

An Analysis and Percussive Arts Demonstration  
of Developmental Stages in Improvisation with  
Related Applications for a Middle School Jazz Band

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## Abstract of the Research and Findings

The purpose of this research was to analyze models of teaching and learning improvisation and the related applications to middle school and junior high students. A developmental model for improvisation created by John Kratus was the basis of this research. The author was introduced to this model during a Department of Defense Elementary and Secondary Schools (DDESS) in-service conference in which Kratus was a guest speaker. Other methodologies for improvising were reviewed, some of which had been used previously by the researcher.

Kratus describes seven levels of improvisation identified by certain skills and behaviors demonstrated by the improviser. His model has parallels to Piaget's developmental theory. Students must attain skills and knowledge at one level before the next can be reached. A student cannot skip a level, but may revert to elements of an earlier level for a variety of reasons. Elements of any level can be introduced at any time, but will only be incorporated by an improviser when that person attains the skills and knowledge requisite to that level.

The researcher utilized this developmental approach in action research while instructing his junior high students participating in an extracurricular jazz ensemble. Students self-reported their perceived ability and comfort in regard to improvising on an instrument developed by the researcher. Students were surveyed before and after receiving instruction. The results of the surveys were analyzed to determine if there was any improvement in ability or comfort in improvising perceived by the students. The rehearsals were videotaped.

The researcher concludes that middle school and junior high students can be taught to improvise using a developmental methodology. This approach to improvising is appropriate to meeting the needs of young students learning to improvise. This conclusion is evidenced by the students' response to surveys about the instructional and improvisation processes and the analysis of videotaped performances. This approach also allows a teacher to incorporate methods to teaching improvisation developed by the many authors and researchers reviewed as long as instruction is appropriate to the level the students have attained.

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## Review of Related Literature

There were a number of issues that needed to be researched in reviewing literature for this thesis topic: the nature and components of improvisation, the necessity to teach improvisation, methodologies for instruction and meeting the needs of the learners. Disparities among the researchers were also investigated. As there was a performance component to this thesis project, the music used in the demonstration performance was also discussed. The review drew upon journal articles, anthologies, encyclopedias, books, websites, electronic media and teaching methods to encompass the topic.

### *A. Characteristics of Improvisation*

The reviewed literature disclosed many differing opinions of the definition of *improvisation* and what it means to improvise. The meaning of the word differs even within cultures and genres. The word *improvisation* can mean both the act and the product of that action. Nettl (2001, p. 94) describes improvisation as “the art of thinking and performing music simultaneously.” He mentions that the term “extemporization” is used more or less interchangeably with “improvisation.”

Hinz (1995a, n.p.) states that, particularly in the case of jazz music, “improvisation can be as simple as changing a few notes of the notated melody but more often involves creating a melody that is quite different from the original one.” He suggests (1995a, n.p.) that one of the first steps of the improvisation process “is to subtly change a melody through ornamentation... In this manner the improviser can grasp the spirit of improvisation as a process of melodic variation rather than the creation of an entirely new melody” (p. 33). Alperson (1984) explains that “a player may take a melodic unit or phrase as a point of departure for musical transformations or he or she may begin with a phrase not obviously derivative of the original composition” (p. 22). According to Pressing (1984), improvisation is the product of “event- clusters” as musical motives are pieced together.

Improvisation has been a vital part of music making throughout history. Improvisation is rooted in the musical traditions of India, Asia, Africa, Persia, Australia and other non-Western locations. From an historical perspective, several authors note in their works that improvisation was a part of music making from the time of ancient Greece. In the Western musical tradition it was instrumental in the development of melismatic types of liturgical chants in the fourth century, and was an integral part of Baroque and Classical music. Improvisation is essential to

jazz music. Gould and Keaton (2000) point out that early opera scores were little more than a melody and figured bass, and the improvisatory nature of the cadenza in classical concerto scores, which was comprised of "a blank measure crowned with a fermata and inscribed 'cadenza'" (p. 144). Azzara (1999) reminds us that "Bach, Mozart and Beethoven were all exuberant improvisers. Improvisational skill played a vital role in the lives of these master musicians, while their notated music has become the core repertoire of many musicians today" (p. 21).

There is almost universal agreement that improvisation has elements of premeditation, structure and constraints that guide the performer, regardless of the genre. These create the framework that keeps an improvisation coherent. Azzara (2002) states that improvisation "involves an ability to make music spontaneously within specified musical parameters" (p. 171). Hinz (1995b, p. 33) says that "improvisation mainly involves the element of variation." Gould & Keaton (2000) note that while "some players improvise with great abandon, they nonetheless must respect both the limits of the genre and the musical logic itself; otherwise their performances lose intelligibility and become simply haphazard sequences of sound" (p. 146). Alperson states that "even the finest improviser... improvises against some sort of musical context" (p. 22). Pressing (1987) describes the many aspects of improvisation as a decision-making process.

The inter-relationship among composition, performance and improvisation makes improvising a unique creative activity. Alperson writes that "composition and performance are clearly interdependent rather than mutually exclusive activities," while noting "a greater element of risk which stems from the fact that the activity of improvisation is simultaneously an act of musical composition and musical performance" (p. 20). Elliott (1995) deduces that composers



sometimes perform, and performers sometime compose in the course of their work. He notes that the problem is with the "oversimplified ideas of composing and performing" (p. 169). Elliott states that composing and performing are separated by temporal, rather than mental, conceptualization. He declares that "what distinguishes an improvisation from a performance is the human effort to compose in real time" (p. 169). Here, Elliott uses the word "performance" to indicate playing a piece of music that is already rehearsed with the purpose of rendering a musical experience similar in quality and character to others of the same work. These two writers point out the creative and interpretive richness of the activity of improvising and the vast resources a person calls upon while engaged in the act.

