

Breaking Down Barriers with Jazz Improvisation

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So many students today learn instruments in band class, and through that experience, they are often taught a certain way. They learn music, en masse, from method books, which is a great way of familiarizing them with written music – rhythms, reading pitches, articulations and details. They get very comfortable with this process, and often become proficient at it a high level. However, sometimes elements of musical training are missing with this approach – specifically, the ear, and a sense of musical **creativity**.

Personally, this was the path I experienced in my formative years. As a saxophonist, I learned that if I pushed down certain keys (the saxophone has a lot of buttons!), the correct note would come out. I didn't particularly need to develop my ear to have success with this method. In fact, it wasn't until I was considering a career that I realized this deficiency.

Along the way, I did get experience as a jazz soloist. I had a lot of technique, so I was able to get in front of a band and 'impress' with my dexterous abilities on the saxophone. I had been told the correct notes I could use in situations, and I started to create. It worked out for me and I continued this practice, eventually evolving with experience into a more complete improviser. However, for a lot of other students, they never get this chance. They become engaged with the success that they've had with written music, and don't want to take the risk of being creative (especially when others are already ahead of them on this curve – looking bad in front of peers, even when there shouldn't be risk, is a daunting challenge for any teenager).

This project involved student outreach, where I've done clinics with students of varying levels, trying to give them some experience and confidence with this artform. I will explain my method and my rationale for the elements of the process. I've found that this content has been effective in a wide variety of situations, and the clinics covered the following demographics:

Ages:	Middle school and secondary school
Schools:	Public board, separate board, private school
Streams:	Conventional school and arts school
Playing experience:	As low as 1 year, as to 4 years
Jazz experience:	No jazz experience, up to moderate jazz experience

An important feature of the clinic involves the **setup**. I try to have the students in a semi-circle, or if they'll be in rows, I try to make sure that there are spaces I can so that stand next to anybody I'd like. I also remove all the music stands – sending an early message – and it helps with the physical pathways in the room. It's nice to eliminate the visual barrier and distraction, too.

I typically open the clinic with a solo saxophone piece. I play a jazz standard, embellish the melody, and then take a brief improvised solo. I like to have them hear my sound and time feel, and to get comfortable with me as an expert. Often, they are unfamiliar with jazz – or haven't heard it at this level up close – so it is an effective **ice breaker**. I'm relaxed and smiling about the performance, so they also realize that I'm here to have fun and to play. After all, the verb we use with music is **PLAY** – it should be fun!

Depending on the room, I'll often initiate a brief discussion about jazz and improvisation, asking them if they're familiar with what I've just performed, or what I'm doing. I'll ask them what they hear and what they notice, and I'll go from there. It's often a chance to get a feel for their experience, and their personalities, all while I get a chance to establish some rapport. It ends up being helpful as a way to transitioning into the next topic.

Step 1: One Note at a Time

At this point, I'm keen to play. I want to actively **engage** each student in the room, no matter how many people I'm dealing with. I open up this portion of the clinic with the 'One Note Game.' I give these simple instructions: "I will play one note, then you will play one note. Do not ask questions." (I then pause for a second, and then add 'Don't worry. It'll be clear what you should do!') At this point, I'll pick a side of the room, go to the person on the end, will make eye contact, and will randomly play a note. After s/he responds, I'll quickly make eye contact with the next student, and will repeat the process. I'll quickly make my way around the room, sometimes repeating with a student, sometimes jumping back or ahead, sometimes running to someone on the other side of the room, always to keep the students alert knowing that they could be next (despite a giant group!) and need to be ready. It also forces them not to be able to prepare, which effectively levels the playing field.

I do my best to almost randomly play notes – I vary the pitch, duration, attack, volume, pacing – and will try to initiate a pseudo dialogue within the group. They can hear the themes that I'm starting to connect, even if they aren't sure or can't fully predict what is coming next. After 3-5 minutes – a few times around the room if possible – I stop for a quick discussion. I ask them "What did they think about when they chose their note?" And when I get some blank looks, or some responses along the lines of randomness, I ask them "What decisions did you make when you played your note?" At this point, I start to explain that they've actually done a number of things instinctively – choose pitch, duration, volume, articulation and any other effect on their note. And not only that, they've often related it to something that I've done – similar register, similar duration, similar pacing or dynamic. And furthermore, I point out they've made **choices** there too – they had the option to mimic me in any of those areas (which tends to be the default, as I am the 'leader' and expert in the process) or find a way to contrast me. It is amazing to track all of the subtle things that are happening in such a simple exercise!

