



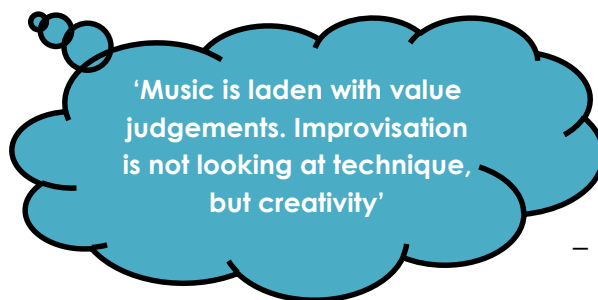
Ways into improvisation in participatory music projects

Thanks to all the musicians who attended and shared their experience and practice!

1) Challenges encountered


When improvising with a group or an individual, what issues often arise?

- Improvisation is, by its nature, difficult to plan
- When getting a group to improvise, many can find it hard to know **when to listen and when to lead**
- Signs of **anxiety** appear from participants and teachers when asked to improvise
- External factors and **preconceptions** (particularly of adults)
- The idea of **right and wrong** doesn't fit with improvising, yet the current education system drills the right/wrong idea into children very firmly
- Finding a way to **focus** a whole group after an exercise/get them down from a high
- Reconciling an individual's actual skill level with their perceived skill level, whilst keeping the material relevant and appropriate for all participants in the session
- Balancing ability and aptitude levels with an individual's confidence level
- Bringing energy back down after a high
- How to get past the "I'm too cool for that" attitude
- Getting teenagers over their reluctance to use their voice
- **How do you start?** How to get the first one or two people in a group to start improvising, in order that the rest of the group will follow (overcoming security in numbers)
- How do you make **'free' improv** acceptable? It's not about 'going off into own world'. How do you **keep people listening?**
- Its fine if a participant seems to go against/doesn't expect nurture their creativity



2) Progression – how do you further develop improvisatory skills?

With a topic as fluid as improvisation, it can be difficult for a novice to see where to start.

- Make sure activities are **achievable**
 - Strong **support and encouragement** from leaders is vital
 - Instructions and expectations need to be **clear and concise**. Introduce one idea at a time and assume nothing (especially with EY & SEN/D).
 - Build improvisation up from the base – start with body percussion, actions, etc. to build up to pitched improvisation
 - Employ a **'no wrong note' policy**. The improviser should not feel restricted to 'right' notes; they need to develop expression through conviction.
 - Developing listening skills – when not to play vs listening to others
 - Find ways of getting people improvising without them realising it (e.g. call and response)
 - Gradually build up from a small, defined start where the task is clearly explained and the goal is realistic. They may not even realise they're improvising!
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- Think about starting improvisations in larger **groups before a solo** improvisation
 - When starting solo improvisations, start with a one or two bar break in a song to **reduce the size of the task**, gradually increasing this as confidence grows
 - If appropriate, start with vocals and then move to instrumental improvisations
 - Start with call and response, building up the length of the responses into fuller improvisations – can be a useful way to start improvisation without the musicians realising
 - When introducing pitches to improvisation, confine them to **a set of pitches**, e.g. pentatonic scale. This will help to deliver a more rewarding improvisation when starting out, as everything sounds 'right', building confidence. **Broaden the constraints as confidence grows**
 - **Consider the big picture** – improvise on mood, dynamics, textures, before thinking about harmonic/scale/modal improvisations
 - **Structure the progression**, first looking at rhythmic improvisation, then melodic. How the musician structures their improvisation, however big or small, can be informed by the contour of a phrase. Natural pauses in speech can be a starting place for this idea.
 - Repeat a single phrase until they're comfortable and can then extend it
 - **Learn by ear** so they're not reading. Then improvise around what they've just learned
 - Hide the harmony – no chords means no rules and less sense of right/wrong
 - Improvisation can be used as a **tool for composition**. Discuss the difference between these two forms of music creation
 - Depending on the age of the group, it can be productive to **discuss why** a musical idea might or might not make a successful improvisation

“As the leader, think about how you might improvise around an issue that a group throws at you. The skills of the workshop leader are fundamental across all genres and ages. Observe other leaders, go to training, and be prepared to work with anybody. Never assume anything about participants.”

3) Sharing useful workshop techniques, games, resources...

Try using some of these different ideas with your groups, offered by musicians at the practice-sharing session.

- Use visual cues to steer the group without having to stop the music to talk, e.g. red/green (stop/go) cue cards
- Ask participants to come to the front and be the director/conductor
- Call and response is an effective starting tool for new improvisers. Once the idea of the exercise has been taught, group members can be brought forward lead the next call to the group.
- ‘Musical consequences’: in a circle, start with a riff from one person, gradually add in more people by moving around the group. Each new idea compliments the idea that came before it
 - To not have too many ideas at once, group members could drop out once they feel their idea has been fully explored
- Start with non-musical stimuli, or explore the use of graphic scores
- Circle song – when someone is tapped on the shoulder they start singing any note. Gradually build up until everyone is singing – good for listening
- Use emotions to stimulate improvisations
- Tell a story as a group, with sounds for each element of the story, gradually adding more and more to tell the narrative. This can be linked with emotion stimulating improvisation
- Conducting – get individuals to make up their own signals/signs/ movements which can be interpreted by the members of the group as a form of improvisation
- Each musician chooses a number between 1 and 8. The leader calls numbers out, with each musician clapping as their number is called. Gradually build into a rhythm, or begin to replace the claps with vocal / percussive sounds. Be very clear about guidelines here!
- Sit in silence and ask participants to observe what they hear – listen to the silence. With this game it can often take time for the first observation to come, but this then always leads to a stream of suggestions
- With string instruments, do scales on only one or two strings to break out of the standard patterns
- Shape singing (<http://www.ukshapenote.org.uk>)
- Stand in a circle, eyes closed and listen to each other perform
- Pass a sound around a circle, each member improvising on the last sound
- Listening games – scales in thirds/canons/parts to parts/rounds
- Singing – using words, breaking up words into sounds, e.g. sound of your name, then moving on to words with intended meaning, e.g. poems
- Start with a 12 bar blues, and then develop improvisations around blues scale
- Improvise on a current piece
- All playing at same time, so no ‘freeze’