Improvisation in the School Setting

Ray Stuckey

November 19, 2002
Even though improvisation has been an important part of music throughout all periods of music, it has been short-changed in America’s school systems today. Even with the adoption of the National Standards in 1994, improvisation has mainly been ignored except in the jazz area. The content standard for improvisation is very specific on what the students’ achievement should be. The following will look at the specifics of what the National Standard in improvisation prescribes and how it relates to the theories of improvisational development.

**Improvisation Defined**

Grove’s Dictionary of Music defines improvisation as “the art of thinking and performing music simultaneously” (Blom 1954). All improvisations share some of the same characteristics, whether they are by an elementary student or a professional jazz performer. Kratus defines these characteristics as such: purposeful sound through time, no intention for revision or replication, and freedom to make melodic and rhythmic decisions within certain constraints (Kratus 1995). Kratus has developed a sequential model of improvisational development. Each of the seven levels builds upon the previous level, but is also relational to the student’s overall musical development. The teacher must be aware of what level each student is at to properly direct instruction towards new levels.

**Kratus’s Developmental Approach**

The first level of Kratus’s model is exploration. At this level, the student has little control over the performing medium. The first attempts are often amorphous and largely random-sounding events. This level is considered pre-improvisational because its lacks the purposefulness and structural constraints of improvisation. This level is most often used with Orff keyboards, setup in a pentatonic scale. The pentatonic scale has the unique characteristic of no scalar dissonance. If every note is played at once, it will all sound acceptable.
Exploration in improvisation is comparable to a baby’s babbling. The child is trying out sounds with little control as to what sound is made. Over time the child learns how to control the oral cavity to create the sounds he wants to say. In music, this inner-voice is called audiation. When students can inwardly hear and predict what sounds they will create, they are ready for the next level of improvisation (Kratus 1995).

The second level is process-orientated improvisation. At this level, students consider improvisation an act of doing rather than the product that comes from it. Students start to associate motor movements with their resulting sounds. The music created by the students has brief moments of structure and tonal center. The teacher can hear when the student reaches this level when there are patterns that are repeated. Most organization is done in the short-term, with little reference to large scale structure. This level closely relates to a child’s painting. The child will put as many colors on a page even if it turns that brown color. The painting is done when the child loses interest or runs out of room. The child then has no interest in the finished product, even if it is hung on the refrigerator (Kratus 1995).

The third level is product-orientated improvisation. There are two things that happen when a student reaches this level. This first is that she becomes aware of music in the environment and begins to use the structure of that music in her own. The second is that music can be shared with other people and others value the product of music, not just the process. This awareness gives the student’s improvisations more emphasis on structure that would allow others to derive meaning from it. A teacher can hear the shift from process-orientated to product-orientated improvisation when such characteristics as steady beat, consistent tonality, phrases, or musical references occur (Kratus 1995). Product-oriented improvisation can be likened to building a house with Lego’s without the instructions. The student has a general plan for
building, and when she is done other people can recognize what it is she built. With the Lego’s, she has just enough constraints with the way the blocks are put together to be successful, yet enough freedom to be creative with them. But as will always happen, there is going to be that one blue block in the corner that should be red. Getting rid of that blue block brings us to the next level.

The major step between the product-orientated improvisation and the fourth level, fluid improvisation, is that the student must think about the sound and think about how to produce that sound. When the student reaches the fourth level, her technical performance is relaxed and automatic. In the previous levels, performance technique was not a hindrance to the level of improvisation (Kratus 1995). At this level, the performance technique is a critical part of improvisational success (McPherson 1992). Student’s improvisations may sound technically correct but are usually lacking in expression and emotion (Kratus 1995). This level would be most associated with an ordinary person driving a car. They would be able to get from point A to point B without stopping or breaking any laws.

The fifth level of Kratus’s model is structural improvisation. In this level the student is able to use various strategies for shaping the overall structure of the music. Some strategies include ways of developing musical ideas, using musical tension and release, and flowing from one musical idea to the next (Kratus 1995).

The sixth level is stylistic improvisation. At this level the student has mastered a particular style or multiple styles. This mastery involves a detailed knowledge of the practices of each style and the ability to utilize this knowledge fluently. Often these specific characteristics of the style are introduced as tricks of the trade (Kratus 1995). This is the level at which almost
all professional jazz musicians level out. Seldom will anyone develop any style so much as to push to the next level of improvisation.

On the seventh level, personal improvisation, Kratus writes this:

Occasionally an expert musician will push the boundaries of a style so far that the initial style is no longer recognizable and a new style emerges. The new style establishes its own conventions that enable others to perform and listen to the music with meaning. Musicians who can break new ground in their improvising have reached the seventh level of improvisation, called, personal improvisation. Very few musicians attain this level (36).