Spontaneity is the single element that separates improvisation from other kinds of composition. It leads to a clear aspect of creativity that composition and improvisation do not share; therefore an improviser cannot change his or her creation the way a composer might. Sarath notes that "improvisation is undertaken in a single, continuous format, with no provisions for revising or editing. The real-time performance of improvisation leads to the element of risk taking" (p. 189). The challenge to compose in real time "adds an extra degree of risk because improvisations unfold without second chances to correct, edit or polish the musical ideas" (Elliott 1995, p. 172). Valone (1985) describes improvisation a "musical ultimatum, as performance without chance for redemption either by way of rehearsal, improvement or the composition" (p. 193).

Azzara (1999) asserts that developing improvisation skills requires risk taking, while Nettl calls risk a typical component of improvisation. Brown (2002) notes that "a distinctive feature of jazz is the way players look for opportunities to make daring moves" (p.119). With a positive

outlook on taking risks, Mickolajak (2003) states that "improvisation can give (students) the freedom to make music without the fear of failing" (p. 40).

In summary, improvisation includes components of spontaneity, structure, composition, and performance. Authors' opinions differ in both the amount and significance of each of these elements, depending on the methodology they promote, but for the most part these elements are to be considered as a part of creating improvisations.

### *B. Rationale for Teaching and Learning Improvisational Skills*

The review of related literature leads the researcher to the conclusion that improvisation is a small and often ignored part of music students' educations. Sarath (2002) notes that "conventional curriculum models filled to the brim with requirements in interpretive performance and analysis of European repertory leave little room for experiences in improvisation, composition, technology and multiethnic musicianship, to list some of the areas most commonly cited as lacking" (p.188). Azzara (1999) determined that "although improvisation has been a vital part of music making throughout history, it is inexplicably missing from most school music programs" (p. 21). Snyder (2001, p. 26) reports on inclusion of improvisation, composition and music history in classes, that, "...a survey of 147 band directors from across the nation revealed that these three standards are rarely, if ever, addressed in ensemble rehearsals." Hickey (1997) targets an emphasis on ensemble performance as a reason for the status of improvisational study. Volz (2005) warns that "for too long musicians have left improvisation solely to jazz musicians. But improvisation should not be reserved for jazz ensembles and garage bands" (p. 50).

The review of literature reveals many musical, practical and logical reasons to make improvisation a part of a music curriculum. One incentive to teach improvisation is found in the National Standards for Arts Education, a list of musical concepts and skills that students should be able to know and do. Standard 3 states that students should be able to improvise melodies, variations and accompaniments (MENC, 1994). Azzara (1999, p.24) points out that music teachers "are responsible for developing the music listening, improvising, reading and writing skills of their students," but notes that "although these skills are important, many music teachers

spend most of their time teaching music reading." Aebersold (n.d.) insists, "There is nothing to fear in incorporating improvisation into the general musical curriculum" (p.1).

Elliott (1995) states that "improvising links students to performing and composing in practical and musical-social ways" (p. 173). In his 1990 article, Kratus lists improvisation among four types of creative activities, and in his 1991 tome argues that "improvisation can and should be a meaningful part of every student's music education, from pre-school through adulthood." Hinz (1995a) finds improvisation can free students from "reliance upon the notes on the page and strengthen their reliance on their ears" (p. 20). The research on improvisation shows that students interpret music more accurately and have less reliance on the written score (Azzara, 2002), and have a better sense of compositional functions (Hickey, 1997, Hinz, 1995b) when they learn to improvise. Taylor (2000) includes allowing for self-expression, developing creativity, promoting teamwork and helping to strengthen values among the benefits. In his 2002 study, Azzara notes that "improvisational skill allows individuals to express musical thoughts and ideas from an internal source, with meaning, and it promotes the acquisition of higher order thinking skills" (p. 172). Azzara (1999) states improvisation should become a part of every student's instruction, "because of its fundamental nature and its profound contribution to the building of students' music understanding and performance abilities" (p. 25). Further, Azzara (2002) finds that, "students who have the skills to improvise enhance their performance of notated music" (p. 179). Sarath (2002) lists many benefits:

The creative, integrative, eclectic and hands-on qualities of improvisational experience promote the development of both conventional and contemporary skills, foster in students an all-important self-sufficiency, and also open up pathways to emerging educational areas such as consciousness and contemplative studies (p. 188).

Sarath concludes "when students begin to see music as intimately related to self-growth they begin to evolve as self-driven learners" (p. 196).

### *C. General Themes in Methodologies for Teaching and Learning Improvisation*

A theme that runs through many authors' methodologies harkens back to Gordon's idea of "audiation" - hearing the music mentally before it is actually played. Hinz (1995b) says "improvisers often 'prehear' what they improvise. The ability to know what a melody will sound like immediately before it is performed is essential in the art of improvisation" (p. 35). Hinz (1995a) also finds that improvisation can free students from "reliance upon the notes on the page and strengthen their reliance on their ears" (p. 20). In a summary of his 1999 work, Azzara (2002) states that in order to learn to improvise "individuals should listen to improvised music, learn a repertoire by ear, learn harmony and counterpoint by ear, learn the vocabulary of the genre by ear and take risks" (p. 179).

Some authors point out the similarities of improvising on an instrument and in speaking. In his 1999 study, Azzara quotes his earlier writing on this subject, contending that in both spoken language and improvising, the individual develops a vocabulary and four ways to use it: listening, reading, writing and speaking/ improvising. He asserts that students learn to improvise in the same ways they learn to speak extemporaneously. This assertion echoes Pressing's (1987) observation that "the clearest parallel seems to be with spontaneous speech, which has a comparable creative component." Gould and Keaton make the comparison that "just as a speaker fluent in a given language does not have to formulate exactly what will be said prior to saying it, so a skillful (virtuosic) musician does not have to think about every nuance of phrasing..." (p. 146).

