
Conceptualizations of Improvisation with Young Instrumentalists:

A Literature Review

By

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Abstract

This paper draws from the current body of research on improvisation, especially improvisation in schools and studies with younger school instrumentalists, and presents a myriad of ways to conceptualize improvisation in the instrumental music classroom. Various studies and methods of teaching improvisation are explored in an effort to provide music educators with different ways to effectively utilize improvisation activities in school settings. Ultimately, teachers are asked to investigate their own understandings of improvisation and what role it may play in their classrooms.

Keywords: improvisation, teaching, learning, teacher roles, student roles

Improvisation in the classroom: What are we talking about?

Amid a busy school year, new and different sounds are coming from the band room. What starts as seemingly random notes and sounds begins to transform into something more. It grows into a melody new to everyone's ears. Other instruments join in, copying, following, taking the lead, and offering other harmonic and melodic textures. A musical piece is being born through improvisation.

This scenario may sound like a best-case scenario to some music educators—students making musical decisions and creating new music in the moment. Other teachers may feel anxiety at the thought of improvisation in the music program—*how do I teach improvisation? What do I ask the students to do? What do I do?* Many music educators successfully incorporate improvisation into their music programs; perhaps many others would like to but are unsure of exactly where to start or what to do. Some of this confusion may lie with teachers' own lack of experience with improvisation. However, confusion may also arise because there are many different ways that music educators view improvisation and its role in the classroom.

In this paper I propose to organize the various ways educators and researchers conceptualize improvisation so that the reader may analyze each and come to a better personal understanding of improvisation and its use in the music classroom. After discussing the many ways improvisation can be utilized in a group setting, I review qualitative and more experimental research studies, as well as theories about novice and expert improvisation. Finally, I offer implications and suggestions for music teachers. By investigating the different ways educators and researchers conceptualize improvisation, music teachers can better form their own paradigm of improvisation and decide how to effectively engage students in improvisation and music-making activities.

Improvisation: Multifaceted or Overwhelming?

One way that music educators and researchers view improvisation is as a means to developing a personal voice. McMillan (1997) argued that improvisation's greatest asset is in being an empowering and liberating holistic activity for students and suggested that the role of improvisation is in encouraging students to find a personal musical voice. Through improvisation, students are able to make choices of what they like and do not like by exploring different musical ideas and styles. They may also be able to develop as individuals by musically expressing their feelings. In this setting, the teacher's role is that of providing opportunities for students to explore their musical voices. Other researchers, such as Burnard (2002) and Kanellopoulos (1999), took a hands-off approach to utilizing improvisation; rather they viewed improvisation as a collective student process in which the teacher takes a non-participant role.

Many researchers interested in improvisation (Azzara, 1999; Berliner, 1994; Dobbins, 1980; Liperote, 2006; Monson, 1996) took a linguistic approach to music, suggesting that music is analogous to language, that improvisation was analogous to conversation, and that students should be able to "converse using an acquired vocabulary that allows them to express their thoughts spontaneously and personally" (Azzara, 1999, p. 22). Still others (Baker, 1980; Campbell, 1991; Priest, 2002; Riveire, 2006) suggested that improvisation has a more immediate practical use within the classroom, where it can be used to reinforce or manipulate learned skills, patterns, or concepts by having students improvise using only the material—a particular scale or rhythmic pattern—that the teacher hopes to reinforce. These researchers conceptualized improvisation as what Bailey (1992) referred to as idiomatic improvisation, where students learn skills and patterns particular to a certain style of music and then recycle them in order to perform appropriately within that specific context. For example, a teacher might present students with

bebop scales and patterns in all twelve keys in order to help them improvise within a bebop setting. The teacher's role involves choosing the patterns or idioms to reinforce as well as the context. In addition, the material learned is specific to the context in which the students will perform. Material from other contexts, such as concert band or private lessons, may not be applicable within the improvisation setting.

Many researchers (Bash, 1991; Brophy, 2001; Fredrickson, 1994; Goldstaub, 1996; Hickey, 1997; Kuzmich, 1980; Priest, 2002; Volz, 2005) suggested exercises, lessons, and practical ways for teachers to effectively integrate improvisation activities into their classroom. These included activities such as rhythmic games and guided imagery improvisations (Brophy, 2001; Goldstaub, 1996; Volz, 2005). Other activities included embellishing melodies (Fredrickson, 1994) and completing musical lines or filling in the musical blanks (Hickey, 1997).

