

A Model for Teaching Creative Vocal Jazz Improvisation

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ABSTRACT

Many music teachers consider improvisation to be a creative musical activity, without questioning whether student improvisations are really “creative.” Others claim that improvisation skill is not dependent on creativity, and suggest that while anyone can create a solo, that solo may or may not be “creative.” No significant correlations were found between the improvisations of college jazz singers and their Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking scores, yet musical creativity emerged as a factor. This factor accounted for a very small amount of variance, suggesting that an effective jazz improvisation solo may not be primarily a creative activity. A model for teaching creative improvisation is presented.

Many music teachers consider improvisation to be a creative musical activity, without questioning whether student improvisations are really “creative.” Others claim that improvisation skill is not at all dependent

on creativity, and suggest that while anyone can create a solo, that solo may or may not be “creative.” To complicate matters further, teachers are feeling the pressure to teach improvisation because of state and national mandates, yet they lack the background, because their own training did not involve improvisation. They end up seeking out teaching materials and methods that promise to enhance students’ creative skills, and they hope for the best. But what exactly is “creativity”? And if teachers cannot improvise, can they teach creative improvisation?

Let us examine, first, some characteristics of creative thinking, followed by teacher attitudes toward the improvisation standards as stated in The National Standards for Arts Education (1994), and finally, a model for teaching improvisation in the style of vocal jazz.

Creative thinking has traditionally been described as divergent thinking, characterized by fluent, flexible, original, and elaborated thoughts. The standard measure for general creativity, the *Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT)*, 1974/1990), has been criticized in favor of more recent theories of creativity and its assessment. Among the most popular are Amabile’s consensual assessment by experts (1982), as well as those illustrated by Gardner in *Creating Minds* (1993) and by Csikszentmihalyi in *Creativity* (1996). Those who have extended Amabile’s work have found good interjudge reliability among “experts” who refer to a personal definition of “creativity” (Hickey, 2001). One exception, however, was in the case of professional composers, who failed to agree with any other group, or with other composers, on children’s compositional “creativity.”

Similarly, in my own research with “expert” vocal music teachers, there was little agreement on how they described a “creative” jazz improvisation solo. While some used terms that resonate with divergent thinking, such as “imaginative, free” and “making it your own voice,” others aligned more with convergent thinking characteristics including “knowledge of correct jazz scales and chords” and “knowledge of jazz style.” Still others described a creative improvisation as one sung with “confidence and conviction” and “more feeling.” It seems that expert teachers often fail to agree on what constitutes creativity.

If we look to those such as Csikszentmihalyi and Gardner to provide valuable insights into the nature of creative thinking, we find that their focus is not on creativity “with a small c” (Csikszentmihalyi,

1996, p.8), but on the minds of creative giants who have changed the culture of their particular domain. Their focus may not be helpful to teachers who are concerned with enhancing the creative potential of novice improvisers.

Despite the criticisms against the *Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking* (TTCT, 1990), it has been widely used (Davis, 1983), and its reliability and validity are well documented in the test manual. The TTCT assesses general creativity by measuring verbal or figural fluency, flexibility, elaboration, and originality. I examined relationships between general creativity (TTCT) and improvisational skill of college level jazz singers (Madura, 1991 & 1996) and found no significant correlations. This was particularly surprising because of the 19 improvisational criteria that were rated, nine used creativity terms (or synonyms) borrowed from the TTCT, but with added musical reference: *Rhythmic* flexibility, originality, and elaboration; *Tonal* flexibility, originality, and elaboration; and *Expressive* flexibility (of range, tone color, and dynamics). A synonym for flexibility is variety, and for elaboration, motivic development.

Despite the almost nil correlation between general creativity and improvisation skill, factor analysis did tend to group the flexibility, originality and elaboration items into one factor. Flexibility (or variety) in vocal range, tone quality, and dynamics dominated this factor but also included were flexibility, originality, and elaboration of rhythmic and tonal ideas (Madura, 1992). These divergent/creative thinking characteristics do appear to comprise an aspect of musical improvisation which would be expected.