There are many forms that improvisation may take. Kernfeld (2001) mentions no fewer than five forms of improvisation:

1. Paraphrase - an ornamental variation of the melody which remains recognizable;
2. Formulaic - the building of new ideas from fragments pieced together;

3. Motivic - building a melody through the development of a single fragment;
4. Modal - explores the melodic and harmonic possibilities of a collection of pitches;
5. Use of interrelated techniques - combinations of the other forms.

Pressing (1987) outlines five approaches educators take to teaching improvisation. The first treats improvisation as real-time composition, with no distinction drawn between the two. The second sets out patterns, models and procedures specific to the improvisational situation, but requires the students to possess an advanced level of musicianship to produce stylistically appropriate music. A third technique sets a spectrum of improvisational problems or constraints for within which students act. A fourth approach presents multiple versions of important musical entities (motives) in which variation may occur "by appreciating the 'fuzziness' of the concept." A fifth approach is allied to humanistic psychology, and depends on "students' powers of sensation, imagination and memory,"— what could probably be termed "giftedness."

Most of the reviewed methods for learning to improvise (among them methods by Aebersold, Baker, Coker, Hinz, Sarath, and Taylor) are based on a model that requires students to learn scales and harmonic progressions, and to have an advanced level of technique in playing their instrument ("eye-training" instead of "ear-training"). Strong emphasis is placed on the students' ability to play notes. Most also leave the actual conceptualization of improvisation up to the student. Aebersold has students playing improvisations that mimic more advanced performers. Coker introduces a variety of styles and their characteristics. Taylor offers exercises and theory tips, but leaves the actual development of ability completely with the student. Many authors evaluate the success of an improvisation based on whether the notes "fit" or not, with a few also concerned with the interpretation and phrasing of the musical elements. As Hinz (1995b) points out, "Beginning improvisers often rely on scales and other simple patterns to become familiar with the basic vocabulary of their instruments. They have to work with scales

work with scales and other patterns because their aural skills and their sense of melodic development are still growing" (p. 33). The problem for implementation of methods such as these is in the expectation that students possess advanced skills before beginning to improvise.

#### *D. Specific Methodologies for Teaching and Learning Improvisation*

As previously mentioned, many of the reviewed methods for teaching and learning improvisation require students to have developed certain physical, technical, cognitive and creative skills before attempting to improvise. Azzara (2002) notes that “many of these studies and curricula for improvisation focus primarily on teaching through imitation and music theory” (p. 181). Alperson is speaking specifically of jazz musicians when he says they “frequently begin to learn to improvise by listening to and copying from recorded and live performances, other players’ musical phrases (or even whole solos)... In this way they develop a personal repertoire of phrases” (p. 22).

One of the first attempts at improvisational instruction was created by Aebersold. He made tapes and records of jazz tunes that could accompany learners as they played their instruments. This was a result of his own experience in jazz improvisation, of which he writes (n.d.):

I was probably 20 years old when I had my first lesson with Baker. From that day on, I thought in terms of “what scale goes with that chord symbol?” What is the correct or first choice arpeggio or chord? This way of thinking quickly lead to solos that contained better note choices and overall phrase construction and this quickly led to the understanding and exploration of altered tones, blue notes, chromaticism, etc. A whole new world of musical possibilities was opening up to my ears, fingers and mind. (p.1)

As of this writing, Aebersold has created more than 120 play-along compact disks. The problem with using his series with younger students is exactly the comprehension of music theory he writes about, which, while easily grasped by a 20 year-old with eight years of experience, is not so easily grasped by a 12 year-old who has only played for a year. In an online forum, Eve (n.d.) says of the Aebersold series, “While many of the available Jazz Improv methods (most notably Play-a-long Volumes 1 and 24) can be adapted for use with eighth graders and younger, there are not many resources targeted specifically for that age group” (n.p.).

In his 2002 work (p.179), Azzara delineates his method for learning improvisation:



1. Learn to sing and play a repertoire of melodies and bass lines by ear
2. Chant, play and improvise rhythm patterns
3. Sing, play and improvise tonal patterns
4. Learn solfege (harmonic function)
5. Improvise rhythms to familiar bass lines
6. Choose notes that outline the harmony
7. Combine improvised rhythm and tonal patterns.

A major problem with using this approach in a junior high setting would seem to involve the time it takes to learn the melodies and bass lines and the harmonic function of chords in music by ear. Azzara's intent is for the performer to allow aural intent to dictate action in improvising. This would be difficult to adapt to a junior high because of the limited repertoire and experience of the students.

In his course of study, Taylor (2000) breaks improvisational skills into five levels, labeled from "Starting" to "Advanced." His approach focuses strongly on technical skills and knowledge of theory. He lists seven elements of improvisation: melody, rhythm, expression, development, chord progressions, performance and analysis. He states that "when you recognize the seven elements, you make progress" (p. 2). On the same page he also lists five skills he believes are necessary to begin improvisational study: music reading, scales and arpeggios, sound and technique, knowledge of intervals and desire. Taylor provides a series of lessons that combine the seven elements with the five skills. Supposedly, this will lead to successful improvisations. In his first level, *Starting*, Taylor begins with basic keys, scales and chords, and how to create and develop imaginative 'improv' ideas. Level two, *Apprentice*, introduces tools for improvising basic jazz tunes, including swing rhythms and melodic shapes. There are

pedagogical problems associated with applying this approach to junior high students. Even at the starting level a student must have mastered certain technical aspects of performing on their instrument, and have a better-than-rudimentary knowledge of scales, chords and intervals.

Although junior high students should have instruction in all of these areas, finding a young teen student who is proficient in these areas is rare. This approach would be best suited for private lessons in a studio setting with a gifted child.

