"Play It Again, Billy, but This Time with More Mistakes": Divergent Improvisation Activities for the Jazz Ensemble

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Abstract: The jazz ensemble represents an important performance opportunity in many school music programs. Due to the cultural history of jazz as an improvisatory art form, school jazz ensemble directors must address methods of teaching improvisation concepts to young students. Progress has been made in the field of prescribed improvisation activities and materials that use scales, arpeggios, and chord changes as bases for learning concepts. However, less effort has been devoted to creative improvisation, such as experimentation, personal discovery, and listening. This article describes benefits of devoting teaching time to such concepts and outlines three easy warm-ups: melodic variation, free improvisation, and limited-note exercises, all of which can be taught to young jazz ensembles along with harmonic and theory-based methods.

Keywords: creativity, improvisation, jazz, junior high, middle school, mistake, variation

As the school day school ends, Billy grabs his trumpet case and heads off to jazz band. On this particular afternoon, he walks with an extra spring in his step because he was the only sixth grader who made it into the seventh- and eighth-grade jazz band. After arriving in the band room, Billy puts his trumpet together and begins to warm up. Mr. Heckinger, the jazz band director, strolls in and tells the students to prepare for their improvisation warm-up. “Improvisation—what’s that?” Billy asks Stephanie, the eighth grader next to him. “It’s kind of when you make up the music as you go,” says Stephanie. Beads of sweat begin to form on Billy’s forehead. He had spent three years in band playing fun band pieces and practicing twenty minutes a day, but he has no idea how to make up music on the spot. Anxious questions begin to form in Billy’s mind. “What do I play? What notes do I use?” “What if I hit wrong notes?” He is almost in a complete state of panic when Mr. Heckinger takes out his saxophone and

Your jazz ensemble can learn musical risk-taking and develop greater musicality if you model some simple techniques and a supportive attitude toward experimentation.
plays a simple riff-based blues melody. He plays each riff, one at a time, having the students play it back to him until they get it. When they finish all the riffs, he asks the rhythm section to play a swing-feel blues in concert B-flat with them. On the fourth chorus, Mr. Heckinger points to one of the seasoned alto saxophonists, who then proceeds to play a variation on the blues melody. After that alto saxophonist plays his version for one chorus, the tenor saxophonist next to him plays a completely different variation on the same melody. Billy realizes that Mr. Heckinger is having each member of the band play their own version of the simple melody. “Well it’s not that scary,” he thinks. When it’s Billy’s turn, he plays the melody as he remembers it. He only adds a few notes and changes a few rhythms, but he thinks, “That was kind of fun! Maybe improvisation isn’t so scary.” Billy looks forward to the chance to play over the melody again and change even more notes and rhythms.

B illy’s initial concerns are common for young student improvisers in jazz band. Although middle and high school jazz ensembles are popular settings for jazz improvisation in the schools, many students continue to experience feelings of anxiety and guardedness when they are asked to improvise in jazz ensemble.

Improvisation activities are a valuable source of creative expression for young students. Such activities not only are useful in jazz ensembles but can also be effectively used in school bands, orchestras, choirs, and general music classes. Too often, however, it is the music students who are confident improvisers who thrive (and get the lion’s share of the improvised solo spots), while students who are afraid to improvise succeed in avoiding this source of creative expression. As music teachers, it is critical that we acknowledge that all students have the potential to improvise and that, along with focusing on scales, arpeggios, or patterns, we need to focus on teaching techniques that specifically help allay the improvisation anxiety experienced by far too many of our young musicians.

