Improvisation in General Music Classrooms

Rachel Whitcomb, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor of Music Education
Duquesne University
Pittsburgh, PA
(412) 396-2225
whitcombr@duq.edu
Points to Ponder

• What are your experiences with improvisation in the classroom?

• How do you feel about incorporating improvisation into your classroom?

• What challenges do you face in this endeavor?

• What are the benefits of including improvisation in music instruction?
Definitions

• **Improvisation**: a musical endeavor in which an individual or group of individuals spontaneously creates original music that will live in the moment without revision

• **Improvisational activities**: any endeavor in an elementary general music classroom in which students create music spontaneously as individuals or in groups; these types of endeavors require students to simultaneously perform, listen, analyze, and make musical choices in the moment; these activities include rhythmic, melodic, or harmonic creation
Improvisation

• Included in the National Standards for Music Education (#3)
• Provides opportunities for children to express feelings and ideas in musical ways
• Allows children to combine skills of performing, listening, and analyzing
• Honors the ideas of the learners
Dissertation and Replications

- Survey of elementary general music teachers in the state of Illinois (2005)
- Replication study in New York State (2006)
- National study recently completed with results to be shared soon!
- Outcomes very similar (results here are from Illinois)
- Please see reference list to learn more details about the results of these studies
Extent of Improvisation

- 87% have implemented some form of improvisation
- 59% include improvisation at least once every ten lessons
- 91% teach improvisation with other skills
- 11% include improvisation as separate unit
- 55% say improvisation is included in curriculum
Highly reported activities

- Improvising on unpitched percussion (92%)
- Improvising instrumental rhythmic patterns (88%)
- Call-and-response singing (87%)
- Improvising on pitched percussion (79%)
- Improvising using body percussion (78%)
- Improvising vocal sounds to accompany a story or poem (77%)

See additional document for a comprehensive list of improvisational activities
Teacher Attitudes

• 83% feel at least somewhat successful in implementing improvisation into instruction

• 69% feel improvising should remain in the National Standards
Assisting Factors

- Teaching demonstrations by fellow music teachers (92%)
- More time scheduled for music instruction (83%)
- In-service teacher training (83%)
- Professional conferences (82%)
- Summer workshops (79%)

- This webinar will hopefully assist you!
Inhibiting Factors

• Lack of instructional time (77%)

• Lack of experience improvising as a musician (56%)

• Lack of training in teaching improvisation (55%)
Today’s webinar will provide:

• suggestions for how to overcome common challenges

• specific improvisational activities for use in the classroom
Suggestion #1: Start Simple and Set Guidelines

• Specify
• Gradually Loosen Up
• Get out of the way!
Specified guidelines

• Provide musical context
  ▫ Tonality, meter, mood
  ▫ Use melodic and rhythmic vocabulary already known by students
• Specify number of beats, pitches, rhythmic or melodic patterns, expressive elements
• Listen to the musical responses of the students and adjust the guidelines appropriately
Suggestion #2: Go With What You Know (Method and Material)

• Choose songs and activities that you already use and add an improvisational element to them

• Embed improvisation into your method
  ▫ Example:
    • Kodály: prepare, present, practice, *improvise*

• Use rhythmic and melodic vocabulary previously learned
Suggestion #3: Model Improvisation

• Modeling provides a musical context
• Students can use the teacher model as a basis for their improvisational endeavors
• Teachers can use modeling as an opportunity to share their musicianship and also their “fears:”
  ▫ “Boys and girls, if you are nervous about improvising, you are not alone! I am nervous too, but I think it will be so exciting to do this together. We can listen to one another and share our musical ideas. That way, our spontaneous music-making skills can grow and develop.”
Activity #1: Hot Cross Buns

• Teacher plays measures 1, 2, and 4

• Students choose one note (B, A, or G) and play it on the given rhythm within measure 3 (this will sound “messy” but that’s OK!)

• Everyone plays measures 1, 2, and 4 while individuals improvise measure 3
#1

\(\frac{4}{4}\)

B A G B A G B A G

#2

\(\frac{4}{4}\)

B A G B A G B A G
Hot Cross Buns (continued)

- Additional suggestions:
  - Use the notes B, A, and/or G in any order within the measure as long as each note is repeated for a given pair of eighth notes
  - Play any combination of B, A, or G in any order within the measure
  - Use any notes previously learned on recorder
  - Use any notes previously learned on the recorder as long as the newest note is included in their improvisation
  - Improvise both melodically and rhythmically
Activity #2: Hand Drum Improvisation

• Improvise a four-beat pattern (clapping) and have the students echo it
• Tell the students you are going to make up another pattern and have them echo it
• Explain that you made up that pattern but you were counting to 4, so you started on 1 and ended on 4
• Tell the students to clap any pattern they want as long as they start on 1 and end on 4
Hand Drum Improvisation (continued)