When looking at the different levels, it is possible for the same student to be at two different levels. This can happen when the student switches between two instruments. The most important thing is to get students to reach new levels on the instrument they are most comfortable on.

**National Standards**

With the push for voluntary national standards starting in 1992 by the National Council on Education Standards and Testing, funding was granted to the Music Educator’s National Conference to develop standards in the four disciplines of art: dance, music, visual art, and theatre. On March 11, 1994, after two years of development and debate, these standards were presented as a final document to U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley (MENC 1994). Within music standards there are nine content standards, each with their own achievement standards. The third content standard is improvising melodies, variation, and accompaniments (NAEA 1994).

There are achievement standards given for the end of high school for proficient levels and advanced levels of achievement. Every student is expected to reach the proficient level in at least one of the arts, but only students with specialized courses of study will likely reach the
advanced achievement standard (MENC 1994). The proficient achievement level for the
improvisation standard is this: students will be able to improvise stylistically appropriate
harmonizing parts, improvise rhythmic and melodic variations on given pentatonic melodies and
melodies in major and minor keys, and improvise original melodies over given chord
progressions, each in a consistent style, meter, and tonality (NAEA 1994).

Let’s take a look at how these achievement standards relate to Kratus’s developmental
model of improvisation. The first achievement standard is to improvise stylistically appropriate
harmonizing parts. If the word stylistically is not used, this achievement standard reaches to the
fluidity level. When style is considered the student would have to jump up three levels in
Kratus’s model. The problem here lies with interpretation of the standard, and what it was to do
with improvisation. Some styles have little room for improvisation in accompaniments. Instead
of block chords, the stylistic interpretation might be an Alberti bass or a walking bass line. It
would be a logical conclusion then that the standards are asking for harmonization that is more
than just block chords, more analogous the style’s drum beat than the actual style characteristics.
This would still be included in level four of Kratus’s model.

The second achievement standard is to improvise rhythmic and melodic variations on
given pentatonic melodies and melodies in major and minor keys. This is at least a level four
type of improvisation. It requires the student to internalize the melody and make changes to it
when she plays it. Technical proficiency would be required to transform what she is audiating to
what she plays. This standard could also be satisfied at level five. The student could use the
variations to create more or change the structure of the melody. If the student had reached level
six, she could use different styles to create the variations with the characteristics of that style.
This achievement standard is based on the practices of jazz. Jazz pieces consist of a 32-bar melody, and then soloists create new music by using the material in their improvisations.

The third achievement standard is to improvise original melodies over given chord progressions, each in a consistent style, meter, and tonality. To break this down, consistent tonality is a characteristic of product-oriented improvisation. Meter is another characteristic of that level. On the other hand, style is the sole focus of the sixth level. This raises the question again of what is the interpretation of style for the national standards. To be consistent, one must assume that the same standard is not asking professional quality improvisation in the same sentence as asking for mid-level improvisation. This standard is most likely asking for the student to use some of the basic conventions of a style, but not have mastered them all.

**Teaching to the Improvisation Standard**

Now that the standard has been explained, how is it taught? This first step is to determine as closely as possible the level of development of each individual student. There are three factors that can affect the child’s ease of improvisation in the classroom (Brophy 2001). These factors can disguise what improvisation level the student is at. The first factor is proficiency on a particular instrument (Brophy 2001). A student may be a fluid improviser on their primary instrument, but if they pick up a new instrument they will be in the exploration stage. The most important point is that it takes time to develop enough technical ability for any type of improvisation.

The second factor is the child’s skill in generating new musical ideas (Brophy 2001). There are four ways of generating new ideas: imitation, consequence, variation, and origination. This sequence is important to foster and develop creation of new ideas. This is one characteristic
that is important in all level of improvisation, and is important for student to be comfortable in this area.

The third factor is the child’s musical experience. This factor is closely related to the third level of improvisation. As the child listens to and incorporates more musical practices of other music she becomes a better improviser, and the listener can gain more meaning from what she is playing.

Since each child has an individual learning style, it is important to consider all these factors when preparing lessons. Students cannot skip levels of improvisation (Kratus 1995). For example, if a student cannot improvise fluidly, she will not be able to improvise structurally. On the other hand, it may be important to revisit lower levels when introducing new musical concepts. If the student learned a new tonality, it would be essential for her to explore that tonality before she is able to improvise in it.

**Conclusion**

When looking at the third content standard of the National Standards of Music, we see that they prescribe that every child should be able to improvise fluidly on an instrument or voice. Kratus’s model of improvisational development gives a clear, sequential model for teaching improvisation in the classroom. Geared with the knowledge of how students learn and the standard of what they should be learning, the music teacher ought to develop curriculum that address this content in all music classes.
**Works Cited**