Startlingly, however, this divergent/creative thinking factor accounted for only 6% of the explained variance strongly suggesting that an effective jazz improvisation solo is not primarily a creative thinking activity. Jazz rhythmic feel (Factor 1) explained 66%, and tonal language (Factor 2) accounted for an additional 8%. So, although an impressive 80% of the variance of vocal jazz improvisation achievement was explained by these three factors, the creative thinking factor meant little (only 6%) to an effective jazz improvisation.

Although many music teachers think of improvisation solely as a creative activity, performance practice from around the world shows that this is not so. Improvisation in Western classical music, as well as in other art musics of the world, such as Indian and Persian, requires that a vast repertoire of stylistically appropriate rhythmic, melodic, and

harmonic patterns be internalized. The language of a musical style is usually learned through years of extensive listening, imitation, practice, and study. In fact, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) and Gardner (1993) both agree that at least a decade of study in a domain is required before one can make a truly “Creative” (with at large “c”) contribution.

I do not mean to imply that our students cannot be creative in the arts without several years of training. As aspects of a musical style become internalized and automatic, the student can be guided to manipulate those in improvisation. A balance must be achieved between learning the rules of that style (convergent thinking) and having numerous opportunities to “play” with those ideas by varying, combining, and developing them; synthesizing them into something new; or even relaxing all restrictions to encourage the “art of forgetting”(Koestler, 1964, p.190).

Unfortunately, studies have suggested that schools stifle musical originality, and that musical experiences outside school are often the main motivators for creativity (Auh, 1995; Kinney, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996.) Traditional training has placed little value on improvisation and more on note reading and performing written musical works. With the advent of the National Standards for Arts Education (1994), all students in grades K-12 are now expected to learn to improvise and in very specific and ambitious ways. And despite the many valid criticisms of the National Standards (Thibeault, 2003), the fact that school music teachers and students at all levels are trying to improvise, or at the least questioning why their music educations have failed to prepare them to do so, is a good outcome.

Research on musicians’ abilities to teach improvisation according to the National Standards indicates that they are neither prepared nor confident (Wollenzien, 1999; Kirkland, 1996; Jorgensen, 1997; Riveire, 1997.) In a survey I administered to attendees at my vocal jazz conference sessions in 1998, teachers indicated that they felt moderately confident to teach basic improvisation at the elementary school level, but became increasingly insecure with the more advanced improvisation national standards recommended for middle school and high school. To be able to teach improvisation according to these advanced standards, music teachers would have to become proficient at improvising in at least one “style” of music.

I continued to survey music teachers during my summer 2000 workshops. When asked, “How confident are you in your present ability

to improvise jazz?” the mean was 1.8 on a scale from 1 (low) to 4 (high). When asked, “How interested are you in learning to become a better jazz improviser?” the mean was 3.5 out of 4. They also indicated an interest in learning to improvise in the following styles: Classical, world, African, Latin, Gospel, atonal, contemporary, popular, Armenian, Irish, Cajun, and folk. It is clear that the lack of improvisation practice is not for lack of interest but rather for lack of training.

Using the exact wording from the National Standards, teachers were asked, “How confident are you in your ability to teach students to improvise original melodies over given chord progressions?” The mean was 1.8 for jazz and 2.2 for a style other than jazz. When asked, “How confident are you in your ability to teach students to improvise harmonizing parts in jazz style?” the mean was 1.65, and in a style other than jazz, 1.85. It is apparent that teachers are minimally confident in their ability to teach improvisation in any style.

No matter what style of improvisation is to be learned, both convergent and divergent thinking are at play. Without the internalized rules of a musical style, divergent production often sounds out of context. This is frequently heard when a novice jazz singer scats but is obviously unaware of the chord progression and the jazz tonal language.