Hinz (1995b) suggests a system for teaching improvisation. The teacher provides a classroom or studio that is supportive of learning to improvise. The teacher allows the students to spontaneously play "anything. The teacher plays a root-fifth bass line while the students play an appropriate scale. The students play a short chord progression with their left hand while singing an improvised melody, which is followed by having the student play exactly what they just sang. There are boundaries for beginners to simplify the process. The teacher has students play melodic fragments, transposing them into all keys without hesitation. The problems with utilizing this approach in a junior high are numerous. Many junior high students cannot play chords on a piano. They are usually not willing to sing in front of others. Young students do not know all scales and keys. Rarely can they transpose quickly. Hinz does note that this method may be better suited to private, rather than group, instruction. He does not offer any suggestions on how to teach a student to play what was just sung, only that it should be done.

In *The Real Vibes Book*, Lipner (1996) outlines an approach to learning to play arrangements specifically on vibraphone. There are eight arrangements of each tune which are graduated in difficulty from simple two-mallet melodic line to four-mallet full arrangements with written out solos. According to Lipner, a person will learn to improvise by mimicking solos. He includes

sections on music theory and improvisation. The improvisation section includes lessons on creating lines, chords, chord progressions and "comping" (jazz terminology for accompanying).

For the purposes of this paper approaches that are more applicable to a junior high or middle school setting are needed. Snyder (2001) uses an approach based on call and response to help students become comfortable with improvising, and limits the note values available for rhythmic improvisation to those the class has already studied. Tonal values are limited to a single note at first, and eventually expanded to encompass a pentatonic scale. Volz (2005) also suggests that the easiest way to start students exploring improvisation is with a one-note solo of any length the student chooses. Hickey (1997) begins with simple rhythms that have been studied, but adds combinative aspects to her class activities. Students may clap while the teacher plays, or improvise a song while the teacher claps, as well as improvise on familiar tunes. Bitz (1998) encourages group improvisation, suggesting that, "students can learn a great deal from each other when they pass musical ideas around the classroom" (p. 21). Brophy (2001) presumes that "older children will also enjoy free improvisation without reference to specific musical forms. This can be accomplished by improvising musical backgrounds to literature, particularly favorite stories or poetry" (p. 41).

One improvisation method book that is geared towards younger band students is *The Chop Monster*. Berg (n.d.), the author writes, "I have found that students can be overwhelmed if you give them too much theory too soon. And yet the opposite approach, having them play over the blues scale or one pentatonic scale is a dead-end, and can even be detrimental to ear development" (n.d.).

### *E. Disparities in methodologies*

A point of contention among some of the authors is over the use of blues scales as tools for teaching improvisation. "Don't let students use pitches outside of the blues scale" warns Tomasseti (2003, p. 18) in reference to younger learners of improvisation. He is emphatic in saying beginning students "must learn one scale" (p.18), which is a blues scale. Hinz (1995b) notes,

Beginning improvisers often rely on scales and other simple patterns to become familiar with the basic vocabulary of their instruments. They have to work with scales and other patterns because their aural skills and their sense of melodic development are still growing (p.33).

He also points out why pentatonic and blues scales are frequently used by improvisers: "Any one of them, unchanged, can be used in a variety of chordal contexts" (p. 34). Hickey (1997) also believes blues scales are valuable tools for teaching young students. "The notes of the blues scale, which students love to jam with, provide a foolproof way for students to improvise in the blues style" (p. 20). She notes that students do not have to understand chord changes at this level, although they will eventually.

On the other hand, Huenink (2002) claims a blues scale doesn't teach musicianship because it is foolproof.

I made a big mistake when I taught improvisation. Our first improvisation used the blues scale, which made it easy for anyone to improvise. The problem was that students had no need to listen to the chord changes, because they could play blues scales notes over any chord. While the solos sounded fine, it didn't help students develop a musical ear! (p. 60).

Hinz (1995b) states that "nevertheless, scales and other basic patterns are only a starting point, and improvisers who rely heavily on them often create uninteresting and unidiomatic improvisations" (p. 34). He goes on to say aural skills are the key to developing convincing natural instincts. Bitz (1998) does not believe jazz is the best way to start teaching improvisation

### *F. Kratus' Developmental Theory*

Rather than focus on a methodology for teaching improvisation, Kratus (1991) focuses on students' readiness to learn. Kratus defines seven levels of development in improvisation. He provides a strategy of sequencing meaningful activities for a student to practice techniques and demonstrate readiness to move from one level to another. Kratus' approach to developmentally appropriate practices echoes the work of Montessori, Piaget and other educational psychologists.

Kratus points out two rules for using the levels to sequence instruction in improvisation. The first rule is "advancing from one level to the next requires attainment of the knowledge and skills of the preceding level. The knowledge and skills that students develop at a certain level, however, need not be taught only at that level" (p.39). The second rule is "students cannot skip levels as they advance to higher levels, but they may revert to lower levels for a variety of reasons" (p.40). To improvise at a high level, Kratus maintains that a musician must possess the skill of audiation, skills to manipulate the voice or instrument, strategies for structuring an improvisation, knowledge of stylistic conventions, the ability to develop a personal style and be product-oriented.

- At Level 1 a student is "Exploring." This is actually a pre-improvisational step.
- Level 2 is indicated by "Process-oriented" activities, and is also pre-improvisational.
- A student at Level 3 becomes "Product-oriented." According to Kratus (1991):

When a person creates music for the sake of experiencing the process of creation, that person has a process orientation to creativity. When a person creates music that is or could be shared with others, then that person has a product orientation (p.38)

- At Level 4 a student demonstrates "Fluid Improvisation." The creation is more relaxed and fluid, with the student demonstrating control through technical manipulation of the instrument. The focus is on technical facility.

at all. He explains that the speed is generally too fast, that there are syncopated rhythms that inexperienced students have not become proficient in playing, and that the harmonies of jazz are strange and unresolved to most young ears.

