

Teaching through music

Using the joy of music to foster cooperation & communication

For a long time, I had difficulty making a choice between community responsibility and music. On the one hand, I felt that it was important to work towards a more just and equal society, while on the other hand, my love was music. I was sure that what we needed were people, especially in the younger generation, who could “think outside the box,” (creatively) and who could be leaders.

But how do we inspire such independent, creative thinking? And what was my place in that inspiration? The further I examined successful communication and self-confidence, and the more I worked as a music performer and educator, the more I saw that art, and music in particular, can play an important role in teaching these important skills.

Eventually, I combined my interests of leadership education and music: not just to perform and teach music, but to teach leadership through music.

This article is intended for educators asking similar questions: What are some new and innovative ways to teach young people effective communication? And how can we help foster the self-esteem and confidence they need to be future leaders?

I am not arguing that music, by itself, is the solution. However, I suggest that music can make a unique contribution towards teachers’ efforts to improve communication and leadership in their classrooms.

This article explores why musical improvisation can be helpful in the classroom and in life, and will offer some practical examples that teachers can try, as well as giving teachers some suggestions about ways to create their own new games.

I. Improvisation as a tool for communication & cooperation

Music offers some opportunities that may be helpful to classroom teachers; this article discusses improvised music, or music made by a group of students who are creating something new without any previous planning or practice.

Improvised music can help groups of people listen to and communicate with each other, connecting in ways that continue after the music-making



experience. People who improvise often will tell you that the secret of success in group improvisation is listening. This is listening in a deep sense—requiring and improving the ability to tune-in, listen and cooperate with the other members of the group. This is because good improvisation is a process in which individual participants work closely together in a joint project. It is a thrilling, exciting process of in-the-moment creativity and discovery.

When I improvise music with someone else, “He doesn’t know where I’m going, I don’t know where he’s going, yet we anticipate, sense, lead and follow each other” (Nachmanovitch 94). Improvisers must be ready to find their way through musical twists and turns together, and for this to happen, they must be open to the many types of information exchanged back and forth, from sounds to gestures and eye contact.

Group members must, in other words, adjust to one another, carefully watching, sensing, listening and changing their own behavior.

Here is an example of a simple improvisation game:

Drum Jam

Students’ age: 13-adult

Size of group: A maximum of 15. When groups are larger, try splitting the group into two and leading each group in turn.

Requirements:

- A drum, or simple stick percussion instrument, for each student. If drums are not available, instruments can be improvised from everyday items. For example, a large plastic water bottle, a pot or a bucket can make an excellent drum.
- Teacher’s comfort playing simple, repetitive patterns on the drum.
- A sense of rhythm and beat.

Goals for the students:

- Be able to play short patterns on the drum.
- Remember the patterns that each student plays.
- As a group, be able to echo and play back patterns played by others.
- Be able to work together, playing one drum pattern on top of others.
- Be able to lead the group, signaling “loud,” “soft,” “start,” and “stop.”

1. Sit in a circle. Hand out drums or improvised instruments. The teacher leads brief echo (play back) game, creating a simple pattern of four beats at a medium speed. The group echoes the beat and plays the four beats back. The teacher creates a few more patterns, encouraging the group to echo the patterns correctly. Keep patterns four-beats long in order to establish a pattern length.

After a while, decide on one pattern and repeat it. Use verbal instructions as little as possible. Try to lead without talking at all, just using body language to communicate to the participants how to echo your beat—quick or slow, soft or loud.

2. Using a flat palm (rather than a pointed finger), the teacher points to a student. The student plays a pattern. The group repeats and echoes.

Go back and forth between people, coming back to students for a second or third time. When a student remembers the pattern she/he played, praise their good memory. This will encourage other participants to remember one pattern and to return to it each time you point to them.

The important thing as a teacher is to



stick to one pattern—but it is best to allow the participants to “arrive” at this on their own, rather than telling them to do so. Using the same flat palm gesture, keep pointing to individuals that have already played as you go around the circle, to reinforce their memory and keep the group’s attention. (They must pay attention because you might call on anyone at any time!)

3. Using a flat palm, the teacher gestures toward a participant (choose someone with good beat) and uses a ‘stop’ hand motion to the rest of the group to stop them from echoing. The teacher points to the same participant and that participant plays her/his pattern alone.

