

# Group Drumming Improvisation

Improvisation is one of the four main methods (Re-creating, Composing, Improvising, and Listening) used in both music education and music therapy. Improvisation has traditionally been explored within the larger categories of re-creating and composing music, i.e., playing a short solo or exploring musical ideas with the goal being to formalize ideas that result in a composition. For some, the idea of an ensemble using free improvisation as a means to developing musicality poses challenges, but there are many proven techniques that help to provide structure, define role relationships, and help to build musicality without the need for a formalized plan.

In the book *Improvisational Models of Music Therapy* (1987), music therapist Kenneth Bruscia listed 64 clinical techniques that relate to music improvisation within music therapy. Some of these are presented below for consideration within the music classroom as a means for developing both personal and interpersonal connections. These techniques, along with play rules (givens) allow students and teachers to create extemporaneous music that is student-driven. Musical experience can then be analyzed and discussed from several perspectives including; intramusical, intermusical, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cultural.

## • Structuring Techniques

### **GROUNDING**

**Definition:** Helping to organize and steady the music.

#### **Description**

Grounding helps to organize and support the musical efforts of another; however, is not simply providing a pulse or tonal center for another to “play to.” It involves listening to another’s music, assessing the primary features and musical tendencies (both rhythmic and harmonic) and supporting those features through techniques such as accenting primary beats, simplifying patterns, establishing a meter, establishing a key or tonal center, etc. Grounding does not mean anchoring someone’s feet to one spot, but to support him throughout his journey.

### **SUPPORTING**

**Definition:** Playing that brings out the salient aspects of the music.

#### **Description**

Supporting is similar to grounding, however, whereas grounding often involves simplifying one’s music to act as a musical framework that holds or anchors another’s, supporting is more like providing some additional energy that is placed behind someone’s efforts. This could be done through, matching, mirroring and any technique that helps to “bring out” the salient features of the music.

## • Empathetic Techniques

Empathy has been described as the ability to imagine yourself in someone else’s position, to walk in their shoes, and to imagine what it might be like to be them, to feel what they feel.

## **MATCHING**

**Definition:** Playing that corresponds to, and is harmonious with, the music.

### **Description**

Matching includes using a similar degree of rhythmic complexity, dynamic intensity, and melodic and harmonic structure as the music you hear. Matching does not need to imitate or echo the music, only 'fit' with it. Matching is what we do most commonly during a jam session, playing your own part, but relating it to what you hear. Another term that one could use to describe this technique is "complementing," also sometimes referred to in musician circles as "comping."

## **MIRRORING, SYNCHRONIZING, SHADOWING, DOUBLING**

**Definition:** Producing a detailed reproduction of the music as it is being played.

### **Description**

This technique is widely differentiated with regards to its name. Bruscia (1987) defines the act of "synchronizing" as 'doing what the client is doing at the same time;' however this can include various levels of synchrony, from all musical elements to just one, such as rhythm. It may also include "cross-modal synchrony" whereby the music of one player is expressed as movement in another, used to support, stabilize or strengthen another's response. Wigram (2004) uses "mirroring" to include both the music and body language (behavior). This technique holds strong potential as a tool for creating empathy; however, care is to be taken so as not to appear as if you are mimicking or mocking your partner. Mirroring is also the foundation for other techniques, such as supporting, amplifying and matching.

## **IMITATING, ECHOING, COPYING**

**Definition:** Playing the same thing as someone else, after they play it.

### **Description**

In the definition provided by Bruscia (1987), he describes this technique as echoing what someone plays. I prefer the term 'echoing' because it clarifies that you are playing after someone else and it is a common term used in music education, i.e., "Won't you be my echo please?" Some may also use the term 'copying.' Echoing can happen within a rhythmic framework (phrases that are separated by a set number of beats) or it could be more free-form.

