

## **Collaborative Music and Dance Improvisation Project:**

### **Investigating Perspectives**

By

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#### **Abstract**

*The 2014 National Core Arts Standards identify creating as one of three primary artistic processes. Music educators have often reported the improvising content standard of the 1994 version of the national standards challenging to implement outside of the jazz setting. With the intent of increasing pre-service teachers' competence, confidence, and comfort level in implementing improvisation activities, this research explores participant (N=15) perceptions regarding these areas following a collaborative music and dance free-improvisation project. Research questions were: How does a collaborative music and dance free improvisation project impact pre-service music teachers' perceived competence, confidence, and comfort in their improvisation skills? How does a collaborative music and dance free improvisation project impact pre-service music teachers' perceived competence, confidence, and comfort in implementing improvisation activities? Themes that resulted from a simple content analysis of the data included apprehension, growth, time constraint challenges, creating in new ways, thinking about improvisation differently, and opening new cross-media collaboration possibilities. Positive participants' perceptions increased following the improvisation experience.*

**Keywords:** creativity, improvisation, collaborative project, cross-media, music and dance

One of the nine 1994 U.S. National Standards (Music Educators National Conference, 1994) that music educators have often reported challenging to implement outside of the jazz setting is the improvisation standard (Content Standard #3: Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments). Now that the standards have been revised (renamed the National Core Arts Standards) and creating has been elevated to one of three primary artistic processes, the creative activity of improvising is more important than ever (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014).

Music education researchers and philosophers also confirm its importance. Reimer (1989) wrote “we must pay far more attention than we ever have to improvisation as a mode of musical creativity” (p. 34). Hickey (1997) asserted that improvisation can be used in jazz, and in non-jazz music classes. According to Hickey, improvisation frees “the students’ reliance upon the notes on a page and strengthen[s] their reliance on their ears” (p. 19). Further, Hickey and Webster (2001) wrote that improvisation engages students at a high level of musical thinking. According to Gordon (1980/1997), “creativity and improvisation represent the unfolding of what students know, based on discriminations they have made in the past” (p. 129), and Azzara (1999) stated that improvising “provides a way for music students to express their understanding of music from within themselves” (p. 25). Finally, Reese (2001) wrote that improvisation is a process through which music educators can “put into practice today’s emphasis on student-centered learning, creative and critical thinking, problem solving, working cooperatively with others, and new forms of student assessment” (p. 53). The current research examines a collaborative music and dance improvisation project designed to provide undergraduate students in a choral methods course experience with the creative

activity of improvising. The intent was to increase the students' competence, confidence, and comfort level in implementing improvisation activities.

### **Related Research**

Research conducted by Abrahams (2000), Bell (2003), Byo (1999), Louk (2002), Orman (2002), and Riley (2009) examined a combination of pre-service and in-service music educators' and general educators' awareness of, attitudes toward, and perceived ability to implement the 1994 standards, and supported the perception that the improvisation standard was indeed challenging outside of the jazz setting. Abrahams (2000) studied the extent to which goals, structure, student experiences, instruction, and evaluation of pre-service music educators in two teacher education programs were consistent with the standards. He found that learning about the standards did not begin until college, and that students were lacking in their improvisation ability. Bell (2003) investigated the effect of various experiences with the standards on the perceived ability of in-service music educators enrolled in a semester-long graduate course to teach using them, and reported that 36% identified the improvising standard as the most difficult to implement. Byo (1999) researched perceptions of elementary school music teachers and fourth-grade general education teachers to determine their opinions regarding implementing the standards, and found the improvising and composing standards to be least favorably perceived. Orman (2002) studied elementary school general music teachers to observe the amount of time devoted to each of the standards, and found that class time was spent on all nine of the standards, but that the least class time was devoted to the evaluating, composing, and improvising standards. Louk (2002) investigated fourth-grade general music teachers to determine their attitudes toward and implementation of the standards. She found that the teachers regarded the evaluating,

improvising, and composing standards as least important, and that high correlations between the teachers' attitudes and practice existed. Lastly, Riley (2009) explored perceptions of pre-service music educators regarding their awareness of and ability to implement the standards, and found the least favorably perceived standards were the composing standard, followed by the understanding relationships, and improvising standards. Riley also reported that favorable perceptions toward implementation of the standards increased after students engaged in experiences with the standards, especially in the areas of training, ability, time, and resources to effectively implement them.