• Ask:
  ▫ “If we all make up our own patterns, will they all sound the same?”
  ▫ “What will it sound like when we clap our patterns together? Is that okay?”
• Count off and show the students beats 1, 2, 3 and 4 on your fingers
• Instruct the students to clap a different pattern and (depending on the age level):
  ▫ Add a rest
  ▫ Add a half note
  ▫ Make it louder/softer, etc.
Hand Drum Improvisation (continued)

• Add hand drums to the activity, starting out with echo patterns
• Count off and show beats with fingers again
• Demonstrate the difference between patterns and “noise”
• Include group improvisation and individual improvisation
• For older grades, have students play patterns that can be echoed by the whole class
Activity #3: Rhythmic Patterns

- Set of four rhythmic patterns written on board
- Teacher provides tempo by snapping or keeping the beat on a drum
- All students say and clap all patterns (on rhythmic syllables they already know, such as ta/ti-ti, du/du-de)
- Students choose one pattern silently (“keep it in your head”)
Sample Rhythmic Patterns (focus on sixteenth notes)
Rhythmic Patterns continued

• Teacher and students will say patterns as a call-and-response.

• Possible teacher script:
  ▫ “I will say a pattern that may or may not be on the board. It will last for four beats. When I’m done, it will be Susan’s turn to say the pattern she has chosen from the board. She should say her pattern right after mine. Then it will be my turn again. Then Jonathan will say his pattern. We will continue until everyone has had a turn.”
Rhythmic Patterns continued

• After successful completion of the activity, the teacher can erase the patterns. This will require the students to improvise patterns. They may recall a previous pattern, but the ultimate goal is for them to spontaneously create their own pattern.

• The “fall back” pattern can be an easier pattern that includes the rhythmic elements appropriate for the grade level.
Rhythmic Patterns continued

- Use your turn in the call-and-response progression to set up each child for success.
- Your pattern can be simple for those struggling with rhythm, or more complex for students who need a challenge.
- Discuss the students’ choices after the lesson to combine this activity with *National Standard #7: Evaluating music and music performances*
Rhythmic Patterns continued

• This activity works with the rhythmic vocabulary already established in the grade level

• Transfer this activity to melodic patterns as well (solfege)
Activity #4: Folk Song Call and Response

- Choose a folk song that has the form a b a c such as:
  - Great Big House in New Orleans
  - Alabama Gal

- Once the students know the song, the teacher can play the “a” phrase on xylophones and the students can play the rhythm of the “b” and “c” phrases, improvising the notes using the pentatonic scale
Folk Song Call and Response (continued)

- The students can play as a group first and then individually.
- Some students will figure out the correct melody, so they can be commended on that and then encouraged to create (and then perhaps sing) their own melody to the “b” and “c” phrases.
- The teacher can say things like:
  - “Play more than one note this time.”
  - “Choose only one note this time.”
  - “Play high and low notes this time.”
Video

- The children here are improvising the “b” and “c” phrases for *Great Big House in New Orleans*

- This was a mixed-age class (5-8 year olds) that met once per week for 11 weeks at Duquesne University
Activity #5: Improvisation and Visual Art

• Divide students into groups of 4 or 5

• Provide each group with:
  ▫ An interesting piece of visual art
  ▫ A collection of pitched/unpitched instruments of various timbres
Improvisation/Art (continued)

- Possible teacher script:
  - “You will create a piece of music that includes all of the instruments in your group. Each instrument will represent something in the picture – either something you can see, or something you would hear if you were sitting in the picture. You will only have a few minutes to work together to create a piece of music with a beginning, middle, and end. You will play your piece for the class. After you are finished, the class will guess the part of the picture that each instrument represents.”
Improvisation/Art (continued)

• Model your own “creation” with a piece of art and one instrument to provide an example for the students and share the “risk”

• If groups have limited time, the music will be more spontaneous

• If groups have more time, the activity blends into National Standard #4: Composing and arranging within specified guidelines because of the ability to revise

• After each group plays, students can also evaluate the music they have heard
Improvisation/Art (continued)

• This activity also connects to National Standard #8: Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts

• Talk with the art teacher about specific artists or artwork that is currently being studied for your chosen grade level
Activity #5: “Sally” in Rondo Form

• Use an established folk song, such as *Sally Go Round the Sun* as the basis for improvisation
• Teach a drone, alternating bordun, level drone, or crossover bordun on barred instruments, depending on grade level
• Students can all play the assigned accompaniment with the song as the “A” section of a rondo form
“Sally” in Rondo Form (continued)

• Give students a few moments to explore the melodic possibilities of their instruments

• Students are to play the rhythm of the song with improvised melodies

• Individual students will improvise the B, C, D, E... sections of the rondo form
“Sally” in Rondo Form (continued)

- This activity uses repertoire the students already know

- Transfer this activity to a varied repertoire of music (folk songs from around the world)

- Guidelines allow students to concentrate on one element (melody) spontaneously
Questions?
Revisiting Original Points to Ponder

• What are your experiences with improvisation in the classroom?

• How do you feel about incorporating improvisation into your classroom?

• What challenges do you face in this endeavor?

• What are the benefits of including improvisation in music instruction?
References