With your hand, motion to that person to keep playing the same beat pattern.

Choose another participant (again, one with a strong beat!) and point to them, bringing them in, and motion to the two students to bring their patterns together.

Using your hands, gesture to the two playing students to watch and listen to one another.

After a minute, point to a third student, signal them to add their pattern to the others, and gesture to the three playing students to watch and listen to one another.

Gradually add other students, layering the drum patterns. Do not be afraid to take students out if their pattern does not work—some patterns are good for the base and some are good for extra decoration. Bring these in later!

The teacher can use words if needed: “Listen carefully to each other. If your pattern doesn’t work, change it so it fits. Keep feeling the beat inside you. What’s that beat we had at the beginning? Stick to it!”

4. Once several participants are playing, try some simple conducting (leading or directing the musicians):

- Use eye contact and body language to let participants know whom you are directing.

- By raising your flat hand, you can communicate an increase or decrease in volume.

- Make up a clear hand signal that will mean “stop.”

- To add someone to the playing group, count to four on the beat (you can use fingers to count, instead of speaking). On the fourth beat, raise your arms and shoulders high and inhale. Then exhale with a strong “phew” and bring your hand back down, pointing to that person as he or she starts drumming. Be very big and animated!

How to conduct:

- Conduct individual students, telling them to play louder or softer.

- Conduct any part of the group or the whole group.

- Tell any part of the group to stop or start again.

Once all are playing, experiment with different things. Try taking just one student out and leaving only a few in. Gradually add people back in.

5. As the teacher who is conducting the class, find an ending for the drum song that your class has made.

6. Brief discussion with the students: What worked? What can we improve next time?

7. Lead the group in practicing by conducting a stop and a start, and an increase and decrease in volume, as you just did. Then invite a guest conductor from the group to take over your job.

8. Repeat with different students conducting the class.

II. Lessons from this game

As this game shows, improvised music is larger than each of its different parts. Each person adds to the final piece of

music, but it does not come just from any one player. “Nor does the work come from a compromise or halfway point ... but from a third place that isn’t necessarily like what either one of us would do individually. It is ... not a matter of meeting halfway. It is a matter of developing something new to both of us” (Nachmanovitch 94-5).

Cooking is a useful comparison. Each one of our patterns in this game is simple and repetitive, like an ingredient, like a potato or an onion. Try eating only onions, or only potatoes, and you’ll quickly be bored. But if you put the onion and the potato together, and add some spices, it is the start of something new and delicious.

In creating this new music, each player must listen to, and work with, the group. To succeed, I must listen to you and fit my part to yours. You must do the same with me. And the next participant must listen to your part and to my part and then add her part, making changes so that it fits, and so on with other players. If the players stop listening to one another, the rhythm will quickly turn into chaos.

Just as each ingredient is necessary for the soup, each player’s part is important to the group. The music could not be what it is without each person’s contribution, making each participant an equally valuable player. Also, successful improvisation is a process of cooperation. Working together requires musical group members to accept and support the ideas of other members while also making their own contribution. Improvisation can be seen not only as a community activity, but also as a celebration of individuals’ different contributions.

It is important to remember that communication in musical improvisation is

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◀◀ “CHANGE” CONTINUED

more positive attention to the change and the fact that you and your community are doing something to make the world a better place ... and although we might not all agree on what that looks like, we all feel good about the idea of trying.

Very often during the change process, people encounter “bumps in the road,” obstacles they imagined or did not imagine they might find. It is essential to not just hit these bumps, but to meet them and then ride right over them in the best

way possible. This may mean needing to revise your plan. Often people get side-tracked and/or discouraged if they start their plan and obstacles arise or they feel overwhelmed.

Abandoning a plan too soon is one of the biggest downfalls I see in people and communities trying to make change. Making mistakes and “falling down” is part of the process, and like the Chinese proverb states “fall down seven, get up eight;” the key is to “get back up.”

Getting back up can include reassessing your needs or your plan, asking and acquiring more help, or just remembering to congratulate yourself and others

before moving forward again.

One of the most important truths about making change is that change is inevitable. What is not inevitable is what kinds of change will happen and who will benefit or not benefit from these changes. Being part of creating change in your own life or in your community is noble and worthwhile.

