



An improvisation course designed for music teachers and therapists brings **MORE THAN MUSIC**

An Orff-based improvisation course designed for music teachers and therapists has the aim of teaching social values and life skills as well as music skills. SUSIE DAVIES-SPLITTER argues that a teacher in a creative music setting is ideally situated to model values and promote the learning of skills that are 'more than just music'.

Educators have been promoting the concept of 'learning for life' for many years, but it is only now being espoused by governments and education authorities world-wide. Snyder¹ points out that music is capable of building skills for lifelong learning, such as integrity, initiative, flexibility, perseverance, organisation, a sense of humour, effort, common sense, problem solving, responsibility, patience, friendship, curiosity, co-operation and caring. Snyder also notes that there is so much evidence that music and the arts are essential for human growth and normal development 'it is a wonder that decision makers still consider them to be "frills"'.²

In 2005 the Australian government released the National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools.² Nine values were identified on which to base a school's mission or ethos (p.3). I believe that, for successful learning to take place, they are central to the ethos of any organised learning, and to core principles that all teachers and facilitators should hold: care and compassion; integrity; honesty and trustworthiness; doing one's best; showing respect; giving a 'fair go'; being understanding, tolerant and inclusive; taking responsibility;

and promoting freedom [to be creative and expressive]. It may be reasonably argued that a teacher in a creative musical setting is ideally situated to model these values and principles, and to promote the learning of life skills that are 'more than just music' in a safe environment where each

contribution is valued, and where participants feel sufficiently brave and confident to take risks and extend beyond their comfort zones. Further, it is paramount that an environment should be non-judgemental with regard to 'right and wrong', and should encourage all participants to 'have a go'. But how is a classroom teacher to acquire the skills and experience that will nurture this?

'Improvisation gives me the greatest challenge and the greatest pleasure. I never know from moment to moment where I'll end up, and sometimes I'm scared to death. Yet, with all the risks, being on the edge is always the most fulfilling place to be'

—Bobby McFerrin⁴

The fulfilment of improvisation

It just happens that these factors can be found at the core of any successful creative learning that includes— *improvisation*.

For me, this has been borne out through my experience in designing and implementing a professional development course based on the teachings of Carl Orff, focusing on music improvisation, and its accompanying research study, for

which twenty-six people participated in a 25-contact-hour course conducted over seven weeks. All had at least a rudimentary knowledge of improvisation and all but one (a music therapist) were practising music teachers in either a classroom or studio setting.

Course aims

The broad aim of the course was to instil confidence in improvisation. It was designed to provide participants with 'more than just music', as it aimed to teach social values and life skills as well as music skills. Activities included practical music-making in small and large groups, discussion and reflection, and presentations by special guests, culminating in a studio recording of an improvisation performance.

Based on responses from pre-course questionnaires, specific aims were established—

To help participants

- overcome any fear of improvisation
- learn how to improvise across a range of musical structures, specifically:
 - develop simple strategies for effective improvisation using pentatonic scales, modes, the blues scale and pieces with simple harmonic progressions;
 - understand how to read simple lead sheets and chord symbols;
 - understand the role and function of the rhythm section; and
 - learn bass riffs and the 12-bar blues
- learn how to arrange in an Orff-style ensemble
- develop or enhance aural perception skills
- increase musical confidence and experience through the joy of improvising in many styles and situations
- acquire the confidence to help children and others create and express themselves through improvisation.



The method

The course was designed to train participants in an Orff Schulwerk-based approach to the teaching of improvisation through speech, singing, movement, games, and playing percussion instruments as well as the participants' instruments of choice. Activities incorporated a range of music styles such as jazz, blues, gospel, Latin, klezmer, African and other world musics. The repertoire was applicable to a wide range of teaching levels— early childhood, primary, secondary, therapeutic and community settings— and followed the sequence of scales and chord progressions in the Orff/Keetman *Music for Children* series edited by Margaret Murray. The range of activities was designed to involve participants in hearing, thinking and feeling, and to allow them to understand and recall their experiences for implementing in their own teaching.

In an inclusive and humanistic setting, the Orff Schulwerk approach incorporates 'play', games, exploration of sound through body and vocal timbres, musical expression through movement, and playing percussion instruments. Most importantly it can teach values and life skills and provide a joyous connection with oneself and with others, uncovering the 'inner child'.



An Orff classroom is rarely dull and is often filled with joyous activity. Frazee³ has described it as 'a place where self expression is encouraged and valued, musical experiments are carried out and tolerance for differing views is practised'. Such an ethos enables students to experiment with solutions to musical problems, it fosters their creativity, develops imagination through fantasy and play, and engages the senses. As a result, Frazee noted that Orff teachers 'have relished the gift and the challenge of drawing forth the innate musicality of their students for the purpose of expressing themselves in and enriching their lives through music.'³



Results

To assess the value of the course to participants, qualitative data was collected through questionnaires at both pre-course and post-course points; and by mid-course evaluations, reflective journals, interviews, video recordings and photographs. Analysis indicated that course participants enjoyed the approach, with its application for practical music making, group work, improvisation experiences, performance, discussion and reflection.

Findings showed that most felt their confidence with improvising had increased, with a 31 per cent positive change recorded overall. Many participants commented that they had developed musical freedom, confidence, and other life skills.

I discovered that participants long to know how to connect more deeply with those in their charge, to express themselves, to provide more quality experiences for their students and clients, and to demonstrate more confidence and effectiveness as teachers and therapists.

In a recent email, one participant reflected, 'What the course did for me was to actually get me not to worry so much about keys etc, but just to use my ear and have the confidence to make mistakes, or to celebrate the discord!!!' Other people commented on the similarities between improvising, and living one's life.

The resulting 'Joy of Jammin' course is now an annual event in VOSA's calendar of professional development, and accredited through ANCOS⁴ as enrichment courses. As a result of my research, the focus of the course has changed to being concerned not only with improvisation that leads to music learning outcomes, but also with improvisation that promotes life values and well-being.

The future

My great hope is that students who leave school, or complete another educational course or therapeutic intervention, will do so with a love of and appreciation for music in all its

variety, and with a greater sense of confidence and joy that has come about through their engagement with music. It took many years before I had the confidence to participate in improvisation sessions—confidence that came from years of tertiary training, jazz clinics and professional gigs and culminated in my discovery of Orff Schulwerk. My goal is to help people on their unique and wondrous journey to improvisation and self-discovery—to discover 'more than music'. **MⁱⁿA**

Notes

1. S Snyder, 'Is music important? How do you know?', *Counterpoint* (Victorian Schools Music Association Magazine), Melbourne, June 1999, pp. 45-49.
2. Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Education, Science and Training, *National framework for values education in Australian schools*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005.
3. JFrazee, *Orff Schulwerk today: Nurturing musical expression and understanding*, Schott, New York, 2006.
4. Quoted in JNeill, 'President's message', *The Orff Echo*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1999, p.5.

Susie Davies-Splitter

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