Sounds of Cooperation

Social-Emotional Learning Using Improvisation

Suggested Grades: 6-8 & High School

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National Core Arts Standards

#1 – Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.
2– Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Objectives

- Encourage prosocial interactions, such as agreement, harmoniousness and equity.
- Enhance musicianship skills - listening, responsiveness and ensemble coordination.
- Encourage personal risk taking for making one's voice heard in a group context.

Materials

These activities will work with any combination of instruments and voices, or without instruments using voices and body percussion.

Rationale:

The five competencies of SEL (self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, social awareness, and relationship skills) are addressable via non-verbal interactions. Social interactions have a lot in common with group music improvisation because there is no predetermination of the means or interaction methods. A conversation is an improvisation, and we generally do not consider that remarkable.

We are all able to converse because we know the language. We teach the language of music as pitches, notes on a staff, and finger positions on an instrument. But the language of music can also be taught relationally – your tone in the context of a partner's tone, your rhythm in the context of a partner's rhythm. From this point of view, note production is not the priority. The priority is what we learn by listening to the result. Do the notes blend? Do the rhythms coordinate? Is there a dynamic energy of creativity in the combinations of players?

Teachers have opportunities to demonstrate that spontaneously created music sounds are better when students follow the principles of SEL. We lead students to this point of view when we give them the chance to discover the principles of SEL through musical interactions. They can experience what works well, what needs work, and they can label for themselves the attributes that make for tight rhythms, interesting harmony, and novel and cooperative interactions.

Suggested Teaching Process:

Pre-Teaching

- Define the three roles in an improvising ensemble.
  - **Solo –** The soloist tells a story in sound.
  - **Support –** Support players provide a setting for the story through consistent support in rhythm and tonality.
  - **Silence –** Players use silence to add contrast and interest as new parts come in and familiar parts leave.

Social-Emotional Learning Perspective
Teacher Notes:

- Soloing involves self-regulation. One does not have to be a virtuoso to take a solo; it is enough to be "a master of what you can control," even if that is only a few notes. Those notes, played with social sensitivity and authentic expression, will come through as highly musical.
- Support roles require social awareness. To accompany a partner, one must attune to pitch and rhythm and put one's own needs for attention or expression aside temporarily. To engage with a partner cooperatively, one needs to balance self-expression and outward listening—the more deeply done, the more moving the music.
- Since playing music is intrinsically rewarding for many people, the music itself will do a good deal of the teaching. Students will gravitate towards better-sounding group music, and in the process, tacitly learn SEL skills that can later be labeled to aid in generalization to non-musical settings.

Playing with Drone and Pulse
- Define drone and pulse using activities below.

Drone
- Students hold a steady note together.
- Students continue holding the note while the teacher uses gestures and body language to divide or sculpt the group in half.
- One-half of the group holds the drone note steady.
- Gesture for the other half of the students to go free and "noodle" or experiment with their notes.
- Bring the whole group back to the original drone.
- Switch roles, so the second half of the group gets to experiment while the first half holds the drone.

Pulse
- Students tap a steady pulse together.
- Students continue holding the note while the teacher uses gestures and body language to divide or sculpt the group in half.
- One-half holds the pulse steady.
- Gesture to the other half to go free and "noodle" or experiment with their rhythms.
- Bring the whole group back to the original pulse
- Switch roles, so the second half of the group gets to experiment while the first half holds the pulse.

Small Group Work
- Divide the group into quartets.
- Each quartet repeats the drone and pulse exercise.
- In each quartet, one person is experimenting while the other three are holding a steady drone note or a steady pulse.

- One at a time, the players experiment, then return to the steady drone or pulse and make room for another player to have the opportunity to "noodle."
- "Noodling" is soloing without the pressure of judging the results.

Adding a Rhythm
- Next, each quartet holds a steady pulse, and one player at a time "noodles" or experiments and creates contrasting rhythms. Again, there is no difference in this case between "noodling" and soloing.

  In a class of 24 students, there will be six quartets doing these activities, one quartet at a time. If the class has difficulty sustaining their focus on the individual quartets, involve the whole group in (quietly) supporting the pulse or the drone.

Free Improvisation
- Allow students to try a "free" improvisation, using the roles of solo, support, and silence. See how they organize themselves or struggle to do so.

  Teacher Notes:
  What is important is whether or not they find coherence in the music in the end. The priority is process before product.
  - Do they cooperatively settle in on a common pulse or rhythm? If so, they have reached agreement.
  - Do they coordinate their notes and tones? If so, they have achieved interpersonal harmony.
  - Do they share the available opportunities to stand out and solo? If so, they have achieved equity.

- Introduce and discuss the three terms - agreement, harmoniousness, and equity - after the playing.
  - Ask students where else in their lives they would benefit from agreement, harmony, and equity.
  - Ask what they did in their playing to bring this about. Why did students succeed or not succeed while improvising?
  - Give the students opportunities to put their newfound awareness into a "second movement" or "take two."

Extensions:
- Use the Music Doctor Improv Cards to expand the roles the players fulfill in the quartets.
- Preview the cards and select the cards that emphasize support and contrast.
  Basic Skills cards example:
  - Match pulse and create accents, use your instrument mainly as a drum, drone, do as much as you can with one note, have a musical conversation.

  Support cards example:
  - Imitate more than you initiate, provide a groove, play a heartbeat rhythm, play long tones.

  Contrast cards example:

- Provide the drama, play with full emotional power, hear what the group is like without you, enter/leave/re-enter/leave again, emphasize silence and space.

Styles cards example:

- Add lyrics or spoken word poetry; inspire others to move, play softly until your partners join you.

Bonus – Watch YouTube videos of Bobby McFerrin for vocal groove and videos of Victor Wooten for bass groove.

Plan – Turn improvisations into compositions in progress by deciding what aspects of the improvisation are "keepers."