

Improvisation in the elementary music classroom

by

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Abstract

For my project, I created a series of activities to facilitate fifth grade students' learning that focused on improvisation, rhythm and solfege reading, and responding to music. The first of the activities of my lesson focused on responding to music. Given manipulatives, students show a variety of notes along with a chosen song. The second activity in my lesson involved reading and performing rhythms and solfege. I guided students as a class to determine what notes are being used, how to count the rhythm, and how to perform the specific rhythm or solfege. The last activity in the lesson focused on introductory improvisation. In small groups, I gave my students a series of rhythms to practice improvising. The groups needed to figure out the rhythm and perform that rhythm on any of the given notes. At the end of the lesson, most students were excited to make up their own music. More instruction would be needed when another improvisation activity is planned.

During my time in Kansas State University's Master of Music program, I realized that my students have created, moved, and responded to music more than before I began working towards my Master of Music degree. A major development in my teaching has been for me to integrate more improvisation and composition into my classroom. I realized earlier in the school year that I had not been allowing my students to express themselves as often as they could have by creating their own music. If I were to inspire my students to be lifelong learners and musicians, as well as taking away any hesitancy of improvising, I would need to incorporate more creating in my classroom. If my goal is to inspire my students in that way, they should be able to connect music to other areas of their lives. Since my time in the master's program, I have become more comfortable with myself in the classroom. I am determined to show my students that music can follow you throughout your life and build connection with those around you.

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Chapter 1 - Teaching Philosophy

“Does your current music practice reflect both what you believe and your greatest potential?” (Jorgensen, 2010, p. 21). Estelle Jorgensen poses the reflection as an important question to educators. As I reflect on my education, attending elementary school into middle and high schools through attaining my Bachelor of Music Education degree at Central Methodist University, I have noticed one thing: I had always felt safe, loved, and heard. I had always been able to express myself, had a place to learn, and had a place to grow. After graduating college, I knew that I wanted to give students the same opportunities that I had once had. If I reflect on Jorgensen’s question, am I practicing what I’m preaching? I want my students to feel as though they have a safe place to be themselves whether they are in class or just passing through. Not only is it important to me to provide that space, but it is even more important to the kids that walk through my door every single day.

Formal education is defined as a form of learning that is structured and systematic. In this structured and systematic form, educators are preparing students for their futures and helping shape the future of our society. Therefore, we must treat it with the respect that it deserves. We should be providing a rich education to all children. The most important aspects of formal education are to provide students with a rounded education in providing them with a safe space to learn, grow, and feel loved while preparing them for the future. Educators should take pride in helping shape the future of our society. Every child deserves a place to feel safe, loved, and heard. With those, every child deserves a place to learn, a place to grow, and a place to express themselves. These are the purposes of education. These are the values that education should have in our current society and our future. As teachers, it is our duty to provide a safe and positive environment for our students to grow into the adults they long to be.

In the Ancient Jewish traditions, it was realized that “music was not an invention of the gods” but “music was a human invention” (Mark & Gary, 2007, p. 3). Even though music began as a religious practice, it has since evolved. Although music is still so important in churches and religious ceremonies, most of our students today will not associate purely with church music. Since Lowell Mason’s generation (and Lowell Mason himself) began integrating music into formal education, music education has evolved exponentially. In today’s society music programs across the United States are being cut due to funds, lack of applicants to fill the jobs, lack of support, and even lack of student participation. “Administrators...realize that simply valuing a program will not suffice to sustain it in a school” (Major, 2010, p. 59). Since music education has been integrated in schools, music teachers have had to fight for their spots. Fine arts teachers often have built such a rapport with students that when arts programs are cut, students lose their safe space and place to express themselves. Music education in schools is of utmost importance for allowing students to learn how to express themselves. Students are able to improvise, create their own works, learn how to work as a group, and so much more. Music education not only allows students to express themselves, but they are able to feel safe and heard. In a time where arts programs (fine and performing) are being cut from districts across the United States, it only seems to be forgotten that music education has been in schools since the days of the Ancient Greek societies.

How does a lack of music education in schools coincide with a positive learning environment in our education system? On one hand, it doesn’t. On the other hand, they can be seen as going hand in hand. Students participating in school music programs have a positive impact on test scores. In a study conducted on 5-7 year olds, “first-graders who participated in special music classes as part of an arts study saw their reading skills and math proficiency

increase dramatically” (Gardiner, et al., 1996, p. 381). This is only one of many examples where music in schools provides a positive learning environment for students.

