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**Competencies in improvisation** - towards a rubric of essential and desirable skills for music performance, music education, music therapy, and the uses of music and rhythm in social, business, and community settings.

Background:

The Improvisation Ensemble class at Adelphi University of necessity has had to fulfill multiple purposes and serve multiple student needs. As a music department offering, it has to hold students to a high standard for instrumental competency. As a music education offering, it has to include activities that teachers-in-training can use in classrooms and ensembles to introduce improvisation to school age students. As an offering open to the general university population, it has to be inclusive enough that students who are not music majors can participate and succeed in the class.

Improvisation can be approached in a technical way and in a non-technical way that emphasizes personal expression; however these approaches are not mutually exclusive. The expressive aspects of improvisation overlap greatly with areas of nonverbal and verbal expressive arts therapy, such as music therapy, dance therapy, psychodrama and poetry therapy. These kinds of activities are often the basis for "ice breakers" that are used in university orientation experiences and other training settings.

Although it is likely the least often cited aspect of improvisation, leading groups of people in spontaneous rhythmic and tonal activities is a stock in trade of a variety of influential leaders in political, spiritual and corporate settings. When a leader uses improv to highlight the key messages of the moment, techniques that derive from musical sources can be applied to reinforce lessons in non musical academic settings (as when song form mnemonics are used in science, language arts or social studies). The Improvisation Ensemble is designed to include experiences that are traditionally associated with music improvisation in a variety of musical styles and eras, along with how to employ these experiences in classrooms and ensembles, and the class also encourages students to consider improvisation broadly for its applications to support other content. This is a very expansive point of view for what an improvisation class might entail.

Historically, the Improvisation Ensemble at Adelphi has been a performance oriented class, akin to the other performing ensembles such as the Chamber ensemble, Jazz ensemble, Vocal ensemble, etc. However the differences in content and format make comparisons difficult. The Improvisation Ensemble is not literature-based, although there are forms in jazz, blues, popular and classical music that regularly feature improvised segments within their structures (as well as in the music of various world cultures outside North America and Europe).

Unlike the other performing ensemble classes, the IE class does not meet for two semesters, nor does it have rehearsal time set aside for it outside of the 2 1/2 hours of class time each week. Most importantly, the students (within and outside the music department)

who participate in the other performing ensembles come to the ensembles with a background in the type of music being played; they have reading and performing skills that have been honed over years of practice. In contrast, many of the IE students have no prior background in improvisation of any kind, unless they have been jazz, rock, blues, folk, pop, or avant garde musicians. A student's background that includes formal high school ensemble experiences and private lessons often includes no improvisation at all.

This creates a dilemma – to introduce students to improvisation, the students need to take risks doing something that they have little prior experience with. To foster risk-taking, the class needs to have an atmosphere that fosters safety for creative experimentation. Safety, in general, requires limiting critiques and judgmental comments that might stifle risks or channel students into too narrow paths of expression. How can this match up with criteria for a performance group that is often based on overtly qualitative judgements about the accuracy and appropriateness of a student's musical efforts?

Anyone working with adolescents knows the high level of sensitivity they have about being labeled “wrong” in public. As a psychologist and as a founding member of a musical organization dedicated to fostering improvisation as a path to self-expression, the classroom approach I have taken over ten years of teaching the Improvisation Ensemble has been relentlessly positive and encouraging, based on simple and accessible structures that are abstracted from various musical forms that are found in musical cultures around the world. These forms are simpler than “trading eights” or improvising a melody for a Indian raga on the fly. They include imitation at their core, as is found in basic call and response, but initially, the responses need not be a perfect echo of the call.

As the class progresses, students are given experience in all of the following areas related to improvisation:

Solo Improvisation

Duet Improvisation

Small Ensemble Improv

Large Group Improv

Styles – popular, historical, cultural

Vocal Skills

Accompaniment Skills

Facilitation/Teaching Skills

Scholarship

Ability to give accurate and supportive feedback to peers

### **Rubric of Skills - improvisation competencies in educational terms**

Solo Improvisation

When a player solos, it is possible to hear how he or she accesses a creative source and steers it through their layers of technique and emotional range. Solo playing can take place in a bare setting with no other players, or solos can be shaped in the context of ensemble

play. These ensembles can have structured opportunities for one person at a time to solo, or they can be more free with multiple improvisers interacting simultaneously. Soloists may have clear personal preferences and clear strengths in one or more of these settings.

One way of approaching the task of building broad competencies in the variety of possible solo improvisation areas is to begin with the simplest setting: a single player improvising with no constraints of style. Structures will emerge in the playing itself.

#### First skill:

Player can create a one minute improvised solo showing both instrumental competence and compositional structure (statement(s), development, contrast, emotionality, finality)

The most common way improvisation solos are experienced in music for audiences is when a player gets featured in a song form structure. This occurs in nearly all of popular music, from jazz and blues to standards.

#### Second skill:

Player can create an improvised solo in the context of chord changes  
Improvisation can be inspired by contexts that are not musical. This is the "silent movie" tradition, in which the house player (on piano or organ) improvises a sound track to the action on the screen. Similarly, players can create improvisations in response to moving images, moving people (dancers), still photos, abstract art images, single words or verbal phrases, poems, or stories. In these cases, the solo becomes an element of the whole piece; whether it matches the feeling tone of the visual component or whether it contrasts with the visual component can be used for emotional effect.

#### Third skill:

Player can create an improvised solo in reaction to visual or thematic context (sound track; response to words or visual images; dancers, poems, stories).