Another contradiction that runs through the literature centers on the need for students to learn how to be creative. Azzara (2002) quotes a study by Alibrio that finds early instruction in improvisation centers of the development of technical skills and should exclude creativity. Kratus (1990) concludes that, while educators may have developed activities to stimulate creativity, "what has largely been lacking is a scheme for bringing structure and sequence to the learning process...a set of clearly articulated goals and objectives must be developed to guide creative learning" (p. 33).

- Level 5 is marked by “Structural Improvisation.” Students become aware of overall structure, and create a repertoire of strategies for shaping the improvisation.
- Level 6 is indicated by “Stylistic Improvisation.” Musicians at this level improvise skillfully in a given style, learning the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic characteristics of that style” (p. 39).
- An improviser demonstrating “Personal Improvisation” has achieved Level 7 of development. At this level a musician transcends recognizable improvisation and develops a new style.

In Kratus’ approach to improvisation, a teacher is not telling a student what he or she should be learning or doing (scales, technique, theory), but instead is developing the students’ learning and understanding only when they are ready to learn.

### *G. Implications for Middle School and Junior High Jazz Programs*

The thesis project will focus, in part, on the application of an appropriate methodology for a middle school or junior high jazz band. Azzara (2002) points out that in Coy's research, students with two or three years of experience in playing an instrument can develop jazz improvisation skills (p.181). This indicates that working on improvisatory skills with students this age is not a waste of time. Brophy (2001) found evidence of the beginning of Kratus' Level 5 in the improvisations of some twelve-year olds, at the lower end of the ranges for middle school students. Aebersold (n.d.) says "When the student can play five notes, let them improvise with those five notes. Melodies don't have to contain all the notes of a scale or chord. Let the student's imagination blossom at each stage of their musical tutoring" (p. 1). The review of this related literature led the researcher to hypothesize that a developmental approach is appropriate in teaching improvisation to middle school and junior high students.



## Review of Performance Literature/ Repertoire

### A. *To the Gods of Rhythm* by Nebojsa Zivkovic

This piece of music will be used to demonstrate some of the points of development in the lower levels of Kratus' developmental model for teaching and learning improvisation. The music requires the performer to demonstrate an awareness of the locations of various sounds on the djembe and the use of proper techniques in acquiring them. The performer will use this approach to demonstrate the first three levels of exploring, process-oriented and product-oriented operations during the recital. The chant section will be used to demonstrate Fluid Improvisation.

The work is divided into three major sections. The first section is imitative in style, and requires the performer to demonstrate the locations of various sounds, both resonant and muffled, on the drum and the technique for producing the different timbres. The performer speaks the sound that the drum is to be making, so that the voice and drum move in unison. There are also three examples of call and response in the first section, whereby the performer chants the sounds first before creating them on the drum. The second section is a set of seven call and response rhythms followed by all seven being performed as one continuous rhythm. In the last section the performer demonstrates Fluid Improvisation while chanting. In the liner notes of his recording *uneven souls*, Zivkovic (1995) writes,

If there is a rhythm section in Heaven, the realm of the Gods, then surely the peoples of Africa and the Balkans have the say there. *To the Gods of Rhythm* (1994/95) is a mixture of Balkan rhythms with a spoken rhythm and a chant. The melody is based on an orthodox Serb church song. The piece is performed on one of the most fascinating African drums – djembe.

*B. Summertime from Porgy and Bess by George Gershwin*

"Summertime," written in 1937, is the first song heard in the opera *Porgy and Bess*. It is sung by the character Clara to her sleeping baby in a row house on the South Carolina coast late at night. The lullaby is necessitated by the loud craps game going on in the same room as many of the characters of the opera are introduced.

The tonality is minor and moves to a major submediant in measure 13 in the tradition of Gullah and other folk music. The 16-bar melody stays in E pentatonic except for measure eight which uses an F# for the dominant (B) chord.

For the recital performance the tune will be played in a jazz swing style, as opposed to the operatic style originally intended. The performer will play vibraphone accompanied by a traditional jazz rhythm trio. After the statement of the melody, the performer will demonstrate the various forms of improvisation outlined by Kernfeld (2001). The goal is to demonstrate a Level 5 (structural) improvisation as the form, underlying harmonic structure, and style will not be altered during the performance. The melody will move to the piano to allow the vibraphonist to demonstrate "comping," which is improvising accompaniment. The arrangement ends with a recapitulation of the melody in the vibraphone part followed by a short coda.

*C. composed improvisation for snare drum by John Cage*

Cage composed this piece in 1987 at the suggestion of Stuart Sanders Smith, who was compiling a book of snare drum solos. Cage was so enthusiastic about the project that his was the first submission. The “composed” part of this piece is the structure of the work. All other elements of the work are determined by chance. The performer “asks” a question, and then pulls slips of paper from a pool of possible choices in a hat to determine the answer.

According to Revill, the composer’s authorized biographer, Cage was drawn to percussion for several reasons. He had a desire to do something different from other composers, and during this time percussion was used mainly in a supporting role. He liked the possibilities that noise (as opposed to melodic pitch) offered. He preferred the element of duration/time to harmony or melody, which made percussion a more desirable option to other instruments. Elements of history or familiarity, likes and dislikes, preconceptions and personal tastes were to be eliminated from a performance. A performer who could do this would “make a discovery, ‘a leap out of reach of one’s grasp of oneself” (Revill, n.d., p. 1).

Cage was influenced by Eastern philosophy from the late 1930s until his death in 1992.