Step 2: Two notes!

After this discussion, I'm looking for ways to continue to engage them and expand the process. At this point, I'll often ask them what is next, and with a smile, I'll hold up two fingers and nod. I'll quickly move to the first person, and will repeat the process with two notes. At this point, I'm consciously expanding the types of things that I'll play: small intervals, wide intervals, repeated notes, differing registers, contrasting volumes, gaps between the two notes, repeating patterns and dialogues with students. If possible, I'll stick with a student for quite a while to expand the **dialogue** and conversation with him/her, just to see the types of responses I'll get. I'll still be engaging as many people as I can, as quickly as I can, jumping around the room and surprising students to keep them on their toes. I often make a point of spending extra rounds with the drummers, as the lack of available pitch forces creativity on the drum kit.

After a few minutes of this, I'll re-open the discussion. Keeping in mind the responses and all of the variables that went into choosing a single note, I go through the process (as described when I choose my notes) to show them that the possibilities have now expanded geometrically. And I try to show them that they are capable of making many choices, without conscious thought, which is the heart of beginning to improvise. As improvisation is categorized as being in the moment, any resistance between thought and action – which includes thinking about and fearing the process – can be reduced through comfort and experience. By taking these **tiny chunks** of the process and breaking them down, it becomes easier to expand the challenges bit by bit.

Step 3: Three notes! Or phrases!

At this point, depending on time available or the experience level, I will either repeat the process with three notes (although I don't typically belabour the exercise or the discussion) or I'll jump ahead to phrases. If I'm continuing with phrases, I'll explain "I will play a phrase, then you will play a phrase." I'll typically vary my phrase lengths, and this gives me an opportunity to challenge the best and most comfortable students I've been able to identify after the first few exercises. I will isolate certain students for extended dialogue, and I will allow students who are less comfortable to use short phrases, sometimes of a single note or two. With this additional freedom, I find that students embrace the challenge. They are aware that they have a lot of power, and embrace the opportunity to take risks. **Risk-taking** is one of the central themes for the developing jazz improviser, and it is helpful to introduce this element at this early stage. I will often spend a fair amount of time playing phrases, and typically have a lot of success with this facet of the process. I also find that students, who may have been skeptical at the beginning, often embrace this piece and are surprised by their ability to create.

Sometimes at this point as an aside, I mention personal **practice**. While I share some tips about practice, the biggest thing that I offer at this juncture is to suggest that they spend time playing creatively on their own at home. They can experiment with sounds that their instrument can make, mess around with tonality and scales, or just goof around in general. Getting more familiar with the instrument, as well as exercising their creative muscle, can go a long way to future jazz process and success.

Interlude step: Mid-exercise reflection, and the introduction of words/language

After a significant amount of time being spent playing freely, I tend to take a bit of a break. I will often ask the room if they are nervous, or if they were nervous at the start. I'll also ask about their own levels of success, as well as how they think things sound, in general terms, from the other students. Being aware of these feelings can also help break down some barriers. Furthermore, I'll bring up the element of **self-expression**. I find in doing these clinics, you can quickly assess people's personalities. I'll ask them if they feel like they know me, and they often say they feel comfortable and will express that they have a sense of who I am. At this point, I'll point out that they've known me for less than 30 minutes! However, given my character, quirkiness and creativity, they're able to assess who I am through my music and my instrument, and I feel like I know them too, through these 'mini-relationships' that get formed through the musical dialogue. It is very powerful!

After that brief discussion, lately I've taken to adding an additional component: what if we tried the one note game again, but with words? I will repeat the process as before, going around the room, but I will choose **words** and will see what type of responses I get. I will choose random things – often fruit! – but will sometimes use words without direct physical representations, like hope or love or sadness. I will enhance the conversation by using opposites, or will repeat words (mine and theirs!). For further engagement, I might choose words that live in the classroom (chair, desk, clock, teacher) or on their clothes (Nike, sweatshirt, earrings, Raptor). I enjoy watching them as they start to unravel my thought process during the exercise. They start to learn the value and effectiveness of **surprise**, and as well as the power of the set up.