Music education in schools is, obviously, nonexistent without music. But, what is music? Christopher Small believed that music is an action, not an object. He thought that anyone experiencing a performance in any way, was in some way responsible for how the performance went (Small, 1998, p. 9). Estelle Jorgensen believes that music is for everyone, it is a social, human activity (Jorgensen, 2020, p. 72). Music is cultural, global, inclusive, universal, and lifelong. Unlike Small’s theory of “musicking”, I believe that music is an object. Music is something to experience. It is something people make and experience in the world. However, like Jorgensen’s theory I believe that music, and music education, is for everyone for their entire life. Music is something that can be so inclusive, social, and active. Music and, again, music education can provide insight to different cultures and people.

“Thinking of life, as music teachers, everything we do needs to be embraced fully and deeply, and the knowledge we share with our students also needs to be alive” (Jorgensen, 2020, p. 68). In conclusion, the importance of education, especially music education, is that it allows for all children to feel safe, to feel loved, and to be heard. If the three previously mentioned are in place, students will be able to learn, to grow, and to express themselves. I look back at my seven years as a music educator and I hope that even on the not-so-great days I provided my students with not just a place to learn how to create, perform, respond, and connect to music. I hope that I have provided them a place to tell stories, sing a song from the radio as they line up, take their shoes off and do homework during their free hour, and recommend the show *Outer Banks* for three years in a row. I hope that I have provided each and every student that has passed

through my door in seven years a place where they knew that they were able to express themselves, to learn, and to grow by knowing that they were safe, loved, and heard.

How My Philosophy Informs My Teaching

As Jorgensen stated: “Thinking of life, as music teachers, everything we do needs to be embraced fully and deeply, and the knowledge we share with our students also needs to be alive” (Jorgensen, 2020, p. 68). In my teaching, I strive to embrace the creativity of and the unplanned moments from my students. My philosophy focuses on music being for everyone for their entire lives. In my teaching I emphasize everyone being able to experience music, no matter what. The students who may not feel comfortable singing experience joy and success in instrumental music. The students who feel uncomfortable with instruments find success in singing. My philosophy has grown and changed in the seven years that I have been teaching. I strive to keep Jorgensen’s quote in mind as I continue to grow and expand my teaching philosophy in the future.

Chapter 2 - Lesson Plan

For my project, I presented this lesson with one of my upper level elementary classes. This lesson was ideal for my fifth grade students with a class of 16-17 kids. The students were allowed to choose their own groups for this lesson. This specific group of students that participated in this lesson are able to think for themselves, are driven by their interests, and question everything. The previously mentioned characteristics of the students is why I chose to use the next lesson with them.

I have set up the lesson in the order of: warm up activities, rhythm practice, solfege practice, main activity, and, finally, closing activity. Each portion of the lesson proves to be beneficial for my classroom and students. The warm up activities allow for the class to ready their minds for the rest of class (and also wake their bodies up since they were in class at eight in the morning) while the closing activity allows for closure. Rhythm and solfege are important aspects in my classroom. With guidance, each class time, students figure out how to perform the weekly rhythm and solfege. The closing activity, “Rhythm Battle”, was a way for my students to compete against other classes. Each March classes compete against the other class in their grade level to get the highest amount of rhythms performed correctly.

The “meat and potatoes” of the lesson presented was an improvisation activity. The focus was on improvisation because my students have little experience in the subject. This is due to the fact that I have always been unconfident in my improvisational skills and because I did not want to project that onto my students.

Lesson Plan

2014 Music Standards Addressed

Standards (2014) being addressed in this lesson are as follows:

- I. MU:Cr2.1.5a: Improvise rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic ideas and explain connection to specific purpose and context (such as social and cultural).
- II. MU:Cr1.1.5a: Generate musical ideas (such as rhythms, melodies, and accompaniment patterns) within specific related tonalities, meters, and simple chord changes.
- III. MU:Cr2.1.5a: Demonstrate selected and developed musical ideas for improvisations, arrangements, or compositions to express intent, and explain connection to purpose and context.
- IV. MU:Cr3.2.5a: Present the final version of personal created music to others that demonstrates craftsmanship, and explain connection to expressive intent.
- V. MU:Pr6.1.5a: Perform music, alone or with others, with expression, technical accuracy, and appropriate interpretation.
- VI. MU:Cn10.0.5a: Demonstrate how interests, knowledge, and skills relate to personal choices and intent when creating, performing, and responding to music.

Prior Knowledge/Skills

Prior to this lesson, my students have learned basic xylophone playing techniques. This includes how to hold the mallets and to play in the middle of the bar for the best sound.

Throughout the school year, my students learn, with guidance, how to count and perform four to eight-beat rhythms. Along with rhythms, my students also learn how to listen, repeat, and perform on their own solfege melodies.

Lesson Objective(s)

As a result of this lesson my students should be able to define the term “improvisation”, create a four-beat melody using given pitches, read and perform a rhythm including dotted quarter-eighth note patterns, and present a four-beat melody.