Revill (n.d. p.1) writes,

Cage’s central chance method involved the I-Ching, the traditional Chinese book of wisdom. Cage used the I-Ching’s coin oracle, in which a number between 1 and 64 is ascertained by throwing three coins six times. In this way, he generated chance-determined numbers that could then be tabulated to ascertain what would happen in the music. From the early 1950s until the end of his life, he used the I-Ching in composing most of his pieces.

Chance plays a large role in the performance of “composed improvisation for snare drum.” As with earlier works such as “Child of Tree” (1975) and “Branches” (1976), this piece lasts for eight minutes, which are divided into three chance-determined sections. These sections are

further divided into a chance-determined number of events. Chance operations determine the number of icti (touches or hits on the drum) for each event and which implements will be used.

The goal during the “composed improvisation for snare drum” will be to perform a Level 6 improvisation, with elements of Level Seven present due to the nature of Cage’s composition. Revill instructs the performer to, “improvise while present, centered, engaged, but don’t fill the music with yourself” (n.d. p.1). The performer appreciates his daughter’s assistance in the realization of the chance operations associated with the recital performance.

#### *D. Improvisation and Haiku by James Kuczero*

This work was originally developed as a project for the composer's EDU-565 (Applied Educational Philosophy) course. The task was to produce a creative expression, either of an educational or personal nature, which demonstrated a philosophy relating to any aspect of the student's life. The composer's conception was to write haiku representing personal thoughts to be accompanied by improvised rhythms on djembe. Although this piece does not meet the strict guidelines for a Level 7 improvisation, the composer has created and defined some of the conventions that go into the improvisation and performance.

Originally eight haikus relating to education, teaching, percussion and graduate school were written. Two additional haikus were written for a percussion studio performance that preceded the philosophy class performance by nine days. These were composed while the undergraduates were performing, and recited less than 20 minutes after being written as an exercise in improvisation. The two were also included in the EDU 565 presentation for a total of ten. Three more haikus have been written specifically for the applied thesis recital, and a total of seven will be used in the performance to represent the range of thoughts and philosophies related to the project.

Originally, the meter of the rhythm to accompany each haiku was chosen by chance operation (à la Cage) by a classmate just before the performance. For the recital performance a change has been made in the conception of the rhythms used, at the suggestion of Tracy Wiggins, the percussion instructor at UNCP. He suggested using a rhythm cycle rather than random meters to create a better sense of unity, although the original intent to improvise while reciting haiku has been retained. The decision to base the improvised rhythm cycle on a meter of five is in honor of the five members of Cadre One still in the graduate music department.

## Report on Action Research

This report of action research as a thesis project is based on the researcher's experience working with students in the Albritton Junior High Jazz Ensemble over a 12 month period from October of 2004 to October 2005. Action research activities involved two sets of students. The goal was to improve the improvisational skills of students who performed solos in jazz music. The research addressed questions about methods for teaching improvisation to junior high and middle school-aged students at varying levels of skill and ability. Action research methodology was used in this study to determine if a particular developmental approach to teaching and learning improvisation could improve the performance and willingness of junior high students to improvise.

The researcher works at Albritton in the capacity of music teacher and band director. Students have the opportunity to participate in the jazz band in an extra-curricular setting. The ensemble generally meets after school one day per week. Students in grades seven through nine participate in the same ensemble. This creates a situation in which more experienced musicians (with three or four years of experience playing their instruments) are in the same group as students with only a year of musical and instrumental training.

Retention rates of students in jazz band from one school year to the next are generally around 50% of the ensemble. The two groups of subjects for this study were slightly atypical of past experiences, with returning students comprising less than 50% of the ensembles. In 2004, six of 14 students had prior jazz experience (42.86%). In 2005, the returning students numbered five out of 13 (38.46%).

All students, regardless of experience, were asked to improvise, as the practice of improvising solos is germane to jazz performance. Performances are routinely videotaped for students to reflect on and assess their work, and to develop strategies for improvement.

The researcher had not had any previous formal training in improvisation as a part of high school or college coursework. The researcher incorporated strategies for teaching improvisation in jazz based on information received through workshops and conferences, and purchased materials on teaching and learning improvisation. Some methodologies that were either implemented or reviewed by the researcher were not practical or appropriate for junior-high aged students due to the technical, musical or cognitive skills required of students before beginning the method. One methodology previously used by the researcher was to teach students to play a blues scale and incorporate the notes into improvisations. The researcher analyzed videotapes and reflected on students' abilities to incorporate blues scales. A few students could do so in musically appropriate ways, but many students merely played notes haphazardly. Another method employed by the researcher was to explain chords, chord progressions and basic music theory as a way of choosing notes to play in an improvisation. This method, in the opinion of the researcher, did not produce satisfactory results when implemented as only a few students were able to incorporate this strategy in producing musical improvisations. Younger students were not able to think about the music theory and play their instruments at the same time, resulting in poorly developed improvisations and frustration on the part of the students.

Based on the improvisations produced as a result of this method of instruction, the researcher determined that this methodology was too advanced for use by younger players as it placed too many demands on them at one time. The researcher determined that most students were not ready to play improvisations, but did not have a strategy for improving instruction.

The researcher was introduced to a developmental approach to improvising during an in-service conference for music teachers working in the Department of Defense Elementary and Secondary Schools (DDESS). The conference was held in Peachtree City, Georgia, in October, 2004. The conference was organized to introduce teachers to the new standards for music education and methods of implementing those standards. Improvising and composing together comprise one of the "strands" that is to be incorporated into the curriculum for all teachers at all grade levels. Dr. John Kratus was one of the invited speakers. His session with the secondary music teachers focused on the importance of improvisation in music education. Thus, improvisation is not a concern only for the students in jazz band, but for all students in DDESS music programs.