## **QUOTING**

**Definition:** Incorporating previously played material, in whole or part.

### **Description**

Quoting is a kind of musical recycling, where bits of your partner's music (or you own) reappear at a later time. These often take the form of melodic ideas, but they might also include specific rhythms, breaks, or expressive elements. In certain idioms, such as Jazz, it is not uncommon for an artist to 'quote' the melody of another tune during an improvisation.

## • Elicitation Techniques

The following techniques are designed to invite musical play. They are use when someone might feel timid and need reassurance and/or guidance to feel comfortable and secure. When faced with the prospect of playing a musical instrument, people with low-skills are often intimidated and as a result, may not jump right into the music. People that have sensory or social skills deficits may also need a little extra guidance and a playful invitation to join the music.

### **REPEATING**

**Definition:** Presenting the same rhythmic or melodic motif several times, either in succession or with short interludes (Bruscia, 1987).

#### **Description**

A musical motif or phrase is played several times. Depending on the music, setting and players, the number of occurrences may need to change before the phrase is recognized as repeating. Through repeating the same material, a sense of normalcy and predictability can develop that provides the security someone might need to enter into the ‘musical pool.’ Repetition can also take the form of a melody to imitate or a phrase to be completed or answered.

### **PROMPTING**

**Definition:** Playing in such a way as to encourage a musical expression, extension, or dialogue.

#### **Description**

Prompting musical expression from your partner often incorporates the use of various musical cues. Wigram (2004) discusses several, including; Harmonic cues such as that those that indicate a beginning (introduction) or ending (cadence); Rhythmic cues that imply an approaching space to be filled, such as the popular “shave and a haircut”; Melodic cues, such as a melody to be finished, and dynamic cues, such as using accents, crescendo/decrescendo, as well as changes in tempo and timbre.

### **MODELING**

**Definition:** Demonstrating a desired musical expression or response.

#### **Description**

Modeling is used as an elicitation technique to both inform and encourage action. It might take the form of playing and repeating a specific musical phrase, using an instrument in a certain way, or the use of silence. It is commonly used as a way to show the student different techniques and musical options. Modeling often incorporates repetition.

## **OPENING, MAKING SPACES**

**Definition:** Creating opportunities for others to interject by leaving spaces.

### **Description**

As a way to invite someone to ‘fill the musical cup,’ we sometimes need to empty that cup. Creating openings in the music is often received as an invitation to contribute. Some common ways to create openings is to reduce your volume, simplify your playing, stop playing, leave spaces in your playing, and invite play through facial and gestural cues.

## **INTERJECTING**

**Definition:** Playing in a space left open.

### **Description**

When someone stops, simplifies, or lowers the volume of their playing, another player jumps in to keep the music moving forward. Interjecting is the complement to leaving spaces and a way to share musical space while inviting a response from your partner. A common example of this would be where players take solos, as in a jazz combo.

## **• Redirection Techniques**

Redirection techniques are used to change from one course of action, mood, or modality to another. They are a way of moving into a new state while remaining in the musical relationship. They are commonly used when a member’s actions or the music seems to be ‘stuck’ and would benefit from taking a new course.

## **INTRODUCING CHANGE**

**Definition:** Introducing new thematic material and beginning a new section in the music.

### **Description**

This technique involves discontinuing the current themes or motifs and introducing new melodic and rhythmic material over the existing background (Bruscia, 1987). At some point in the improvisation, you change your music to something that is noticeably different (differentiated) from what has come before. It might be a sudden change in rhythm, dynamics, tonality, or timbre. The music does not stop, but it feels like a new section of the same overall piece.

## **MODULATING**

**Definition:** Changing a fundamental aspect of the musical structure during music making to gradually move into a different meter, tempo, key, or tonality (or mood or feeling), while maintaining other features of the music.

### **Description**

Modulation is a change in a rhythmic or tonal *ground* (Bruscia, 1987). There are two main types of modulation: Rhythmic and Tonal.

**Rhythmic modulation** happens through making changes in accents, subdivisions and/or phrasing that lead to the establishment of a new meter or tempo, such as moving from 4/4 to 6/8 or from 120 to 80 bpm.