Turning away from idiomatic improvisation, some musicians (including Bailey, 1992 and Nachmanovitch, 1990) critiqued it as being too structured and limiting, and offered free improvisation as a counterweight. Nachmanovitch (1990) also rejected the hyper-structured separation of musical styles—such as between bebop and hard bop—and suggested that “the barriers we set up between specialties tend to become overdeveloped” (p. 119). Free improvisation is counter to traditional limitations such as idioms, meter, and key, and allows musicians to improvise without necessitating they perform within a specific context (Bailey, 1992). In addition to breaking down barriers between performing contexts, Bailey also suggested that the teacher's role is to provide experiences for students in which they can improvise.

From What Research Can We Draw?

Recognizing the many ways that educators and researchers defined improvisation can be overwhelming and can do little to actually help classroom teachers investigate their own understanding of improvisation. However, when looking at research conducted with school-age improvisers and comparing it with more theoretical works (such as Bailey, 1992; Berliner, 1994; and Nachmanovitch, 1990), the possibilities may become clearer.

Qualitative Studies

Researchers conducting case studies of young instrumentalists have investigated students' improvisations, students' interactions during group improvisation, and the development of creativity during improvisation activities. Burnard (2002) investigated students' meaning-making and musical interaction in a group improvisation setting with eighteen 12-year-old students in London. These students, collectively called the "Music Creators' Soundings Club," participated in 21 weekly one-hour improvisation sessions and performed various improvised pieces of the course of the study. Students were given the opportunity to choose their performance instrument. Although not all the students were percussionists, the majority of improvisations—100 out of 116—took place on classroom percussion instruments.

Burnard (2002) found that students initially had trouble negotiating starting an improvisation, finding entrance points within the piece, and successfully ending the improvisation. In addition, the tension between leadership and shared leadership became apparent within the group over time. Burnard suggested that the students in the study eventually learned interaction, communication, and focusing mechanisms in order to collectively negotiate improvised music successfully as well as take on both leader and follower roles when

appropriate, and that music teachers hoping to encourage improvisation activities should allow students to make choices, experience options rather than obligations, and select their own instruments. Also, teachers must establish a classroom atmosphere of trust and empathy if students are to feel safe improvising; this requires the teacher to step back and utilize a leadership style that empowers the group. In addition, teachers should ensure that students talk about the improvising group and how interactions within the group play out. Practical implications for music educators from this study include (a) approaching improvisation as a process of musical interaction, (b) assisting children to be musically inclusive by allowing them the choice of instruments and “enabling participation that embraces individual spontaneity at all levels of skill and aptitude” (p. 169), (c) exploiting musical differences in different ways, such as gestures for communicating, and (d) using children’s talk to reconstruct their experience, reflect on negotiated outcomes and moments of uncertainty and conflict.

These notions are similar to Bailey’s (1992) thoughts on classroom improvisation and stand in contrast to Berliner’s (1994). Bailey specifically advocated for group improvisation so that students could collaborate, share ideas, and build off of each other. On the other hand, Berliner suggested improvisers work to assimilate various licks and phrases specific to the particular chosen genre. Once the material was learned, the performer could then go and improvise, either as a solo or with others. In this scenario, material was learned first, then used during improvisation. For Burnard and Bailey, musical ideas can be learned and shared during improvisation.

In 2002, Burnard investigated these same students’ meaning-making within the same study. Students were asked to draw a pictorial representation of some aspect of what it meant to them to improvise and compose. Specifically, they were asked: “Thinking back over your

experiences of music making, what, for you, does it mean to improvise and compose?” (p. 10). Burnard found that students experience improvising and composing differently according to context and intention. Many of the students described improvisation and composition as different activities, the difference being the intention of the musician. Some of the students experienced improvisation and composition as co-existing activities.

Implications of Burnard’s (2000) investigation suggested that teachers help support students’ comfort with improvisation and composition by creating an environment where students can express their creativity. Also, when teachers scaffold experiences within a student’s zone of proximal development, creativity becomes integrated within the student’s existing musical experiences and skills. Furthermore, when teachers provide many varied musical experiences in class, students may recognize the multidimensional nature of music.