	<u>Example 1</u>	<u>Example 2</u>	<u>Example 3</u>
Dave:	One!	Apple!	Steak!
Student:	Two?	Orange?	Potato?
Dave:	Three!	Banana!!	STEAK!
Student:	Four	Peach?	Potato.
Dave:	SIX!!	PEACH!!!!	AARDVARK!
Student: (pause)	Um, seven?	Um, Banana?	Potato?

It's pretty **fun!** At this point, I ask them whether they can predict where I am going, and get mixed, albeit excited, responses. I also ask them if they find this easier than the one-note game on their instruments, and universally they seem to. (This actually surprises me, as I feel like they might be more invested and potentially more embarrassed, but they cite that they are so much more familiar with language than music/instrument, that they can think and respond naturally. I do see their point!). At this juncture, I make the comment that music and language actually have a lot of parallels, and I'll leave the point with them to ponder as they further their musical pursuits down the road.

Step four (choice): Add pulse/tempo/meter (or) Add tonality

At this point, I try to connect the exercises we've been doing to **conventional jazz performance**. The creative playing that we've done to this point may not feel like jazz, but it is actually closer than one might expect. Since we've started creating phrases, essentially the only differences between that and being able to play on tunes are the introduction of tempo and tonality. While jazz is obviously more complex than that, getting comfortable with those two things will go a long way. It is a good opportunity to isolate these concepts and to break down further barriers.

Tempo: Exercise using tempo: I will play two bars of 4/4, and the first student will 'answer' me. S/he can play whatever they'd like, but I will make sure that I enter on beat one of my bar. I'll often play a total of 8 bars with each student before I move on to the next person. I'm hyper clear with my own rhythmic exposition, to make sure that they know when their turn is supposed to begin (I'll even provide eye contact and subtle horn cues to provide further comfort). It's also important to do this using straight eighths – while swing is an important component of jazz, given that they have less experience with it, it tends to add a challenge that we don't need at this point. If I feel like a drummer in the room is strong enough, sometimes I'll have him/her play along, but I'm often happy enough to have the students convey the tempo without additional support – they are often surprised that they can do it without drums.

If I'm having success, I might expend it to 4 bar phrases, or extend the dialogue with each student, but I find that sticking to 2 bar chunks is most effective. They can experience success, and even if the tempo slides or they struggle, so little time elapses that they aren't forced into uncomfortable (and embarrassing) silence. Being able to **protect** the students through this process, by providing a bit of a **safety net**, can go a long way to letting them take some **risks**.

Tonality: Sometimes, rather than tempo, I'll go into dealing with **pitch**. This mimics deeper jazz improvisation, and starts to show how one would deal with chords. After all, in the moment, jazz is often dealing with just one chord – admittedly, the challenge starts occurring as chords move, but knowing what to do on a given chord is the first step.

I will often teach the Dorian scale (mode II of the major scale) in Bb concert. Since the second note of a Bb scale is C, we learn C Dorian. (C D Eb F G A Bb C). It's a user-friendly scale, and while it is related to what they know, it is just different enough to provide a new context.

After teaching the scale, I like to start with the following exercise: I play a two bar phrase in the key, starting simply, and always on C. Then, I'll get the group to play it back to me. I'll always start in a scalar and rhythmic manner to ensure success. Bit by bit I'll make it more complex, eventually adding leaps. I'm trying to get the sound in their ear, as well as enhancing their rhythmic vocabulary for later. Also, if they struggle, it forces them to make it up – **that's improvising!** Once they become familiar with the scale, I will then go around the room, trading phrases in the key with each student. (At this point, it can be done freely, or with tempo – they are often fine with either option.) We are now able to play, in a key, with tempo, with full creativity – that's real jazz!!

If there is a rhythm section present, I might have them play a Latin groove to go along with the C minor vibe. If the group is really working well, I'll start to introduce other tonalities. I find that using two minor keys a minor third apart can really help the process of the students switching keys. They can hear the shift, but they need to be able to clearly articulate the notes in both keys to make the transition. Playing 8 bars of D minor, followed by 8 bars of F minor, and creating a loop of these keys, is often an effective and **user-friendly** method for a class of students with transposing instruments.

Now that we've gone through all of this, typically the students (and myself!) are exhausted. It takes a lot of energy to think, be creative and in the moment, and to expand your artistry. We've gone through a long journey of new content, and I've found that isolating the elements of the music can go a long way to allowing students with little experience to start to see a potential path for future exploration. Effective education is allowing students an opportunity for themselves to explore new avenues, and hopefully this process will inspire some to take up the cause.