This article highlights some strategies that jazz band teachers can use to expand their students’ creative experiences through improvisation. Although there are examples of excellent improvisation activities in school jazz ensembles, such as having the students improvise or perform call-and-response on a blues scale or pentatonic scale, there is considerable room for expansion in terms of personal student exploration. This article is aimed at school jazz ensembles, particularly, large “big band” ensembles that typically consist of saxophones, trombones, trumpets, piano, guitar, bass, and drums. However, the exercises described can be used in any school music ensemble simply by removing the rhythm section component. Creative improvisation activities, particularly those that are perceived by students as easy and nonthreatening, are critical for teaching students the necessary skills of risk-taking and experimentation. In his discussion of aural improvisation learning exercises, music education professor Christopher Azzara aptly points out that mistakes are actually valuable learning tools “as a means of understanding individual differences,” particularly stylistic differences, such as different approaches to sound, phrasing, and intensity.1

Convergence and Divergence

Any creative activity, whether it is composing, writing, painting, or improvising, is performed successfully through the alternation between convergent and divergent activities. A convergent activity is a task that is intended to produce a single correct answer.2 Improvisation exercises can be melodically, harmonically, or rhythmically prescribed, or can be all of these. Examples of convergent activities in improvisation might include learning a modal scale, a V7 arpeggio, a common turnaround pattern, a “lick,” or even a transcription. A divergent activity is a task for which there is no correct answer. There are virtually limitless divergent activities for jazz improvisation, and they often involve personal experimentation and discovery, whether prompted by a teacher or not. A few examples of divergent activities in jazz improvisation include experimenting with various timbres on an instrument, playing the same rhythm with different articulations, or ornamenting a melody.

Jazz band directors can successfully engage anxious student improvisers by understanding the fundamental differences between convergent and divergent improvisation activities and by wisely incorporating both formats into an ensemble’s improvisation activities. In fact, as part of his model of creativity, music professor emeritus Peter Webster distin...
students learn in notation-based ensembles, such as band and orchestra. Such examples of individuals who are highly accomplished in convergent activities indicate that one approach to avoiding such improvisational discomfort is to accultivate young students to divergent improvisational activities early in their musical development.

Developmental Levels of Improvisation

It is also beneficial for jazz band directors to acknowledge the natural development of improvisation skills if they are to include divergent improvisation activities in their teaching. Through his own research on improvisational development, music education professor John Kratus has outlined what he classifies as seven developmental levels of improvisation.7 Kratus labels Step 1 exploration, where “the student tries out different sounds and combinations of sounds in a loosely structured context.” Step 2 is process-oriented improvisation, where “the student produces more cohesive patterns.” He describes Step 3 as product-oriented improvisation, where the improviser is “aware of certain external constraints on the music,” such as meter and harmony.

This development scheme clearly cites Steps 1 and 2 as more divergent, exploratory levels while describing Step 3 as an introduction of convergent “restraints” such as meter and harmony. This underscores the phenomenon that divergent characteristics occur much earlier in the seven stages of development than do the convergent characteristics. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for jazz directors to begin improvisation instruction by giving specific harmonic direction to the students, although many of the students may have no prior experience with improvisation.

This approach can simply compound the problem of improvisation anxiety for students, as they are expected to perform a creative musical activity while absorbing jazz theory concepts that may be new or unfamiliar. Kratus also states that while the sequence of stages should be performed in order, it is rewarding to return to earlier, more divergent stages at various points in a student’s improvisational development. As a result, student apprehension can be reduced by beginning with some divergent improvisation activities and continuously reinforcing divergent activities in rehearsals and performances throughout a student’s improvisational maturation.

When one addresses the issue of divergent improvisation activities, one must consider the issue of criticism and censorship. While constructive criticism and teaching feedback for improvisation can be valuable as jazz students ascend the levels of Kratus’s developmental levels, it is important for the jazz educator to realize that frequent criticism, particularly on convergent issues, such as “correct” notes and “correct” chords, can lead to feelings of censorship and self-consciousness for young improvisers. Neither self-censorship nor hesitation is beneficial for improvisation. Instead, those qualities create barriers to students’ self-expression, personal experimentation, and self-discovery.

Advising students too frequently to “try and swing more” or to “play the IV chord” can influence students to become more guarded in their improvisations. Instead, teachers should balance convergent activities (for raw materials and techniques) and divergent activities (for experimentation and risk-taking) while offering the students positive verbal encouragement. Furthermore, students need not be oriented with the terms convergent and divergent. The divisions of these two classifications are not set in stone, and many improvisations involve both approaches simultaneously. Creative warm-ups enable students to engage in risk and experimentation while they are focused on certain types of convergent activities, such as arpeggios or scales.

