

This is a very brief outline of a curriculum I developed over a period of years. It is not meant to be a "textbook" and it is not a completed work. I hope to have time to expand this outline into a book on the art of teaching improvisation at some point in my life.

There have been a few people who have used this outline and written their own book. They sort of "pirated" my material and made money off of it, not to mention taking credit for my work. I am happy that students may have benefited from the material, but unfortunately the teachers who used this curriculum did not have the "rest of the story". Therefore the teachers and students were not able to really benefit from the books written by those who stole my work.

The key element in making this curriculum work is that it must be taught in a "holistic" manner. Do not teach this material in "sections". All parts must be carefully integrated in a timely manner for it to be a truly effective jazz improvisation teaching tool.

In a nutshell here is an example of what I mean by using a holistic approach. You sing and sign a major scale in solfege. You feel the major scale on your instrument. You play the major scale. You "see" the scale in written form. You play other major scales around the circle of fifths. You learn to recognize the sound of a major scale and you play a basic melody using a major scale. Get the idea? If not, please contact me.

Thank you.

Wallace Dierolf
(210) 696-3783 (home)
dierolf6@cs.com

Ear Training:

Listening skills.

To help the student become aware of their physical ability to hear sounds have the students sit perfectly still with their eyes closed and listen to all the sounds around them for thirty seconds. Encourage them to send out their "listening radar." At the end of the thirty seconds have them write down all the sounds they heard (the buzz of the lights ECT...).

Note: I have other listening skill exercises that I will be happy to share with you.

Solfege (Solfeggio).

I strongly recommend the use of the hand signs (hand signals) along with the use of solfege. Start with a major scale (Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Sol-La-Ti-Do). Sing it and sign it. Follow with going up and down the scale in intervals (Do-Re-Do, Do-Mi-Do, Do-Fa-Do, etc...). Next step is to do the scale in thirds (Do-Mi-Re-Fa-Mi-Sol-Fa-La-Sol-Ti-La-Do-Ti-Re-Do. Then down (Do-La-Ti-Sol, ect...). Then go up and down the major scale in triads (Do-Mi-Sol-Mi-Do, Re-Fa-La-Fa-Re, Mi-Sol-Ti-Sol-Mi, ect...).

Once the students are comfortable with the singing and signing you have them sign without singing. This is how they come into contact with their "mind's ear".

Note: I have other solfege studies I will be happy to share with you.

Dictation.

One way for a teacher to check their students' development of the mind's ear is through the use of dictation exercises (Rhythmic, Melodic and Harmonic). I suggest you start with very simple rhythmic dictation. Intervals can be done first in solfege, then as M2, M3, and ECT...Do the same with melodies and chords.

Note: I have many ideas on how to use dictation to check what students are hearing in their mind's ear.

Listening to Jazz.

Take a few moments and have the students listen to recordings (or live, if possible) of jazz music. Give them a suggested listening list of jazz artists or specific jazz ensembles. Talk with them about how easy it is to obtain good jazz recordings in stores, on line, in the public libraries, etc.... Share with them where they can go to hear good, live jazz.

Thinking on the Instrument:

In order for the students to achieve the fundamentals of improvisation they must be able to "think" on the instrument. This is why it is important that while teaching all of the elements in this jazz improvisation curriculum you should not hand the student modes or chords written out prior to their playing them in class. While I certainly believe in giving students mode and chord reference sheets they should not be playing from them in class.

The feel of keys and modes.

Allow the students to notice that each key and mode has a certain "feel" on their instrument. Have them close their eyes and finger different modes and do the same with keys (have them finger the accidentals in the key signature). Another exercise is to have them finger basic chords and melodic patterns.

Echoing Patterns.