The purpose of the current research was to explore the perspective of pre-service music teachers regarding their competence, confidence, and comfort in their improvisation skills and in implementing improvisation activities following a collaborative music and dance free-improvisation project. Research questions were

- How does a collaborative music and dance free improvisation project impact pre-service music teachers' perceived competence, confidence, and comfort in their improvisation skills?
- How does a collaborative music and dance free improvisation project impact pre-service music teachers' perceived competence, confidence, and comfort in implementing improvisation activities?

### **Method**

Participants ( $N=15$ ) were pre-service music educators in their second or third year of a music education degree program enrolled in a choral music methods course. In this collaborative project, two to three musicians (music education students) and one to two dancers (students in a dance improvisation course) combined to create a free-improvisation music/dance piece in response to a video prompt. The pre-selected videos

were assigned at random on the first day of the project. The music, dance, and video functioned as a triangle—the musicians responded to the video, the dancers, and each other; and the dancers responded to the video, the musicians, and each other. The music education students viewed videos on their program-provided iPads. It was stipulated that the improvised music include singing and accompaniment. The length of each improvisation was assigned to be two to three minutes; and the entire project length consisted of two 50-minute sessions. Data included video of the improvisation performances and post-project reflection papers. Questions guiding the reflections were: What was it like collaborating with dancers to create this improvisation piece? What did you like best and least about this project? What were the challenges that you encountered and how did you respond to them? How do you think this project impacted your competence, confidence, and comfort in your improvisation skills? How do you think participating in this project will help you better implement improvisation activities? And, what sort of similar collaborative improvisation project might you design to implement with your future students? Participants completed the reflection papers as homework for their choral methods class, and were due one week following the improvisation performances. I analyzed the data using a simple content analysis, and emergent themes identified. Pseudonym names are used in the reporting of this research.

### **Results**

Predominant themes that resulted from the analysis of the data are freedom, apprehension, growth, time constraint challenges, creating in new ways, thinking about improvisation differently, and opening new cross-media collaboration possibilities.

*Freedom:*

The first theme, freedom, was mentioned, alluded to, and/or discussed in many of the participants' reflection papers. According to James, "I liked the total freedom to come up with our own ideas based on the video cues" (Reflection paper, 5/12). Similarly, Brian wrote:

I really enjoyed the freedom that this piece represented—the freedom to express the video and emotion associated with it. It was a great way to start a piece. It began with an idea, a feeling, or an emotion and gave us a starting place. After that, it was just watching and listening to one another and reacting to what we felt and what the other performers gave. (Reflection paper, 5/12)

In addition, Lisa stated "I liked how there really were not limitations on what we could do, so I felt more comfortable with my improvisation because none of the notes I sang could be wrong" (Reflection paper, 5/12).

James wrote of the freedom to develop his own ideas based on the video prompt, Brian of the freedom to express his emotions in reaction to the video, and Lisa of the freedom from limitations that the free improvisation format provided. Based on these reflections, it appears the pre-service music teachers were comfortable with and comforted by the freedoms embodied in this improvisation activity.

*Apprehension:*

Somewhat conversely, the second theme that emerged was apprehension. According to Katie, "it was scary and confusing, and felt like we had no guidelines" (Reflection paper, 5/12). Amos wrote:

It was challenging for me at first because I enjoy working on assignments with structured guidelines, but it turned out really well. Once I started interacting with our dancers and seeing the ideas that they had, as well as observing and talking to other groups, it was much easier for me to complete this assignment. (Reflection paper, 5/12)

Similarly, Megan stated:

At first, all of us were very wary about working together on something that was not planned. The dancers seemed to have a better understanding of the idea of free

improvisation than I did and their understanding allowed us to better work together as a group. It was interesting once we got the initial awkwardness out of the way because I had never worked with dancers before in a collaborative effort. (Reflection paper, 5/12)

Lastly, Melissa wrote:

Going into the project, I did not think I was capable of improvising this way, since it was completely out of my comfort zone. After performing, I realized it wasn't so bad. It definitely helped my confidence in free improvisation (Reflection paper, 5/12).

Katie wrote of being scared and confused by the improvisation project, Amos of being challenged, Megan of being wary, and Melissa of being completely out of her comfort zone. After the improvisations began, however, these initial apprehensions appeared to be replaced with developing feelings of competence, confidence, and comfort.