Divergent Activities

There are several divergent activities that a jazz ensemble director can apply as simple warm-ups with a school jazz ensemble. These activities are not time-consuming and are quite easy to implement. Such activities will not only expand students’ creative breadth but will also offer participatory encouragement to students who are apprehensive about scales, chord changes, and jazz theory. More important, these exercises will allow students to engage in musical activities that promote risk-taking, experimentation, personal discovery, and group listening. These characteristics are all necessary partners to convergent skills, such as knowledge of scales, chords, swing rhythm concepts, and proper technique in the process of improvisational learning.

Melodic Variation

As part of this activity, the jazz ensemble director can take the melody of a large ensemble piece that the band is currently performing and ask the students to perform different variations on the melody. Many jazz ensemble compositions and arrangements (for both middle school and high school) do not include the melody in all instrument parts or exchange parts of the melody with different ensemble sections. Due to the aforementioned nature of jazz ensemble pieces and also to the aural nature of improvisatory performance and interaction, it would behoove the teacher to ask the students turn their music pages over and teach the melody to the students by ear on the teacher’s own instrument or voice. The director can then have the students perform a warm-up activity where they play the melody, first exactly as performed by the director and then with variations. The director can demonstrate multiple melodic variations for the students, whether it is turning a quarter note into two swing eighth notes, changing a downbeat to an upbeat, or adding a grace note to an entrance. It is also not required that the director perform this activity on a jazz band piece. This activity can be beneficial on any simple, aurally taught melody (see Figure 1 for an example of this exercise performed on “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”).

The director can structure this activity in various ways depending on the length
of the melody. For instance, if the chart has a short melody, such as a melody that is part of a twelve-bar blues, then each student can have a turn playing the entire melody. If the melody is longer, such as one that is part of a thirty-two-bar AABA form, then the director might have the students each take turns playing four-measure or eight-measure sections of the melody. In this activity, it is important to remember to include the rhythm section. This is particularly true for the drummer, who can learn how to use a melody as an excellent source for improvisational material. Drum-set players should not be ignored, as they can benefit greatly from creatively performing melodic variations on their drum kit. It is also critical to avoid criticizing students who are apprehensive about the activity and who play the melody or their section of the melody exactly as modeled. This is an activity that should be repeated at several rehearsals. As a result, apprehensive students may become more comfortable with the idea of melodic variation as they repeatedly hear different variations of the melody and begin to develop variations of their own. The director also must strenuously avoid criticizing students whose variations do not sound like the melody, as this is simply part of the experimentation process, and such student censorship should be avoided.

This activity has several educational benefits. First, the students are expanding their divergent improvisational experience, particularly, their ability to recognize that a jazz melody can be performed in various ways, and allowing themselves to experiment with deconstructing a given melody in a safe learning environment. Second, while many students feel that they must improvise a solo “from scratch”—particularly by using the blues scale, pentatonic scales, or chord changes—this activity will demonstrate that incorporating a variation of the melody into jazz solos is an excellent way to perform an improvisation solo. This warm-up can also be used as the basis for a listening activity for the ensemble. The director can play recorded examples of performances of artists like Louis Armstrong, Lester Young, Thelonious Monk, Horace Silver, and Max Roach, demonstrating how seminal jazz improvisers have used variations on a tune’s melody as the material for their own solos. It is important to note that having a jazz ensemble listen to many seminal jazz artists is incredibly valuable for the students. As a result, not only will students hear how great jazz artists approach improvisation, but this will also reinforce the idea that each improviser performs melodies and improvisations differently. Finally, this activity will help students understand the workings of the chart better, particularly students who play instruments such as the baritone saxophone, bass trombone, and double bass, all of whom rarely get to play the melody of a chart.