Burnard (2000) challenged teachers with various ideas to think about, including understanding that learning “should be perceived as meanings negotiated amongst learners as well as between learners and their teachers” (p. 21). In order to do this, teachers should refrain from imposing values on students and encourage students to construct and develop their own. Finally, Burnard argued that music educators should aim to provide genuine experiences for children to be improvisers and composers instead of “acting out a pre-defined model” (p. 21).

Another researcher interested in young students’ conceptions of improvisation was Kanellopoulos (1999). In his study, he worked with a class of ten 8-year-old students with no prior formal musical training. Kanellopoulos observed and sometimes participated in their improvisations in three one-hour meetings per week for five months. The students improvised without any teacher instructions and afterward were encouraged to discuss aspects of their playing.

Reflecting on his findings through a sociocultural stance, Kanellopoulos (1999) suggested that the students' improvisation "was not a process of making music in isolation, even when it was done individually" (p. 177). The students' participation in improvisation was based on collectively constructing, learning, and negotiating the rules of music-making. Without overt direction from the researcher, the students came to discuss ideas such as how to negotiate the ideas of ending a piece, combining instruments in performance, music as "thoughtful action" and silence; similar to the students in Burnard (2002).

One of the themes that arose from the students' reflections was the emergence of a piece through the objectification of the process of improvisation (Kanellopoulos, 1999). Instead of noodling, students were immersed in a music-making process, and defined roles such as player, audience, and teacher emerged. Decided-upon rules framed and collectively determined the improvised pieces. The second theme, thoughtfulness, related to the first, and involved purposeful decision-making by the students in order to construct meaning of their improvisations. The third theme, shared intentionality, closely related to Burnard's (2002) findings of shared leadership and interaction, communication, and focusing mechanisms.

Many of Kanellopoulos' (1999) findings aligned with Burnard's (2002), in that students have trouble negotiating aspects of performance that are usually left to a conductor, such as beginning and ending pieces, deciding on instruments, and negotiating entrances and exits in group improvisation. Perhaps these are some of improvisation's social benefits—it forces students to learn to become self- or collectively-sufficient and mindful of the music they are performing.

Experimental and Quantitative Studies

While Burnard and Kanellopoulos took qualitative approaches to their investigations, Azzara (1993), a researcher interested in improvisation, audiation, and achievement, conducted an experimental study looking at both the effects of improvisation study and the effects of various levels of music aptitude on the music achievement of 66 fifth-grade wind and percussion students in two schools in Rochester, NY. First, he administered the Music Aptitude Profile (MAP) to measure the musical aptitude of all students (Gordon, 1988). Students performed three études—one student-prepared without teacher assistance, one with teacher assistance, and one surprise piece not previously prepared (sight-read). These études were recorded and graded according to a five-point scale in the following categories: tonal dimension, rhythm dimension, and expressive dimension.

The study took place across two schools with two different teachers. Each school consisted of a randomly assigned experimental and control group. All students performed in a weekly 30-minute group lesson as well as an ensemble over the 27-week study. Within the lessons, the control groups used only method books, while the experimental groups used method books but also engaged in 10-15 minutes of improvisation activities designed by the researcher each lesson. At the end of the 27 weeks, the students performed three études in the same manner as before.

Azzara (1993) found that students in the experimental groups—those who had engaged in improvisation activities—scored higher than students in the control groups. He suggested that “improvisation skills contribute to more accurate student instrumental performances when reading from notation” (p. 339) and called for further investigation into the link between improvisation and instrumental music performance achievement.

Working with much younger students, Koutsoupidou and Hargreaves (2009) investigated the effects of improvisation on the development of 6-year-olds' creative thinking in music. Using a quasi-experimental design, the researchers utilized two groups of 6-year-olds in England and divided the 25 students into an experimental and control group. They administered Webster's Measure of Creative Thinking in Music (MCTM II) to all students before the study (Webster, 1994). For six months, students in the experimental group engaged in a variety of improvisation activities in their regular music class, including music-making, movement and dance, singing, and using their bodies to create improvised sounds. Students in the control group did not engage in any improvisation activities. At the end of the study, the students again took the MCTM II, which measures extensiveness, flexibility, originality, and syntax. The researchers performed a statistical analysis on the results and found that the experimental group improved in musical flexibility, originality, and syntax, while the control group only showed a slight change. Musical extensiveness was not affected by the intervention. The researchers had similar findings to Azzara (1993) with a similar procedure, and suggested that it was important for teachers to include improvisation activities in their classes in order to provide students with opportunities to explore and experiment with music. In addition, teachers should also provide many stimuli for music-making.