In his session, Kratus explained his developmental approach for teaching students of any age and of any ability how to produce some kind of improvisation. The approach has seven levels of increasingly advanced technical, mental and musical skills. The teacher determines at which level a student is operating through observation and evaluation of improvisations, and develops strategies for the student to advance to the next level. At the conference, Kratus also suggested strategies for implementing this developmental approach.

After attending this DDESS music conference, the researcher determined that implementing a plan for instructing students in improvisation using Kratus' approach might be more successful than previous methodologies used. The researcher organized lessons for the jazz band to introduce the research subjects to improvisation using Kratus' approach. The methodology of action research was determined to be appropriate for this study based on the subjects used, the subjective nature of improvisation and the dual roles of educator and inquirer assumed by the researcher. The opportunity to replicate the findings was not an issue with this study. The



researcher was more concerned with meeting the needs of his students through critical reflection and responsive action.

The research is divided into two cycles of presenting information, collecting data from students' performances and reflecting on the outcomes. The second cycle had the additional elements of pre- and post-instruction surveys (Appendix A and B) filled out by the subjects. Some of the subjects were in both cycles of research. Several subjects had been in jazz band the year prior to implementing the research and already had conceptions of, and experience in, improvising.

The researcher introduced the subjects to improvisation by asking them to create a single measure of improvised hand clapping with the teacher guiding the activity. Subjects were asked to clap rhythms they could perform comfortably lasting for four counts. The next step was to play similarly improvised rhythms on a single pitch, focusing on the relationship between hand clapping and single note playing on their instrument. Once subjects demonstrated this ability, they were asked to improvise using three pitches. The problems associated with having more choices and the strategies for developing a plan were discussed. Subjects were asked to reflect on their perceptions about what they played in terms of musical expression and comfort in doing so.

Most students grasped these concepts readily, demonstrating Level 3 improvisations as described in the research on Kratus' methodology. Subjects who could improvise clapped and single pitch rhythms but could not improvise using three pitches were identified. These students were classified as Product-Oriented improvisers. Exercises in making choices and audiation were introduced to help these students make the transition to Level 4. Students listened to recordings of improvised jazz.

Subjects who demonstrated Level 3 improvisations were asked to improvise using a Bb (concert) blues scale, which was a normal part of warm-up activities within rehearsals for the ensemble. Students were familiar with the pitch set and all knew correct fingerings. In the first cycle the teacher played a simple piano accompaniment while students were given a chance to improvise. In the second cycle the researcher utilized the software program Band-in-a-Box that was using a computer and monitor. Subjects were videotaped improvising and asked to reflect on their perceived abilities. Subjects who played improvisations demonstrating technical facility and musical expressiveness were classified as "fluid" improvisers. Subjects that could not perform at this level received instruction in risk-taking and worked on drills to increase their facility on their instruments. Subjects continued to listen to recordings of improvised music. Subjects were introduced to concepts dealing with the structure of improvisations such as planning a beginning, middle and ending to a solo. The concept of "licks" was also introduced.

The whole group was introduced to chords and music theory regardless of their level of ability to improvise. Subjects were instructed in choosing notes that fit the chords and in choosing "goal notes" that would guide them from one point in the improvisation to the next. Only students that had previously demonstrated their ability to play at least six major scales were asked to perform improvisations at this point. The few that could were predictably the older students with three or more years of experience. These students were asked to reflect on their abilities and their perceptions about what they played, and of these few only one student performed characteristics of a Level 5 improvisation. Others were instructed to continue working on all scales and arpeggios, internalizing sounds and audiating. A single subject that demonstrated Level 5 characteristics also demonstrated an awareness of, and increased skill in

performing characteristics of Level 6 improvisations. The researcher had not anticipated nor expected many students to perform Level 5 or 6 improvisations.

## Conclusions/Discussion

Analysis of the data leads the researcher to conclude that approaching improvisation developmentally as suggested by Kratus does improve students' abilities. Analysis of videotaped improvisations revealed that students made improved choices in matching pitches to chords and exhibited a more expressive, fluid and musical performance. The subjects exhibited planning and audiation skills in the preparation of solos resulting in improvisations that were less likely to be played haphazardly. The subjects demonstrated little inclination to play notes as fast as possible.

After instruction in improvisational techniques and exercises, all subjects reported that they understood the meaning of improvisation (Appendix D). All but one reported they knew ways to improvise. All but one student reported that they were given the opportunity to improvise, but the videotapes from rehearsals show that all subjects were. Subjects also reported an increase in improvisation skill after instruction (Appendix D). All but one student reported at least average skill in improvising after instruction.

Subjects demonstrated that they were at least somewhat comfortable with attempting to improvise. Survey answers on the post-instructional assessment instrument showed a 45.46% increase in comfort during improvising compared to the pre-instructional assessment (Appendices C, D and E). The videotaped rehearsals indicate less apprehension on the part of students when asked to improvise after instruction as opposed to initial reactions. Subjects were able to improvise effectively without receiving instruction on chord progressions and music theory, although eventually instruction in those areas was needed as subjects performance improved.

There are problems with evaluating the effectiveness of the method of the action research. Several of the subjects showed a general giftedness that may have accounted for their higher level improvisation skills rather than the actual instruction of the teacher. Several of the students were operating at fairly low levels in both musicianship and enthusiasm, which may have influenced their willingness to attempt to improvise. The researcher had an advantage in having practiced the techniques and strategies for teaching improvisation with a previous group. This could explain some of the second group's improvements in either actual performing skills or the comfort level achieved as reported on the surveys. The low retention rate makes it difficult to generalize findings even among the researcher's own students. The results of the pre- and post-instructional assessments indicate unbalanced percentages because subjects returned 11 pre-instructional assessments, but only nine post-instructional assessments. The findings are valid based on the positive or negative changes found.