At the next level of complexity, improvisation takes place in a dyad. Here at any moment there can be one soloist and an accompanist, two soloists, or two blending partners creating a musical ambience.

#### Duet form improvisation-

Player can hold a steady accompaniment on their instrument of choice (pulse, rhythm, song structure)

Player can adjust accompaniment to support the dynamics, tonality and timbre of the soloist

Player can shadow a partner

Player can shadow a partner in harmony

Player shows ability to use silence as a way to support a partner

Player can shift to soloist role in a duet format (improvise a solo)

Player can create solos in the context of a partner's accompaniment

Player shows strength in their own contribution while soloing and simultaneously shows flexibility in being able to adjust to a partner

#### Small Ensemble form improvisation

Player can blend with an ensemble (while improvising)

Player can match pulse and tonality of ensemble mates

Player can harmonize pitch

Player can find complementary rhythms

Player can find and hold appropriate pedal tones

Player can find and sustain a bass line

Player can find and hold a rhythmic groove that suits the ensemble

Player can make contributions that contrast with the ensemble

Player can solo boldly in an ensemble setting without dominating

Player can make constructive use of silence

Player can make constructive use of contrasting musical elements (dissonance, cross-rhythms, etc.)

#### Large Group form improvisation

Player can use small ensemble skills within a large group

Player can hold their own part solidly in a complex harmonic or rhythmic environment

Player can improvise a solo over a group, commands attention via quality and drama in their playing

#### Styles - improvisation in specific styles

Player can improvise in at least three contrasting styles of their own choosing

Player can improvise in a classical-historical style

Player can improvise in a modern-art music style

Player can improvise in a folk music style

Player can improvise in the style of music from a foreign country or culture

Player can improvise in a popular music style

Player can hold an accompanist role in the styles above (provide chords or background melodies with appropriate rhythm, voicing, and other stylistic elements)

Player can improvise a solo in the styles above

#### Vocal Skills for improvisation

Player can hold pitch (while improvising)

Player can match pitch

Player has competent voice quality and dynamics

Player can create a basic harmony in thirds when accompanying the improvisation of a partner

Player can add the third part of harmony given two existing parts in an improv setting

Player can sing a short melody, then play the same melody on their instrument of choice

Player can play a short melody on an instrument, then sing the same melody  
Player can match dynamics, nuance and expressive quality when they sing what they play and play what they sing  
Player can flexibly shift between voice and instrument when improvising

#### Accompaniment skills for improvisation

Player has basic piano competency to play chords in rhythm  
Player has basic piano competency to play a descending scale in any key  
Player can hold a steady accompaniment on piano for "Mr. Bojangles" and "Hit the Road Jack" descending scales (3/4 and 4/4; major and minor)  
Player can play chords on piano and alternate the bass note between the I and the V  
Player can reliably play chord sequences and song forms while others improvise  
Player can adjust the dynamics and expressive quality of the accompaniment to complement the soloist  
Player can accomplish the above skills on their instrument of choice in addition to piano

#### Facilitation/Teaching improvisation to others

Player can clearly communicate the structure of an activity so others can participate  
Player can communicate enthusiasm and enjoyment in their demeanor and body language  
Player can guide other players without unnecessary criticism  
Player can find what to complement in the playing of others  
Player can highlight what needs attention in a supportive way  
Player is able to lead a variety of improvisation-based activities, including solo, duet, small ensemble and large group format  
Player is able to adjust the activities to suit a variety of age levels and competency levels  
Player is able to lead a sequence of improvisation activities with appropriate flow, no pauses between activities, and a minimum of verbal instruction

#### Scholarship in the area of improvisation

Player is aware of role of improvisation in the history of American jazz, blues, rock, folk, and rap music  
Player is aware of the role of improvisation in the history of European art music  
Player is aware of a variety of approaches to improvisation in the classical, jazz, and free improv traditions, and in music education and music therapy  
Player is aware of the role of improvisation in the music of a variety of non-western cultures

#### Feedback to students and partners about improvisation performances

Player is able to identify what worked well and what needs work in their own playing  
Player is able to identify what worked well and what needs work in the playing of others  
Player is able to articulate feedback in supportive language

Player is able to dis-arm his or her own inner critic when self-evaluating improvisation experiences

Player is able to avoid judgmental statements in their feedback to others – while preserving accuracy

Specific styles and forms

Jazz

brushes and cymbals in 4/4

brushes and cymbals for a jazz waltz

walking bass with chromatic leading tones

heart and soul (with triplet feel)

scat singing

Blues

12 bar blues chord changes

heartbeat rhythm (I'm a Man)

Contrasts

Use of “out” or wrong notes

Use of sounds that demonstrate contrasts of emotionality and expressiveness (lullaby, prayer, shout, cry, plead, scold, etc.)

Uses of improvisation to support other content

Classroom call and response

Create calls to get the group's attention

Create calls for announcements (with verbal content embedded in the call)

Business or professional workshop

Select musical improv activities that support a metaphorical message – such as, “we all work together, we celebrate diversity, we listen well, etc.”

Drum circle skills (improvised group rhythm activities)

Sculpting for contrasts (leader selects subset of players to highlight their sonic possibilities)

Clear body language when leading (to start, stop, sculpt, modulate volume or tempo, show approval)

Gives clear calls (pulse is clear, starting point is unambiguous, rhythm is accessible)

Avoids over-facilitation, allows free expression in proportion to directed elements of the experience

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