I propose a model for teaching improvisation. This model organizes the predictors of improvisation achievement (Madura, 1996) into convergent (rule-following) and divergent (freeing) thinking experiences.

Instrument/Voice Lessons (convergent): Musical ideas cannot be fully expressed without technical control of one’s instrument/voice. Because technical limits can stunt creative growth, ongoing study with a teacher and a commitment to practice are essential.

Listening and Accurate Imitation of Models (convergent): This step is paramount in the internalization of any style and should be structured to include rhythmic exercises first, followed by melodic and harmonic. Jazz ear-training methods are available for this purpose. Also invaluable is the exercise of learning and transcribing jazz master solos from recordings. There is no substitute for immersion in the listening (both live and to recordings) and accurate imitating for effective improvisation in any style. This focused activity should start

when the student is young.

Call and Varied Response (divergent): While students are learning a particular style's language through the call and imitated response activities of the previous step, they should also be encouraged to create varied, original, and elaborated responses while keeping some aspect of the call similar. This will simultaneously reinforce both the value of rule-following and the freedom of rule-breaking.

Study of Theoretical Materials (convergent): Because of the plethora of sub-styles that have developed within jazz, learning through listening and imitating alone is no longer sufficient. Cognitive understanding of jazz theory and its notation make learning more efficient and can be gained through formal study.

Performed Improvisations (divergent): It is a fact that scheduled performances motivate musicians to practice. The same is true for improvisation learning. Teachers should feature short improvisations (or memorized transcriptions) by all students in every concert or final class project.

Self-Assessment and Expert Assessment of Improvisations (convergent and divergent): At each stage of the model, self-assessment of tape-recorded improvisations, as well as expert/teacher feedback, should occur. Besides attention to stylistic appropriateness, divergent thinking questions might include: What musical aspects could be varied or developed to make it more interesting? What could be added or deleted to create more drama or suspense? Did you enjoy the experience? If not, what could you do to make the experience more of an expression of yourself?

Flexible Environment (divergent): It goes without saying that this model requires a music classroom that is safe and encouraging for improvisation attempts, but it must be kept in mind that an unchanging environment will eventually result in rigid responses. In order to challenge students to adapt to new and unexpected musical situations and thus achieve higher levels of improvisation skill, open and variable environments should be sought out (Koestler, 1964). Providing students with ample opportunities to participate in jam sessions at

improvisation clinics, festivals, and conferences is vital.

Not included in this model is any reference to the individual personality. As teachers, we want to be able to enhance the creative thinking skills of all students, not only those we consider talented. One major factor that will influence the quality of their creative efforts is their motivation to improvise. Therefore, it is essential that teachers seek out a variety of the very best musical models to inspire their students.

Improvisation is a skill that most musicians wish they had in order to free themselves from the tyranny of the written page. Motivated in large part by the National Standards, music teachers are struggling to address both the lack of improvisation in their own training and the need for instruction for their students. Many are under the false impression that an “anything goes” philosophy is valid for creative improvisation attempts, or that improvisation skill is simply a gift and not a result of “long arduous striving” (Koestler, 1964, p. 201).

There are no short cuts to learning to improvise creatively, but following a model such as this can produce positive results. After teaching a five-day intensive vocal jazz workshop for teachers (n=12), I compared pre- and post-workshop scores and found that their confidence in their ability to improvise jazz increased 40% and their ability to teach students to improvise original melodies over given chord progressions increased 57%.

Despite claims that “improvisation cannot be taught,” it is hoped that this model will give teachers a tangible tool to assist in designing experiences to enhance the creative improvisation potential of their students. It is also my hope that two opposing myths might begin to be dispelled: that “anything goes” in improvisation and that it is a mysterious gift bestowed upon only a talented few. These mind-sets inadvertently permit an easy way out of the dedication and “long arduous striving” on which creative improvisation depends.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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