*Growth:*

The third theme to emerge was growth. According to Kurt, "This project increased my confidence and expanded my comfort zone. I really did not know what to expect going into this and was uneasy about performing something so unscripted, but I was pleased with what we came out with" (Reflection paper, 5/12). Melissa stated, "I have never before been exposed to the world of free musical improvisation. Having this experience will mean I can better explain improvising [to students], instead of just going off what I think it is" (Reflection paper, 5/12). According to Brian:

I have been playing improvisational music for quite some time, whether it is jazz music, jam music, or funk music. This was different for me because it was improvising and reacting to a different art, dance. Rather than simply reacting to what the other musicians were doing, I had to interact with what the dancer was doing. It was a fun and interesting exercise in thinking outside the box, while still working towards musical goals. (Reflection paper, 5/12)

Lastly, Becca wrote "this project impacted my competence and confidence in a positive way. My competence has definitely grown so that I would be more comfortable doing a similar project in a school setting" (Reflection paper, 5/12).

Kurt wrote of growth in his confidence and comfort, Melissa of expanded experience, Brian of expanding from improvising within the single the jazz, jam, or funk

realm to enjoying improvising with artists from multiple realms, and Becca of growing competence, confidence, and comfort. Clearly the participants grew in a variety of ways, impacting their perceptions of themselves as musicians and as teachers.

*Time constraints challenges:*

The theme that was mentioned, alluded to, or discussed most often regarding this music and dance improvisation project was the challenge of time constraints. David asserted, “there was nothing that I disliked about this project other than the fact that we only had two 50-minute periods to complete it” (Reflection paper, 5/12). Jasmine went one step further, stating “the only thing I didn’t like about this project was the time constraint—I felt very rushed, and I think if we had more time, we would have been able to come up with something more” (Reflection paper, 5/12). Similarly, according to Brian:

I disliked the limited amount of time we had to get to know our dance collaborators, to better understand how they worked, and how to work together. It would have been fun to develop these pieces, but that wouldn’t have been in the spirit of improvisation.  
(Reflection paper, 5/12)

David, Jasmine, and Brian were all challenged by the time-constraint aspect of this improvisation project. In trying to include as many experiences as possible in the choral methods course that housed this project, I believe that I misjudged how uncomfortable the students would be at the outset of the experience, and how long it would take them to acclimate themselves to the situation and get down to work. In retrospect, either two longer sessions, or a third session would have provided a more comfortable and relaxed experience.

*Creating in new ways:*

Another prominent theme that emerged is creating in new ways. Katie wrote:

When all group members are ‘in the same boat’ and you’re all using what the other does to form and express your own ideas, it builds a sense of confidence that you likely would not have improvising alone. My group actually set parameters for each of us because we felt too overwhelmed just being set free. We each gave ourselves a ‘rule’ that we drew

from our movie prompt. Our movie was about split brain and the part of the left brain that basically connects all of our behaviors and is the controller of the system in our brains. I took this idea of reacting and working in a system and gave myself the rule that I would play as a reaction solely to the dancer's movements. I went further to say that when he moved away from me I would play ascending melodic material and when he came nearer I would play descending. Setting these guidelines for ourselves made the improvising experience less daunting. (Reflection paper, 5/12)

According to James:

It was great to collaborate with new people for this piece; and to think about the music from a 'non-musical' perspective. In other words, our two dancers really had little standard musical vocabulary to talk about what we were collectively thinking, so we had to describe things in different ways. (Reflection paper, 5/12)

Last, Amos stated:

I would say the biggest challenge I had was forcing myself to not over-think or plan. I really had to consciously make myself follow the dancers and think about the video rather than think about a form or progression... When I improvise [in jazz], I am constantly listening for a chord change or a rhythmic idea, but with this assignment I had to improvise off of what I was seeing visually, which requires much more interpretation. I feel this will reflect in my playing if I keep practicing this technique, and will make me feel more comfortable as an improviser. (Reflection paper, 5/12)

Katie wrote of setting parameters, James of thinking about music from a non-musical perspective, and Amos of not over-thinking or planning in a jazz improvisation sort of way. It appears that creating in this new way, facilitated by the free-improvisation format and collaboration with the dancers provided an opportunity to experience improvisation with a unique kind of competence, confidence, and comfort level.

*Thinking about improvisation differently:*

The sixth theme to emerge was thinking about improvisation differently.

According to Becca:

This project showed me that you can work outside the box when improvising and not just do standard [jazz] improvisation activities. You can get really creative and do practically anything, and you can use a couple of different arts at a time. (Reflection paper, 5/12)

Similarly, Melissa wrote:

It was definitely a new experience for me. I have never done anything like this before... It was really cool to hear the dancer's ideas, since [dancers] think of improvising in a very different way than we do. She got me to think about improvising music in a different way. (Reflection paper, 5/12)

Last, James asserted:

This project helped me realize that free improvisation (non-chord based) can be anything you want it to be. It helped to be improvising as part of a team, and to be aware of what others in our group may have been trying to impart. (Reflection paper, 5/12)

Becca wrote about working outside the box, Melissa about experiencing the dancer's perspective, and Becca and James about free improvisation being very open to individualized creative interpretation. All three of these statements reflect competence, confidence, and comfort with improvising in this way.