Instead of looking at improvised melodies, Paananen (2006) looked at the non-pitched rhythmic improvisations of 36 students between the ages of 6 and 11. The focus was to investigate whether students of different ages focus on different aspects of rhythm while improvising. Using a self-constructed model of musical development, Paananen suggested that students in the dimensional stage—ages 5-11—fall into one of three substages of development. In the first substage, students focus on either metrical accent or grouping; in the second substage,

they focus on both grouping and meter, but problems arise when grouping and meter act in opposite directions; in the third substage, these conflicts are understood, and attention is focused on two or three metrical levels.

The students were tested by performing on a MIDI keyboard along with a pre-programmed 24-measure rhythmic accompaniment. The students were invited to improvise along with the accompaniment. A researcher and an independent judge scored these improvisations. Analyses of variance indicated that age was significantly related to performance, supporting the researcher's previously constructed model of musical development.

Some of the findings from this study are noteworthy. Students aged 10-11 years old played complex rhythmic improvisations which stayed with the beat of the accompaniment. Sometimes rhythm analysis does not receive as much attention as melodic analysis although I believe they are both equal parts of students' improvisations.

Although there is not an abundance of case studies examining improvisation with younger instrumentalists, those that exist explore similar ideas—meaning-making and the role of improvisation in music education. What can be generalized from the literature on improvisation is that students in group improvisation activities collaborate to negotiate aspects of performance usually attended to by a teacher or director, such as entrances and exits, and beginning and endings. Also, students attempt to act thoughtfully and purposefully while collaborating and improvising and may view improvisation more as music-making and less as noodling.

Theories About Novice and Expert Improvisation

In an effort to help teachers engage students in improvisation activities, many researchers have developed theories of teaching improvisation. Kratus (1991, 1995) compared novice and

expert improvisers, and outlined a developmental approach to teaching improvisation. The similarities between novices and experts included the ideas that (a) all improvisations are the product of purposeful actions that create sounds through time, (b) revisions are not possible, and (c) the performer is free to choose pitches and rhythms within limits. Differences included the suggestions that (a) experts are able to audiate while improvising—a term that implies that musicians hear inwardly with meaning the sounds they make as they make them, (b) experts are product-oriented while novices are process-oriented, (c) experts possess the skill to make sound manipulation automatic, (d) experts use strategies to shape their improvisations over time, and (e) experts are able to utilize stylistic conventions or licks in their playing.

Inasmuch as Kratus viewed the process of moving from novice to expert as linear, he outlined seven levels of improvisation that students move through sequentially—exploration, process-orientation, product-orientation, fluid improvisation, structural improvisation, stylistic improvisation, and personal improvisation (1991, 1995). Students cannot skip steps, but can revert to previous steps if needed. This linear concept of improvisation development is in direct contrast to Burnard (2002), who found that 5th grade students were able to work together to negotiate starting and ending pieces as well as entering improvisations in process—all concepts that Kratus (1991, 1995) suggested cannot occur until students reach a certain level of development. Kratus' thinking is along the same lines as Berliner's (1994) in that they both view improvisation as happening after preparatory work. Where Berliner almost exclusively discussed idiomatic improvisation, Kratus' ideas moved from free improvisation (the exploration level) to idiomatic improvisation (the stylistic improvisation level). Kratus acknowledged that very few people reach the last level of personal improvisation—thus free improvisation is seen as an

attribute of novice improvisers and stylistic or idiomatic improvisation is viewed as the goal of improvisation.