The researcher concludes that Huenink's (2002) argument against teaching blues scales to beginning improvisers is not valid in light of the findings of this research. Students exhibiting Product-Oriented Improvisation skills should be taught blues and pentatonic scales as a means of developing Fluid Improvisation skills as Hinz' (1995b, p. 33) and Hickey (1997) suggest. Tomessetti's statement that younger students should only be taught a blues scale is not necessarily accurate in light of the research because students need to move beyond using pitch sets to perform Level 5 improvisations. According to Kratus, skills from any level can be taught at any time, but will only be used improvisationally when the appropriate level is achieved. It is not a mistake to teach beyond a blues scale as long as no expectations are placed on students to perform at a level they have not yet reached.

The research does not support Bitz' (1998) assertion that the speed, syncopated rhythms, and harmonies of jazz are ill-suited to teach improvisation. Subjects in this study routinely improvised jazz in a developmentally- appropriate fashion. The key is to not set expectations on student achievement above the level in which they operate.

The research does not corroborate Alibrio's claim, as presented by Azzara (2002), that improvisation should center on technical skills and exclude creativity. The researcher finds that creativity is a key component of the subjects' improvisations at all levels of ability. Learning technical skills are a component of learning to play an instrument, but do not supersede students creative ideas in experiencing improvisation. Students must display advanced technical and theoretical skills in order to perform at Level 5 and above. To demand that students begin their study of improvisation using skills demonstrated at Level 5 is a developmentally unsound practice. This study leads the researcher to discount Alibrio's claim.

The researcher concludes that middle school and junior high students can be successfully taught to improvise using a developmental methodology. This approach, therefore, is appropriate in meeting the needs of young students learning to improvise. This conclusion is evidenced by the students' response to surveys about the instructional and improvisation processes and the evaluation of videotaped performances.

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## Appendix A

### Student Survey on Improvisation Pre-Instructional Assessment

1. Do you know what it means to improvise in music?      Yes    No

2a. Do you know of ways to improvise music?      Yes    No

2b. If you answered yes to question 2a, can you describe ways to improvise in Music?

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3. Have you ever improvised in music?      Yes    No

4. How would you rate your skill at improvising?

1	2	3	4	5
Low Skill		Average Skill		High Skill

5. What is your comfort level at improvising?

1	2	3	4	5
Not comfortable		Somewhat comfortable		Very Comfortable

## Appendix B

### Student Survey on Improvisation Post-Instructional Assessment

1. Do you know what it means to improvise in music?      Yes    No

2a. Do you know of ways to improvise music?      Yes    No

2b. If you answered yes to question 2a, can you describe ways to improvise in Music?

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3. Have you ever improvised music?      Yes    No

4. How would you rate your skill at improvising?

1	2	3	4	5
Low Skill		Average Skill		High Skill

5. What is your comfort level at improvising?

1	2	3	4	5
Not comfortable		Somewhat comfortable		Very Comfortable

## Appendix C

Student Survey on Improvisation Pre-Instructional Assessment Data 11 surveys

Questions	Yes	No			
Quest. 1 Do you know what it means to improvise?	7 63.64%	4 36.36%			
Quest. 2 a Do you know of ways to improvise?	3 27.27%	8 72.73%			
Quest. 3 Have you ever improvised in music?	5 45.45%	6 54.55%			
	1 low skill	2	3 average skill	4	5 high skill
Quest. 4 How would you rate your skill at improvising?	5 45.45%	0 0.00%	4 36.36%	2 18.18%	0 0.00%
	1 not comfortable	2	3 somewhat comfortable	4	5 very comfortable
Quest. 5 What is your comfort level at improvising?	3 27.27%	1 9.09%	1 9.09%	4 36.36%	2 18.18%

Written answers to Question 2a: If you answered "Yes" to Question 2a, can you describe ways to improvise in music?

- Look at the key, play notes in that in that scale, and make it sound really pretty, and jazzy, and perdy, like fluffy sheep
- No, not really, but I can.
- Just play the music the best way you can.

## Appendix D

Student Survey on Improvisation Post-Instructional Assessment Data 9 surveys

Questions	Yes	No			
Quest. 1 Do you know what it means to improvise?	9 100.00%	0 0.00%			
Quest. 2 a Do you know of ways to improvise?	8 88.89%	1 1.11%			
Quest. 3 Have you ever improvised in music?	8 88.89%	1 1.11%			
	1 low skill	2	3 average skill	4	5 high skill
Quest. 4 How would you rate your skill at improvising?	1 1.11%	0 0.00%	3 33.33%	3 33.33%	1 1.11%
	1 not comfortable	2	3 somewhat comfortable	4	5 very comfortable
Quest. 5 What is your comfort level at improvising?	0 0.00%	1 1.11%	1 1.11%	4 44.44%	3 55.56%

Written answers to Question 2a: If you answered "Yes" to Question 2a, can you describe ways to improvise in music?

- Use scales
- I improvise music articulation, accent and anything like that.
- Make a beat, keep to that beat and add notes that makes it sound swell
- You add anything that you want people to hear and play it
- Just play what you feel you want to play
- Play a certain rythem, or play a scale
- Yes, you like do and like play stuff, and it's like fun and you like play your instrument and you like die.
- By adding a rythem to notes

## Appendix E

### Compilation of Data from Student Surveys on Improvisation Pre- and Post-Instructional Assessments

Question	Yes Change (%)	No Change (%)			
1	+ 36.36	- 36.36			
2	+61.53	-71.62			
3	+43.44	-53.54			
	1 low skill Change (%)	2 Change (%)	3 average skill Change (%)	4 Change (%)	5 high skill Change (%)
4	-44.34	0.00	-3.03%	+15.15	+1.11
	1 not comfortable Change (%)	2 Change (%)	3 somewhat comfortable Change (%)	4 Change (%)	5 very comfortable Change (%)
5	-27.27	-8.79	-8.79	+8.08	+37.38