*Opening new cross-media collaboration possibilities:*

The final theme to emerge was opening new cross-media collaboration possibilities. Brian wrote:

There are many different ways to improvise and interact with a variety of things. We can improvise and interact with dancers, musicians, painters, sculptors, videos, plays, and any other type of art, or non-art interaction we can think of, possibly even to a basketball game, football game, or other sport. (Reflection paper, 5/12)

Amos and Melissa connected this project to their future teaching, Amos stated:

I would really like to collaborate with the art department and have art students create while listening to my students play. My students would be improvising to what the art students would be painting—having a give and take very similar to the project we did. (Reflection paper, 5/12)

According to Melissa:

In the future with my students, I could do a similar improvisation project that ties into their English class. If there's a novel they are reading at the time, they can pick a scene or chapter from the book and improvise freely off of that. (Reflection paper, 5/12)

Brian, Amos, and Melissa offered a variety of possibilities for future cross-media collaborative improvisation, including improvising with dancers, visual artists, writers, and athletes. I believe that offering these ideas indicates a comfort level, and perception of competence and confidence in the participants' newly-developed improvisational skills.

## Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore the perspective of pre-service music teachers regarding their competence, confidence, and comfort in their improvisation skills and in implementing improvisation activities following a collaborative music and dance free-improvisation project. Research questions were:

- How does a collaborative music and dance free improvisation project impact pre-service music teachers' perceived competence, confidence, and comfort in their improvisation skills?
- How does a collaborative music and dance free improvisation project impact pre-service music teachers' perceived competence, confidence, and comfort in implementing improvisation activities?

Based on the results of this research, it appears that a collaborative music and dance free-improvisation project impacts pre-service music teachers' perceived competence, confidence, and comfort in their improvisation skills and in implementing improvisation activities in a variety of ways. The areas in which these items were most impacted emerged from the data as predominant themes. These themes are: freedom, apprehension, growth, time constraint challenges, creating in new ways, thinking about improvisation differently, and opening new cross-media collaboration possibilities.

The data in the current study were consistent with existing research. Similar to Bell (2003), Byo (1999), Louk (2002), Orman (2002), and Riley (2009), who reported negative perceptions in regards to implementing improvisation activities, and Abrahams (2000) who reported students lacking in their improvisation ability, participants in the current research reported apprehension toward engaging in the collaborative free-improvisation project, and described their initial feelings as confused, challenged, scared,

uneasy, and wary. Participants also stated that this sort of improvising was a new experience for them, and that they had never been exposed to anything like this before. Also similar to Riley (2009), who found that favorable perceptions toward implementation of the standards increased after students engaged in experience with them, participants in the current research reported increasing levels of competence, confidence, and comfort in their improvisation skills and in implementing improvisation activities. According to Becca, “this project impacted my competence and confidence in a positive way. My competence has definitely grown so that I would be more comfortable doing a similar project in a school setting” (Reflection paper, 5/12).

### **Conclusions and Implications for Music Teacher Educators**

The purpose of this research was to explore the perspective of pre-service music teachers regarding their competence, confidence, and comfort in their improvisation skills and in implementing improvisation activities following a collaborative music and dance free-improvisation project. Analysis of the data indicated that the participants’ perceived competence, confidence, and comfort in improvising and implementing improvisation activities increased substantially as a result of this collaborative free-improvisation experience. They were comfortable with and comforted by the freedoms embodied in the free-improvisation activity; developing feelings of competence, confidence, and comfort replaced their initial apprehension; while the time-constraint aspect of the project challenged them, all of the groups presented highly regarded improvisations; they perceived improvisational growth in a variety of ways, impacting their sense of themselves as musicians and as teachers; through creating in this new way and thinking about improvisation differently, they reflected on increased competence, confidence, and comfort with improvising; and finally, they offered a variety of possibilities for future

cross-media collaborative improvisation, again indicating perceived competence, confidence, and comfort in their improvisation skills and in implementing improvisation activities.

Implications for the profession are that music teacher educators should consider including both jazz and non-jazz improvisation experiences in their existing courses, as well as including discrete improvisation classes and/or creating classes with an improvisation component in their course offerings for pre-service music educators. Cross-media collaborative improvisation is a viable means of providing such experience, and should also be considered and explored.

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