Custodero (2007) also stood in contrast to Kratus. Instead of working in a classroom, Custodero explored the musical improvisations of children and adults and worked with two 7-year-old children and two late-career adult composers outside of the school setting. Custodero spent a weekend with the adults and several two-to-three hour sessions with the children, during which the participants were invited to make music together. After listening to and analyzing the improvisations and discussing the idea of improvisation with the participants, Custodero (2007) suggested the following ways in which children's improvisations may be assessed:

- Improvisers bring to their performances a personal musical history that defines their (subjective) level of expertise.
- Improvisers both resist and revel in conventions associated with their instrument.
- Improvisers use strategies to maintain full engagement in the moment; such engagement precludes self-consciousness.
- Improvising can be interpreted as how performers provide and receive musical space. Such decisions involve negotiation of self-expression and responsivity, that is, maintaining one's own integrity while being generous and open.
- Improvisers embody musical meaning through their movement in space.
- Improvisers create a sense of formal structure through their shared understanding of what is musically meaningful. (p. 93-94)

In arguing for the inclusion of improvisation in music education, Custodero (2007) stated that a skills-based discipline such as music education may suggest that the personal meaning and intention could not come from younger or less technically-proficient musicians. This may lead to a deficit-model of music education. Instead, Custodero (2007) argued for a view of children's improvisation which is situated in the social context of musical communication and meaning making that considers the actions of children as intentional and the experience of improvising as multifaceted.

Custodero's conceptualization of improvisation works well with Nachmanovitch's (1990) suggestion that, although many processes can be taught in preparation for improvising, the moment of performance is spontaneous. In addition, the idea of the experience of improvising being multifaceted is interesting because it not only refers to the social-interaction and meaning-making experiences of students; it may also refer to the transfer of knowledge, skills, content, experience, etc. between musical contexts.

Implications and Suggestions for Music Teachers

Taking all this into account, it is no wonder that many music educators feel overwhelmed. To begin, music educators can reflect and discover what improvisation means to them and how it could be used effectively in their classrooms. No model is more correct than another. However, a teacher's conceptualization of improvisation will inform its use within the classroom, as will particular situations that arise. For example, my own conceptualization of improvisation shifted as a result of this investigation. Originally, I viewed improvisation as ancillary to a traditional instrumental music education and not an inclusive activity for all students. However, aligning myself with Nachmanovitch (1990) and Burnard (2000, 2002), I began incorporating improvisation activities into every lesson. Together, the students and I began to explore improvisation for improvisation's sake and look to collectively make new music together. I approach improvisation by asking students to make music together and then base subsequent musical decisions off of their playing. In this sense, I hope they may become what Nachmanovitch referred to as bricoleurs—those who makes do with the material at hand.

Music teachers can embrace this role of teacher as guide, answering students' questions and attempting not to steer the direction of the students' playing so that the music they make is theirs. Teachers should provide students with different situations in which to improvise, whether

it be in a specific musical style, utilizing particular notes, or engaging in free improvisation. However, many music educators, especially those with little or no previous improvisation experience, may welcome a more structured model of teaching improvisation. Azzara (1999) suggested that these teachers first have students listen to improvised music and learn music by ear so that they may broaden their musical vocabulary of harmonic progression and absorb various musical patterns. Comparing music to language and improvisation to speech, Azzara (1999) pointed out that individuals do not memorize exact sentences to engage in conversation. Instead, they are able to converse using an acquired vocabulary that allows them to express their thoughts spontaneously and personally (p. 22). Therefore, the more music students know, the more vocabulary they have with which they can converse. This is in line with Berliner (1994) who suggested that jazz improvisers learn specific patterns or licks that they later interject into improvisations. Azzara (1999) went on to suggest specific activities that educators can utilize in the classroom, including having students learn to sing and play melodies and bass lines by ear, chant rhythm patterns, sing patterns that outline the function of the harmony, learn solfeggio and rhythm syllables, embellish existing melodies, and listen to other improvisers.

Music educators should begin wherever they can with engaging their students in improvisation activities. For teachers new to improvisation, perhaps have students improvise short melodies and phrases with the concert Bb scale and then ask students to work in musical skills that they are learning, such as syncopation or new rhythms. Over time, students can be given more and more freedom as they and the teacher feel comfortable. However, free improvisation is not the endpoint or goal for the students and teacher to reach—it is simply another type of improvisation. If students are exposed to free improvisation, idiomatic

improvisation, and any other types, they will be better able to create new music, which is the goal of improvisation.

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