Assessment of the Lesson

During the lesson my students were informally assessed. Students were assessed on rhythm and solfege recognition and participation in the improvisation activity.

Instructional Resources, Materials and Technologies

Resources used in this lesson sequence include: A Smart Board, our weekly slideshow/lesson plans, barred instruments, rhythm cards, stereo with an aux cord, YouTube of “Happy” by Pharrell Williams, and rhythm sticks.

Lesson Sequence

Entry Activity/Warm-Up (Rogers, 2023a): Students echo as teacher performs four beats of body percussion and/or vocal warm ups. After the exercise, one or more students will lead the class in a series of four-beat movements/vocalizations.

Activity #1 Objective: Beat (Rogers, 2023b)

1. Beanbags are passed out to students.
2. Students keep the beat to music with eighth, quarter, half, and whole notes.

Assessment: Check understanding of note values.

Transition: Students will turn beanbags in and return to seats.

Activity #2: Rhythm (Rogers, 2023c)

1. Teacher will show daily rhythm (Gagne, 2023a) on board. A new rhythm is introduced (dotted quarter-eighth).



Figure 4.1 – Daily rhythm

2. With guidance, students will point out what notes and rests are being used.

3. With guidance, students will count rhythm aloud while the teacher writes correct counting on the board.

4. With guidance, students will count the rhythm aloud; students will then clap and count the rhythm aloud; and finally clap and think the rhythm.

Assessment: Check for understanding of rhythmic patterns.

Activity #3: Solfege (Rogers, 2023d)

1. Teacher will show daily solfege (Gagne, 2023b) reading on board.

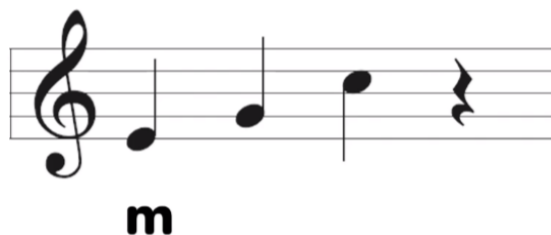


Figure 4.2 – Example of solfege exercise

2. Students repeat after teacher using hand signs and singing voice.
3. With guidance, students will point out what hand signs and solfege syllables are being used.

Assessment 1: Check for hand sign and syllable recognition.

Assessment 2: Students answer question “What is different about this week’s solfege practice?”

Transition: Discuss “Assessment 2” question.

Activity #4: Improvisation (Rogers, 2023e)

1. Teacher will explain improvisation.
 - a. Creating music “in the moment”.
2. Students will relate prior and new knowledge of xylophones and improvisation to an activity of “Rhythm Card Improvisation”.



Figure 4.3 – Example of rhythm card improvisation

- a. Students are given rhythmic patterns (Gagne, Rhythm) including the new dotted quarter-eighth rhythm.
- b. Students will speak through the rhythms as a group.
- c. One at a time, each student will play the rhythm using any of the notes of the F pentatonic scale. After improvising their melody, students will rotate through their group. Each student should play one or two rhythms.

Assessment: Students can improvise a four-beat melody.

Transition: Put materials away and return to seats.

Activity #5: Rhythm Battle (Rogers, 2023f)

1. Students will find a beat to “Happy” by Pharrell Williams.
2. As soon as students have found the beat, the teacher will change slides (Caldwell, Rhythm Battle) to show the rhythm patterns.
3. Students will perform rhythmic patterns as a group. When the slides are play rhythmically correct, on the correct beat, the slides will progress throughout the song.



Figure 4.4 – Example of rhythm battle

Assessment: Students can play rhythmic patterns projected on the board.

Transition: Students will put instruments away and line up.

Lesson Reflections

While going through this lesson, my students learned rhythm, solfege, and improvisation. Students attained knowledge of a dotted quarter note-eighth note pairing. Though they had come across this rhythm before, this had been the first day they were taught how to count and perform that specific pairing. Along with their rhythm, they were also introduced to High Do. Prior to this lesson, the class had been working with Low Do, Re, Mi, So, and La.

In my classroom I try to use different instructional strategies. During this lesson, students experienced interactive instruction, independent study, and experiential learning. Interactive instruction took place in the form of brainstorming, discussions, and a small group project. Students were independently studying and experiencing a new rhythm in small groups. In these small groups students were also brainstorming their rhythms and the improvisational technique. Experiential learning happened when students were given the activity of “Rhythm Card Improvisation”. This was a great way for my students to experience improvising for the first time.