**Tonal modulation** happens through making changes to the melodic or harmonic relationships that lead to a new tonality or key, such as changing from A major to A minor, or moving from C major to F Major.

## Role Relationships

Music making, and many would argue that music itself, is all about relationships. Music is about the relationships between various voices, both vibrating (melodic) and periodic (rhythmic). The formation of musical relationships within a group setting is often described in terms of the various *roles* that a player takes on as part of the music making process. As you improvise within a partner and/or group setting, note the types of roles you adapt, as well as why and how you fulfill those role. The primary roles you and your students will adopt include:

- Listener
- Performer
- Follower
- Ground
- Accompanist
- Partner
- Leader
- Soloist

Note that roles, and the relationships that are formed through them, can (and often do) change during an improvisation. In a free improvisation, each player chooses his/her role(s) according to his/her needs and impulses. As a way to provide structure and guidelines, the members may elect to define certain roles before beginning their improvisation.

## Play Rules or Givens

A play rule or given is a theme, requirement or limit that relates to the tools, actions, and/or procedures of the group. Play rules often provide containment, safety and security to the players through limiting choices and directing play towards a specific outcome. Play rules can define one or more categories including:

- **Musical Elements:** specific rhythms, meter, timbre, tonality, dynamics, tempo, or genre etc.
- **Instrumental:** types of instruments, playing techniques, specific instruments, sharing instruments, etc.
- **Procedural:** Player “B” starts when “player A” stops, Start softly and slowly get louder, play for one minute, etc.
- **Referential:** Play “a rain storm,” “how I feel today,” or “my favorite thing to do.”
- **Interpersonal:** follow the leader, match another player, dialogue with at least two other players, etc.

## Structures for Group Improvisation

The following are some examples of how Play Rules can include Role Relationships and Musical Techniques to structure improvisational experiences. All examples include four players.

The theme is “Dawn to Dusk.” Players experiment with instruments until they find two each they feel are appropriate. Players enter one at a time and continue the piece for no more than three minutes.

Begin very softly and slowly get louder over a period of one minute. Once at the peak, slowly begin to get softer over one minute until back at the original volume.

Player 1 establishes an ostinato. Player 2 listens, then grounds the music. Player 3 enters with an accompaniment (matching) pattern. Player 4 solos. When player 4 is finished soloing, he takes on the role of player 1 and all players switch roles accordingly.

Player 1 experiments then establishes an ostinato. Player 2 listens then enters with a supportive pattern. Player 3 grounds the music. Player 4 listens. When player 1 stops (after about a minute), player 2 establishes a new pattern and all roles shift accordingly.

Players 1, 2 and 3 experiment on their instruments. Player 4 listens, then enters with a ground. Once the music is established both rhythmically and harmonically, players 1 and 2 take turns soloing while player 3 provides accompaniment.

Players 1 establishes an ostinato. Player 2 mirrors player 1 on a different instrument. Players 3 and 4 take turns soloing. Switch roles and repeat.

Player 1 establishes an ostinato. Player 2 grounds. Players 3 elicits play from player 4. Switch roles and repeat.

Player 1 introduces a theme in the form of a short phrase. Player 2 echos (imitates) player 1. Player 3 chooses and plays a portion of the theme (quoting). Player 4 echos player 3 and establishes an ostinato based on the quoted material. Continue with any of the above.

### General Givens:

- Everyone plays with their hands.
- Everyone uses a specific instrument group (drums, bells, blocks, shakers, etc.)
- Everyone chooses two instruments and switches when the leader does.
- Everyone accompanies the leader for one minute, then the leader chooses a new leader.
- Everyone mirrors the leader’s pitch, but plays any rhythms they want.
- Everyone mirrors the leader’s rhythm, but plays any pitches they want.
- Everyone quotes at least two other players during two minutes of improvisation.

### References:

Bruscia, K. (1987). *Improvisational models of music therapy*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.

Wigram, T. (2004). *Improvisation: Methods and techniques for clinicians, educators and students*. London: Jessica Kingsley.