, offer a repeated bass line

set the mood, play something that strongly suggests a mood or style

leave space, play conversationally with room for others to respond

The process of learning by doing will also likely raise questions about how the improvisations might have been more satisfying. Players may realize after the fact that they played too much or too little, that they missed opportunities to jump in or respond, or that there were options open and paths not taken that they would try in future improv sessions. Now they may be ready to verbalize what they have experienced.

Using the cards quickens the process of naming the roles one can fill, and will also nudge players into trying the roles that they might not spontaneously think of or gravitate to.

Preselecting card combinations

When using the cards for the first time in a class, I will preselect card combinations that I know will yield complementary roles among the players, and that will avoid putting players in student crisis mode (not knowing how to do something). Here is an example of a workable set of cards for use early in an improv class:

1. ostinato - play a consistent groove
2. match pulse and create accents
3. play with full emotional power
4. hear what the group sounds like without you now and then

This combination has a rhythm section of ostinato and pulse, an emotional soloist, and a person who will emphasize space by dropping out.

Another basic combination:

1. drone - play one unchanging note
2. play your instrument in a new way
3. play long tones
4. offer a chord progression

This combination will yield harmonic contrasts as the chords change against an unchanging drone. The long tone player and the one playing in a new way will have the solo opportunities.

A third option:

1. play a descending scale
2. play a heartbeat rhythm
3. support the tonal center
4. ooh energy - rhapsody and lullaby

A true heartbeat rhythm (lub-dub-rest-lub-dub-rest, etc) is in a triple meter. A descending scale in triple meter leaves space for movement and pauses. This might set up a gentle piece in which ooh energy melodies will complement the rhythm.

In contrast, it is possible to set up a combination that will encourage the players to be more fiery and risky:

1. provide the drama
2. inspire your partners to get loud and move
3. use your instrument as a drum
4. add lyrics or spoken word

In this combination, all of the suggestions are more abstract and vague. With fewer constrictions there is more room for open expression.

The roles on the cards are not commands. None of the players are restricted to playing only what the cards suggest. They are always free to interact and follow the music that is spontaneously occurring. In addition to the freedom that is built into the way the instructor presents the cards, it is often useful to give each quartet a "second movement," in which they play without regard to any outside suggestions and freely interact.

The goal in using the cards is not to base the whole class around the cards; the class is about the concepts contained in the cards, and there are many ways to impart those concepts. Over-relying on any one teaching technique would be as uninteresting as repeating the same style of music every session. However the cards are excellent for review and reinforcement of the content, and for presenting students with playing challenges, fitting into roles that they might not gravitate to spontaneously. This can help their development as more complete improvising musicians.

Reverse Sides - Improvising to Art

One useful aspect of the Improv Cards is that each card has a different picture on its reverse side. The 54 pictures were chosen to evoke a variety of moods. One way to use

these pictures is to show one to an improvising ensemble or soloist, and allow them to express the mood however they choose. The listeners in the room can comment afterwards on what mood was conveyed and see if it matches. The pictures can be used to inspire an A-B-A improvisation, where there is a shift of mood corresponding to the imagery and a return to the first mood.

Online adaptations

In this era of COVID, with public health policies at times requiring limitations on in-person music-making, music instructors have been challenged to overcome the constraints of online sound sharing, with its unpredictable latency issues that affect synchronizing and rhythmic playing. One common technique for music instructors has been to meet on a platform such as Zoom and have all of the participants other than the host mute their microphones. The host can share a sound file and all of the participants can play along in their own rooms, at their own download rates. It is a shared experience of a kind, but not one that can be witnessed.

It is also possible for a host to share a picture file, and have the students all respond to it in their own ways. Using the Improv Cards, that picture file could be either the picture side of the card or the side with verbal suggestions, judiciously chosen. Using the showcase feature of the meeting app, the host can select various participants, un-mute them, and have the group witness one person's improvisation at a time. Invite might be a better word than select.

While the sound sharing aspects of Zoom are unpredictable, every now and then it is possible for a small group to hear all of its members play simultaneously. This is more likely if the participants are using headphones and external mics rather than relying on the on-board mics and speakers from a phone or computer. If the host uses the breakout group function of the app to set up small subgroups of three or four members, that group can try to improvise a mood based on the picture side of an Improv Card. The host can also send private messages to the group members, giving each one a different suggestion based on the verbal side of the Improv Cards. The group can interact and then try to identify what suggestion each member had.

Most often platforms such as Zoom are best suited to sequential rather than simultaneous sound-making. Logical, considering their origins as business conference utilities. In language arts classes, some teachers create "circle stories" by having each person in turn contribute a sentence or phrase. The story unfolds in unpredictable and ever-changing ways. A musical analog for a Zoom setting is to have each person in turn un-mute themselves and contribute a short improv. This could be based on an Improv Card image, or a card suggestion. The card information can be sent to specific participants by the host using the chat feature. Improv experiences that develop sequentially are not subject to the latency and synchronization frustrations that go along with simultaneous music making online.

Online and non-synchronous

Some groups get around the delay and latency issues associated with online classes by switching to a recording studio format in which tracks are added one at a time. If a group is meeting online using software such as Soundtrap, each person can select or be assigned a different role using the verbal sides of the Improv Cards. They will need to coordinate a logical order for adding their parts to the recording. As with the other online teaching arrangements, it is also possible to create a piece in which each person is responding to the same picture, building a group interpretation of its mood. This type of experience is not interactive in the same way live music is, but it is useful practice for future studio recording. However, even when the music making experience appears to be in sync between the prerecorded tracks and the improviser, the reality is that latency issues may still be affecting the way the new tracks align with the previously recorded tracks. Timeline adjustments by sound engineers are often needed.

The final concert

For the first few years I taught the Improv class, the final concert was like the rest of the classes. I created a sequence of sound experiences by choosing groups and subgroups, moving between rhythmic and melodic pieces, with occasional audience involvement. I'm not sure what gave me the idea to have the group take on the task of improvising the entire program, but I remember how nervous I was the first time we tried this. I was hoping they could avoid any periods of awkward "dead air," and also hoping that they took enough risks to make music that suited their potential as soloists and collaborators.

When that first group completed an hour-long concert that was entirely improvised, I was emotionally lifted. What they had learned was to treat the sequence of pieces in a concert like an improvised piece of music, working with contrasts between whole group, small group, solo and audience participation segments - using these forms as their "notes." It helped to have multiple areas for small ensemble seating pre-staged. There were drums and percussion readily at each seat, and also at a separate "quartet space." There were seats surrounding the piano so that any piece that incorporated the piano in an ensemble would not require dead air time for moving furniture. There were small hand percussion instruments available to pass out to volunteer audience members, and a basket for collecting them so that they did not become distractions. If the group included electric instruments, there were pre-staged places for the amplifiers and instrument stands. Everything was arranged to help the music be continuous. The group knew to mix up contemplative, slow pieces and fast, energetic pieces. They knew to make room for the soloists that emerged, and to add to pieces by strategically laying out at times. They included reading the room with reading each other and brought the audience in to sing along by creating a whole-room drone or a set of simple repeated melodies, starting with call and response. They played infectious drum jams, and brought the audience in and out as playing partners. When they ended, there was nothing for me to do but beam and congratulate them for working so well without a net.

The book about my mentor, David Darling, takes its title from a quote from Lao Tsu -

“It is the child that sees the primordial secret in nature, and it is the child of ourselves we return to. The child within us is simple and daring enough to live the secret.”

That's improvisation - prepare to be simple and daring once again.