The goal of this lesson was for my students to experience, correctly identify, and improvise using a dotted quarter-eighth note rhythm. During this lesson students were informally assessed. Throughout the improvisation activity I observed how each group was working through the process of deciphering the rhythm and improvising on the xylophones.

To improve the outcome of the assessments and the overall lesson, I will need to make adjustments to the instruction. If I were to teach this exact lesson again I would break the improvisation up into two lessons. Instead of explaining the concept of improvisation and having students improvise on their own in the same day, I would explain improvising and do a whole class activity on improvisation. I would also break up the rhythm portion. To ensure complete understanding of the new rhythm, I would break it into two lessons.

This project and lesson helped expand my thinking and enhanced my teaching greatly. Since teaching this lesson I have used improvisation more in my classroom. Aside from content, this lesson helped me realize that I do not have to have complete control in how my students go about improvising. I gave them parameters that worked for them and I didn’t make them improvise in front of the whole class. In doing so, I created a place for them to improvise with

their closest friends in their classroom – creating a safe space for them to something they’ve never done before.

Chapter 3 - Reflections

Before my time in the Master of Music program at Kansas State University I had been stuck in a rut. My teaching had become reliant on the pre-made lessons that came with the curriculum that I had used, let alone being able to focus on one curriculum. The not-so-great days far outnumbered the great days and the thought of leaving teaching had occurred more than a few times. The thought crossed my mind: How can I change what I'm doing? How can I better myself and my teaching? During my time in the Master of Music program my teaching style, thought processes, and openness to try new things changed for the better. I was gaining knowledge and specified instruction on what I wanted to focus my teaching on and my students were getting their teacher back.

Since working to attain my master's degree my teaching style has become more blended between three styles. Before working on attaining my master's degree my teaching style was mainly that of the demonstrator. Now, my teaching style is a blend of the delegator, demonstrator, facilitator, and the hybrid styles.

In my classroom I use the delegator and facilitator styles in forms of sectionals for high school choir and as independent work in elementary music classes. For example, the older students in high school choir work as a group to rehearse parts of their songs that they are having troubles with. In doing this, they will need to identify, as a group, their problem areas and how they can work to improve them. In elementary classes, students are given worksheets with rhythms hidden around the room. They must work on their own to find and write the rhythms.

The demonstrator style is the style that I use the most in my classroom. Vocal production, posture, rhythms, and much more are demonstrated in both elementary and high school classes. With this style I show students what they need to know and how it should be done. In upper and

lower level classes my students learn warm ups, songs, and games by listening and repeating what they heard. Since working toward my master's degree, I have tried to gravitate away from teaching by rote. I want my students, especially younger students, to learn how to read the music they will be performing.

In the classroom, the newest style of teaching I use is the hybrid style. I have used this style on and off throughout my years of teaching, but since starting the journey to my master's degree I have tried to focus on this style more and more. One of my main goals as an educator is to make sure my students know that their interests are taken into account. In my classroom I try to bring the students' interests into the activities that we do. For example, many of the older students enjoy Star Wars and during the week of May fourth there is Star Wars themed activities in the music room. It is important that my students know that they are being heard.

After taking courses in the master's program on philosophy, history, improvisation, movement, theories, and world and cultural pedagogies I have noticed that my thought processes have changed. Before taking World and Cultural Pedagogies in the summer of 2021, a source on the internet would have sufficed if I were looking for a cultural activity. However, now I have included more authentically sourced cultural activities (including working toward a tinkling unit in tandem with the PE teacher).

The curriculum course in the summer of 2022 was incredibly vital in changing my thought process. As someone who was unable to decide which curriculum I liked more, being able to work on my own curriculum was very helpful. Looking back at this course and the 2022-2023 school year, I am able to see how I went about choosing songs, activities, and games for my students based on the curriculum that I began to work on in the curriculum course. As my

years in education furthers, I look forward to continuing to work on the curriculum and build upon it.

As previously stated, before beginning my work in the Master of Music Education program at Kansas State University I had been in a rut. I had been doing the same activities and same songs as the previous years. But, since taking the Symposium courses offered I have begun to integrate new ideas into my lessons. The best example of trying new things is the lesson that is shown in Chapter 2: Rhythm Card Improvisation.

Throughout all of my schooling I never felt confident enough to improvise, which affected my students abilities to improvise and create on their own. Since the summer of 2021 term I have encouraged my students to create and improvise more. The summer 2022 term allowed for in-person sessions meaning improvisation happened in-person. This has helped me grow as a teacher because I no longer feel self-conscious when improvising in front of students.

In conclusion, the past three summers in the Master of Music Education program at Kansas State University has been important and vital to my growth as a music educator. My time in this program has allowed me to grow my thought processes, become more open to trying new things, and even expand my teaching styles. With this program I have become a better teacher.

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