The basic concept here is to help students discover how to have a "conversation" using their instruments and the language of music. This is the foundation that will help students master the skill of "trading off" fours, sixes, or whatever with another player. Start this concept by having two students (of the same instrument, if possible) sit back to back. Using only the first three notes of a major scale have one student play a three note sequence (using only DO-RE-MI but in any order and starting on any of the three pitches) and have the other student "echo" back the three tone sequence. Have the students play each note with the same duration. The students should take turns being the one who first plays the sequence. Continue to expand this exercise until students are able to be somewhat successful using an entire major scale (I suggest adding one note at a time). Using the voice, piano or any instrument the teacher should now play simple melodic sequences and have the entire class "echo" them back in unison. As the students become successful experiment with the rhythm of the melodic material. Gradually expand the number of notes, the rhythmic patterns and of course the keys (and modes).

Playing tunes around the circle of 5ths.

Take a very simple melody like "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" and have the students play the tune in every major key (use the circle of 5ths). Next play the tune in different modes. Again, go all the way around the circle of 5ths.

Teach the students that this was the manner in which the early jazz musicians learned jazz. The older jazz musician would teach a younger player a tune and then tell them to go home and learn it in all the keys (or starting on any pitch).

Vocabulary:

Students must master the basic vocabulary of music just as a creative literary writer studies nouns, adjectives, sentence structure and so on. Jazz improvisation is made up sound and silence. The sounds used are modes (scales), chords, and melodic patterns, and of course the rest. Never underestimate the power of the thirteenth tone, the sound of silence. I strongly suggest that you use the circle of 5ths as a progression when teaching or when playing through vocabulary exercises.

Modes.

Teach the modes in this order: Ionian (major), Mixolydian, Dorian, Aeolian (minor) and then Lydian, Phrygian and Locrian. DO NOT give the students these modes written out. This defeats the whole concept of "thinking on the instrument". Teach the modes as they relate to each other, by sound and by the melodic stepwise progression.

Example: Teach the Mixolydian mode as an Ionian mode (major scale) with a lowered seventh.

Chords.

Teach the basic triads: Major, Minor, Diminished and Augmented.

Teach the following chords in this order: Major Seven, Dominate Seven, Major Six, Major Nine and Dominate Nine. DO NOT give the students these chords written out follow the same procedure as you did with the modes.

Example: A Minor Triad is a Major Triad with a lowered third.

Patterns.

Have the students practice their vocabulary exercises in a variety of ways.

Example: Go up a major scale, hold the top note, raise it a half step and come down that major scale.

I have lots of other ideas.

Jazz Theory:

Key Signatures.

Teach the students to recognize all Major Key Signatures. Then teach how each of the Major Keys have relative and parallel modes.

Example: C Major is relative to D Dorian and parallel to C Dorian.

Chord Symbols.

Start by teaching students that a large letter above the staff indicates the basic triad and that the triad starts on that note.

Example: C indicates a C Major Triad (C-E-G).

Then teach the meaning of a number to the right of the large letter.

Example: A "6" located to the right and upper part of a C indicates a C Major Triad with an A added (the A being six above C).

Then teach the symbols for the triad when it is in the minor, augmented or diminished form. There are excellent chord charts available at your local sheet music store to give to the students as a reference tool.

Chord Progressions.

First teach the terms Tonic (I), Supertonic (ii), Mediant (iii), Subdominant (IV), Dominant (V), Submediant (vi) and leading tone (vii) using a major key.

Then teach the numbers I, ii, iii, IV, V, vi, vii and how they relate to the letters used to indicate chords (again work first in major keys). Then teach each basic chord progressions using both the numbers, terms and letters.

Example: Tonic-Subdominant-Dominant-Tonic. I-IV-V-I and C-F-G-C.

Circle of Fifths.

Teach the basic circle of fifths, as it appears written out. Be sure to point out the increase and decrease of accidentals as you travel around the circle. Show the students how there is a circle of fifths for every mode. Always start with the mode that has no sharps or flats when drawing the circle. (I often use a line instead of a circle).

Example: Circle of fifths major C-G-D-A-E-etc.... and Circle of fifths Dorian D-A-E-B-etc....