



Teacher Education Webinar Series 2018

Excellence in Teaching: Inspiration, Innovation, and Creativity

Yes, You Can!

Breaking through student and teacher inhibitions to create meaningful learning through improvisation.

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Intro: Asking someone to “go ahead and improvise” is like saying “go ahead, give a speech in French”

Improvisation - not just notes, but rhythm, fingering, form, articulation, dynamics, harmony, style, mood, etc.

Reinterpret “I can’t” or “I don’t know how” as “I need more specific directions.”

Remove difficulties by presetting or eliminating elements and giving students specific achievable tasks.

Why bother?

- Speak the language of music
- Professional applications (jazz, church)
- Composition
- Averting disaster!
- Staying inspired

Rhythm

- First improvisations could/should be *without notes*
- Use claps, snaps, taps, vocalizations, percussion instruments, foot stomps
- Try exchanging two-measure rhythms (clapping) with your students

Tips: marching; phrase endings; pickups/rests

Next Steps: Move to the piano (one note only). Students can trade between their RH and LH

Accompaniments

- Transition clapping rhythms into repeated chords for a chord progression (for example, I-IV-V7-I)
- Try with “broken chords” and “oom-pah” rhythms; start with clapping and use the rhythm to generate an accompaniment
- Utilize repetitions and omissions to create a variety of accompaniment patterns
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Tips: Vary the harmonic rhythm - not always one measure per chord, but sometimes faster, sometimes slower

Next steps: Mix accompaniment styles within a progression; move to different keys, sub in different chords (ii, V/V, iv, vi, etc.)

Arpeggios

- Make melodies playing only the notes of the chords
- Match left hand and right hand
- Use multiple octaves, turn around for different shapes, repetition, skipping
- Start with just one chord and then try over the same chord progressions you've been practicing

Tips: show them melodies of famous songs to inspire them (*Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, *Appassionata* Sonata, "Jesus Christ, Superstar")

Next Steps: Try adding half-step lead-ins (from below)

"Intermission" - Miscellaneous Tips

- Never be afraid to write something out first! Improvisation = creation + performance; taking away the creation side means students can focus on a performance
 - o (bike-riding analogy - improvisation in rhythm needs to be *felt*)
- Work to engage the ear. The difference between a scale fragment and a melody is that someone *hears* the melody before playing it. If students are willing to sing, have them sing something first, then play it after.
- Three ways to "customize" an exercise's difficulty: speed, key/progression, and the number of elements in an exercise
- "Make a mess" and clean it up later; encourage students to be okay with being imperfect

Scales

- The DNA of melodies - don't just practice up and down, but divide into intervals and practice changing directions (practicing scales is like cooking chicken)
- "Jeremy's Famous Scale Game"
 - o Rules: playing only the notes of a given scale, play consistent quarter notes without missing a beat for 1 minute. You're not allowed to play in patterns or repeat notes

Tips: watch fingering - add cross-overs, cross-unders, extend/contract and make sure the student's using leaps bigger than a fourth.

Next Steps: Use scales as a device to connect between arpeggios.

Form

- Blues - a great place to start because the student doesn't have to change scales
- AAB blues (3 phrases - 4-bar phrase, repeat the 4-bar phrase, and then a contrasting 4-bar phrase - "oh my baby left me, she left me yesterday" x2, "My baby just went away")
- "play two, rest two"
- Analyze existing melodies and have your students imitate the phrase structure

Tips: Make sure phrases have clear beginnings and endings (no improvisation "diarrhea"); listen for different phrase lengths; make sure students are repeating themselves in improvisation!

What Next?

- 1) Create larger structures! ("Russian nesting doll" of ABA...i.e. ABA CDC ABA)
- 2) Start improvising over jazz progressions. In jazz, the chord progression is given, the melody needs to be created.
- 3) Explore different pianistic textures (use repertoire pieces to inspire)