Although change can often take time and a lot of work, remembering to think both long and short term is important. It is essential to stay positive and believe in your vision.

You and your allies can keep you moving forward one step (or two) at a time.

◀◀ “MUSIC” CONTINUED

mostly nonverbal. Rhythm, melody and harmony, and body movement are the shared messages, letting people work together even if they do not speak the same language. Such nonverbal communication also does not have the problems that come from normal speech, like misunderstandings; this is important for individuals who often disagree or compete with each other.

A few additional observations may be useful to teachers wishing to try such games. One of the unique parts of group music making is that the music is a reward on its own. The pleasure of good music can motivate students. When it succeeds, the music is thrilling. And once participants begin to experience the joy of the group’s music making, they usually want to make it succeed and do well. The learning, communication and cooperation become a way of reaching this musical goal, so teachers do not need to tell the students that the goal of the experience is the strengthening of cooperative communication skills. Let their goal be the excitement and fun of good music.

Secondly, it is important to understand that the individual drum parts repeat themselves because predictability (expecting that someone will do something before he or she does it) is important for players to work together. While change is valuable, it is difficult to work in an environment that is constantly different. It can become random, unorganized and chaotic, and players will become confused and not know how to work with the music or each other. Repetition of simple drum patterns is a helpful solution. Also, it is important to realize that improvisation can be frightening to those who are new to it.

For beginners, successful music improvisation games give just a few limited choices. Limits are important because they create a sense of safety. Participants are not asked to do “just anything.” As my own teacher says, controlling choices is the difference between improvisation that is scary and improvisation that is exciting. Limits also inspire creativ-



ity because they free participants from asking “what next?” out of many, many options; instead, limits allow the player’s energy to be directed towards the way one makes the few moves allowed, not which move to make.

“If you have all the colors available, you are sometimes almost too free. With one dimension constrained, play becomes freer in other dimensions” (Nachmanovitch 85).

In this game, players can only repeat patterns of four beats—not any number of beats.

Finally, each musical improvisation is a chance to talk as a class about what worked and what could be improved. If simple recording equipment is available, it is useful to record each improvisation, then listen to it and look for areas of strength and improvement. Not only does this help students realize areas of strength and weakness, it also acts as a focusing tool: When you are recorded, everything you do “counts.” This can be particularly helpful for groups that become distracted.

III. Conclusion

Experience with musical improvisation, when continued over a long time, can affect other parts of a person’s life.

As one practices listening and work-

ing with other people in these musical ways, a person’s thoughts about other group members might change: they can become important contributors; we can cooperate with them; and it can be useful to listen to them.

However, music should not be alone in working to create such cooperative communication. Other activities, such as sports, outdoor activities and cooperative classroom games, also provide opportunities for learning these skills.

Work cited:
Nachmanovitch, Stephen. *Free Play: The Power of Improvisation in Life and the Arts*. Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tacher, Inc, 1990.

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◀◀ “FACILITATION” CONTINUED

cured “here and now” in the group (with another person, subgroup, entire group or facilitators) and in the daily “out of the room” real world. This is both an integration of the materials—the stimuli—and an integration of one’s life.

The facilitator is keenly aware of respecting a participant’s defenses, yet works to challenge previously held positions and invites the participants to reach their own conclusions.

The facilitator searches for previously unknown, suppressed, or denied materials, and searches also for opportunities for “the corrective experience,” (the opportunity to correct or readjust something with other members, with him/herself or with the “real” world).

The facilitator will invite participants to alleviate their burdens, at times merely by venting and sharing, and at other times by processing.

The facilitator deals mostly with group process and members’ processing. She/he rarely deals with content, does not “correct” introduced materials, and keeps her/his views, opinions, and needs out of the group.

It is the facilitator’s responsibility to see to it that each participant has an opportunity to grow, and to make sure that no participant leaves the group in worse shape than when he/she began the encounter. The facilitator must challenge yet “do no damage!”

The group work spirals, while often dealing with the same or similar materials from different points of view or levels of “maturity.” Skills, bonds, understandings, and sensitivities grow throughout the process. Connections are formed between emotions, assumptions, relationships, stances and people, both as individuals and as groups. Learning, change, growth and application to life is the name of the game. As the group progresses over time, it becomes more and more capable of

handling its task directly and efficiently.