FIGURE 1

“Twinkle” Variations Arranged by Daniel J. Healy

Free Improvisation: Instigation Activities

Another valuable divergent activity that can be applied to a warm-up is free improvisation. Although the act of free jazz improvisation is typically associated with professional avant-garde artists rather than students, it is crucial that the director not only equip the students with the convergent knowledge of jazz practice but also increase their general comfort level in the act of improvisation. It is not uncommon for young jazz students to experience a type of nervous chord/scale paralysis when improvising. More specifically, the unbalanced focus on symbols, such as chord changes, can then paralyze a student’s creative awareness. Free improvisation activities remove such problems from the scenario, giving the students the opportunity to explore melodic ideas and instrumental experimentation as part of the divergent learning process. Hickey illustrates the value of such an activity by stating that “methodologies
that emphasize tonally-centered, rhythmically simple, short and uncontextualized patterns are more likely to hamper the growth of creative musical thinkers than to elicit true creative thought. Bailey writes of how the British musician and educator John Stevens used free improvisation as a gateway to releasing musicians, trained and untrained, from such "paralysis." In an interview with Bailey, Stevens states,

If somebody says to me "I can’t improvise!"—and they could be somebody with the biggest chunk of classical training imaginable in their background—I would find that very inspiring. Because I know that within a very short time they will be doing it and say "Oh, is that it?" And then they will do it again. You see, it’s the most natural thing in the world. (See Sidebar 1 for sources that feature divergent improvisation activities.)

Such free improvisation activities can be structured in a number of ways.

One such approach is to use "instigation roles." More specifically, this involves breaking down a jazz ensemble into three or four groups of students and assigning different "musical roles" to them. To begin the activity, have each student take a number from 1 to 4 (they can count off 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.). Then assign musical roles for each of the groups. For example, the musical role for group 1 might be to perform long tones. The musical role for group 2 might be to perform a repeating rhythmic figure. The musical role for group 3 can be staccato quarter notes, and the role for group 4 can be fragmented, melodic flourishes (some of these might require a demonstration from the jazz band director).

Then the director should signal each group to enter as each group layers on top of each other. Although the time between group entrances may vary, ten to twenty seconds between group entrances is appropriate. As part of an authentic divergent improvisation activity, the students must believe that there are multiple ways of improvising and that there is no "correct" or "incorrect" way of creating in the context of this activity. The director should be sure to tell the students that there are no right or wrong notes, harmonies, rhythms, or contours. The director should also tell the students that they may play aurally "in sync" with other members of the band if they choose but that it is not required. Directors should emphasize to the musicians that the only requirement is to be spontaneous and to have fun. If there is extra time, students can trade groups or roles.

There are several educational benefits to this instigation role activity. One such advantage is that there is quite a bit of inherent flexibility to this approach. Instigation roles are not limited to the descriptions just listed. Other possible roles may include "countermelodies," "repeated fast notes," "extremely loud to extremely soft," "funny sounds" (this can start students on exploring some unusual instrument techniques), or whatever roles the jazz band director can devise. It is easy to perform this activity as a short warm-up that takes five minutes or less.

This activity also gives students, who may be apprehensive about improvisation, a safety net by having them engage in free group improvisation instead of having them perform an exposed solo improvisation. It can encourage the students to listen to other members of the ensemble—a key aspect of improvisation that is not always reinforced. Finally, it is possible for students who are constantly drilled on chord changes, scales, arpeggios, and patterns to become "note-centric," which can lead them to ignore the improvisation possibilities inherent in rhythm, dynamics, and articulations. The instigation role activity assigns no chord/scale relationships and invites the students to personally explore their own ways of improvising with rhythms, dynamics, and articulations.

Limited-Note Exercises

Another simple divergent improvisation activity is to give jazz students a set of three notes that they can use for their improvisations. These can be any three notes, such as the beginning of a major scale (C, D, E) or notes that do not seem to obviously hint at any particular scale or chord (C, G-flat, B-flat).

Some Resources Outlining Divergent Approaches to Jazz Improvisation

Books

- Jeffrey Agrell, Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians (Chicago: GIA, 2007).

