

Teaching Beginning Jazz Improvisation: “All In Good Time”

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“All in Good Time.” This is a multiple play on the words “good time.”

For one, a player who displays good jazz rhythmic skill is described as “having good time” or “having good timing.” This means she or he has a command of swing feel, plays “in the pocket,” or “in the groove.” (If you need definitions for these terms, see the article here.) I like to think of good time in swing feel as laid back yet driving. Interestingly, these qualities of rhythmic skill are also all things we look for in “classical” playing, we just use different words to describe them.

Next, in my view, Elementary band is a “good time” to start teaching jazz improvisation. It’s never too early! Get ‘em hooked on America’s original art form while they’re young. I find that students with only 1 1/2 years of instruction can learn the basics of jazz improvisation and swing feel. As long as they have a sense of tone and pitch, adequate note-reading skills, and a strategy for rhythm reading, they can learn jazz improvisation as a new set of skills that complement what they’ve already learned.

Also, if we “get ‘em early,” we can often guide students to feel that improvisation and soloing is a natural creative outlet before they become self-conscious about playing in front of their peers or an audience.

In my own experiences as a student (and maybe for many of you) I was not the “natural” player to whom improvisation came easily. I always played in a jazz ensemble and loved to listen to jazz. I could swing and read, even getting a handle on jazz theory, but as a high school and even college player I often felt stiff, awkward and self-conscious when it was my turn to

try improvising. Only later as an adult did I start having more and more successful experiences. It took some "unlearning" of my deeply ingrained classical training and learning to "let go" that allowed me to finally feel more comfortable as an improvising musician.

One of my father's favorite saying when I was impatient about something was "all in the fullness of time." So learning swing and jazz improvisation comes "all in good time." Students need to learn a bit at a time to establish the new habits of learning that are specific to swing and improvisation. Changing any behavior, musical or otherwise, takes time. One of my music teaching catchphrases is: **Repeat, Reinforce, Remember**. When you **repeat** (correctly) a phrase, passage or behavior over time, it is **reinforced** in your mind, so you can **remember** how to replicate it.

Lastly, I find that students have a good time when learning swing rhythm and jazz improvisation. We give them permission to get off the page and experience the joy of play by "playing around" with the musical ideas. There is more of a sense of creating in the moment, a key component of "play" theory than when students are trying to recreate and idealized performance directed or dictated by their conductor. Obviously, while both are rewarding, everyone knows play is more fun than work.

Even in the 21st century, young students react to jazz and swing as happy, "good-time" music. Also, kids and adults both feel and respond to the blues.

I find that giving students an opportunity to learn jazz improvisation and swing is motivating in a new way. I also connect with and teach my students in a newer, different, and usually better way when we travel down this path together.

Why Teach Jazz Improvisation? Why start so young?

Improvisation is a big part of most state Music standards and the National Core standards. But in many school music programs, there is very little improvising going on. Maybe an Orff certified General Music teacher will have students improvise an accompaniment or bourdon, or a Many middle, junior or high school music programs have a “jazz band” or “stage band,” but these tend to be performance-based ensembles that happen to have different instrumentation and play a different genre of music than our concert bands. There may be a student or two who improvises, but many of us find ourselves under pressure to “teach the concert music” and don’t or can’t take the time to teach everyone to improvise.

In our Western music tradition, we get very stuck on “the page” and teach “music reading” more than “music making.” When we advocate for our programs with colleagues, administrators, and community members we always talk about music as being the “creative” part of school, as compared to core classroom subjects. In reality the practice of what we teach students is often not really very creative at all. I like to joke that when students “get creative,” they’re usually going to get in trouble.

Giving students the tools for jazz improvisation reinforces the concept we all try to teach, that “the music is in the performance, not on the paper.” Students learn to read the new swing rhythms as a matter of interpretation or style, rather than just a “correct” decoding of traditional rhythms or a rote copy of an aural model.

In most of our lives as educators, we’re teaching students to read music correctly off the page, perhaps copy the sound, style or phrasing of the teacher demonstrating a passage, or learn how to follow a conductor’s gestures to successfully perform. This, however is a “received interpretation.” This is all part of music education, but it is not student creativity, it is the teacher's.

By contract, jazz improvisation is "authentic student creativity." By teaching students how to improvise, they are taking ownership of their creativity and creations.

Lastly, the theories of language acquisition in the developing human brain show that learning takes place organically through exposure, passing through several distinct yet functional phases. Rather than waiting until students can learn or understand all the complex music theory involving swing rhythm, back-beat, blues notes, chord and non-chord tones, chord-scale combinations, and so much more, I've found that Elementary Band is a good time to teach students the language of jazz. We can teach them to use their ears, combine their playing experience and musical knowledge with any previous exposure to jazz rhythms they may have had in their music listening, and connect it to a new rhythmic interpretation. This can be executed on a fairly intuitive level for the students, with the proper guidance of their music teacher.

For a step-by-step method to teach your young students (or yourself) to find the groove, get a strong sense of swing, and practice a fearless approach to improvisation, check out my book [Rhythm First! A Beginner's Guide to Jazz Improvisation](#) published by [Sher Music](#). I promise you'll have a good time, and get good time.