The facilitator is also responsible for the design of the proper setting for each particular group. The facilitator reminds the groups of the pre-established theme (peace & conflict, for example), the unique members of the group, the subgroups, and the time allotted, and helps establish realistic goals to be reached.

She/he then designs the means to reach these goals and systematically leads the group, to learning and growth, while aiding the members in reaching their personal goals.

All of this must occur while respecting the other participants’ difficulties. It is not easy; a natural part of the leading process is the opposition of the group to the facilitator.

As reflection, self analysis, expression of feelings and experiences, and personal changes can be painful, the group often opposes and resists the facilitator in her/his attempts to bring out these difficult but important parts of the experience.

The facilitator must come to the group as “clean” as possible, meaning that she/he has already worked through and personally processed most of the materials likely to arise during the group’s work.

This is achieved by a long training period which offers opportunities to face the conflicting participants, their stances, attitudes, emotions, behavior, assumptions, etc.

The training period also enhances the facilitator’s sensitivities, skills and knowledge so that she/he is prepared for the task. “Cleanliness” is maintained by supervision of both the facilitator and the work group’s performance.

A further development of this technique is presently evolving. It is the development of a new profession—the “Peace Facilitator.” Such a profession will be based upon these facilitation, mediation and coaching skills, as well as the knowledge and skills used by organizational consultants as they attempt to change an

organization’s culture. The notion is to apply all of these skills to structured attempts at changing the culture of conflict-ridden societies.

The Peace Facilitator profession will, of necessity, deal with analyzing national, bi-national and international situations and processes, and with seizing relevant windows of opportunity. It must develop small inter-connected structures, such as encounter groups, discussion groups, exhibitions, demonstrations etc., which will ultimately lead to a massive change in the status quo of a conflict.

Work with children and youth peace education is extremely important and should be systematically developed, in parallel to facilitation, to be effective in bringing about and maintaining peace. Societies with a culture of conflict probably need to introduce a systematic kindergarten-to-university peace studies program to replace the dominant culture of conflict.

An example of such a program is the de-Nazification programs used in post-World War II Germany. Facilitation is one of the skills that can be used by such a school system to achieve the described goal, but it cannot be the sole tool. The emphasis of the Peace Facilitator is the society at large.

All changes happen in the mind and are then acted out in reality. If we want to improve reality, we must effect the minds and hearts of the people. Imagination, determination, a systematic approach, analyzing, processing and acting are the keys to effecting change via facilitation.

Danny Metzl is Co-Director of the Seeds of Peace facilitation courses, along with his colleague Farhat Agbaria. The two facilitated at the Seeds of Peace cross-border educators’ workshop on facilitation in Wadi Rum in January 2008. Participants included Palestinian, Israeli, and Jordanian Delegation Leaders and Palestinian and Israeli participants in the Seeds of Peace facilitation course.

◀◀ “REFLECTIONS” CONTINUED

I soon realized is just a front, a deterrent. Behind the armor, they were just as welcoming and hospitable.

In fact, the most heartening thing about this trip was meeting a wide range of people on both sides who, more than anything else, wanted peace.

At the Pesach Seder at Avi’s family home, it was my privilege to be seated at the head of the table, right next to Avi. Here, I partook of an important family ritual commemorating the Israelite exodus from Egypt. It felt like home—togetherness, prayers, good food, wine and song.

I stayed with Avi in his home and

learned more about the complexities of life in these parts.

Later, I traveled further north, up to Akko where I was surprised to find Arabs and Jews living together. Similarly in the ancient city of Jaffa, I got a glimpse of how life used to be not so long ago.

As I traveled around, I was struck by how completely enmeshed people’s lives are, their histories and their places of worship. I wondered how they’d ever be able to carve the land up into two. Wouldn’t it be easier to learn to live together with mutual respect, peace and understanding? But I also know that this is easier said than done.

By the end of my trip, I began to feel that we’re still going to need Seeds

of Peace for some more time to come, that until both sides accept each other as equals in this conflict, be it India-Pakistan or Israel-Palestine, there is not going to be enduring peace.

Until then, we as Delegation Leaders will need to continue planting more Seeds and nurture them carefully.

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