Online Resources

- Video of Wynton Marsalis explaining melodic ornamentation on “Happy Birthday,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Amwq43-hIM
- More elaborate video of Wynton Marsalis Septet performing “Happy Birthday,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bYi5hJR707Y
- “Improvisation Using Simple Melodic Embellishment,” a jazz clinic given at the 2012 NYSSMA Conference by Mike Titebaum, director of Jazz Studies at Ithaca College, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQOa1q8QL6o
- A useful lesson by Berklee professor Sergio Bellotti on Methods for approaching a melody on the drum set, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFhDdDjZnS4
- Jeff Albert’s research page features a sample outline of his Instigation Quartet approach as well as sample audio files, http://research.jeffalbert.com/category/improvisation/
Tell the students that they can perform a brief solo improvisation with these three notes in any musical fashion that they please and, when finished, they can signal the next student in line to begin improvising. Be sure to tell the students that there are no limitations on range/octave, rhythmic, dynamic, contour, or articulation. This activity can be done either metrically or nonmetrically. If done metrically, the drummer can play a groove while the students take turns soloing over four- or eight-measure sections. If the notes are performed nonmetrically, the students can have freedom to create their own length, signaling to the next individual that they are finished by using eye contact and other body language. The drummer can be included in the metrical or nonmetrical version of this activity by assigning three parts of the drum set, such as ride cymbal, floor tom, and snare drum.

There are several benefits to giving the students an improvisational “constraint.” As Nachmanovitch states, “if you have all of the colors available, you are sometimes almost too free. With one dimension constrained, play becomes freer in other dimensions.”17 As with the instigation role assignment, students begin to focus more on the ways that they can improvise with rhythm, dynamics, contour, and articulation.18 Another benefit is that some students may be reluctant to improvise because they are insecure about their instrumental technique or virtuosity. This activity mostly removes technical virtuosity from the equation, placing all of the students on a more equal playing field. It should also be pointed out that although this is a divergent activity, this exercise can be used as a primer for having students play in difficult keys or modes. For example, in a three-note exercise, the jazz band director can assign B-flat instruments the notes F-sharp, A-sharp, and C-sharp, which gives them the starting materials for F-sharp major. The director can also assign E, G-sharp, and D, which gives them the starting materials for E mixolydian. When the students become very familiar with this exercise after several repetitions, this approach can also be used as an aural exercise. After students become comfortable with a set of three notes, whisper to the rhythm section to move the note up a half-step or down a half-step (if they do not know how to do this, the director can tell them the exact notes), and tell the hand to try to find the new notes by ear.

**Comfort with Failure Leads to Success**

In her study of the application of improvisation principles to design, engineering design professor Elizabeth Gerber cites “supporting spontaneity” and “learning through error” as key facets of improvisation learning.19 More specifically, Gerber states the following:

> The assumption in both improvisation and design is that comfort with failure leads people more readily to success. Failure is a necessary obstacle to learning and achieving interesting results. By celebrating failures, one celebrates the process of risk-taking and possibly achieving great results. If one feels shameful and embarrassed by his or her mistakes, he or she is less likely to take a risk the next time.20

Although many cultures practice improvisation, for some students, jazz ensemble is their first real opportunity to engage in this creative activity. Unfortunately, many students view improvisation as too far removed from their customary activity of reading notation in band, orchestra, or choir. As a result, the opportunity to improvise is offered to many students but truly engaged by too few, which results in countless students missing a rewarding creative activity.

It is paramount that music educators use divergent activities that lead students past their nervousness and apprehension in the teaching of jazz improvisation. Not only will this activity benefit students, but the teachers will also continue to develop their concepts of improvisation as they implement these activities with their students. In fact, teachers can benefit from participating as performers in these activities, especially if certain teachers, themselves, do not feel comfortable improvising. More specifically, it is critical that we balance effective learning of jazz craft with opportunities for risk-taking, listening, and personal discovery.

**Notes**

3. Ibid., 23.
4. Ibid., 24.
8. Ibid., 39.
9. Ibid., 40.
13. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.