

New approach to teaching music improvisation enhances creativity

21 June 2017

As World Music Day is approaching, taking place each year on 21 June, many are looking forward to the musical events in the streets or parks and the atmosphere it brings with it. Watching musicians perform can be impressive, even more so when they improvise. The performers produce their works in real-time and while improvising, they manage several processes simultaneously including generating melodic and rhythmic sequences, coordinating performance with other musicians in an ensemble and evaluating internal and external stimuli. All this is done with the overall goal of creating aesthetically appealing music. It keeps some of us wondering, how they do it and whether this can be learned at all.

In fact, [improvisation](#) is being taught in music education and often focuses on the development of techniques. Dr Michele Biasutti, Associate Professor at the University of Padua in Italy however examined how to go beyond these current practices in his recent paper "Pedagogical applications of cognitive research on musical improvisation". Based on a literature review, the aim was to develop a model that looks at developing processes for improvisation that enhance creativity.

"Practices such as playing by ear is underexposed in current [teaching](#) approaches, which stress notated instruction and exercises such as scales and chords. Instead, I propose an approach that is based on the development of cognitive processes that enhance creativity and the abilities of the players to reflect on their performance skills," states Biasutti.

Improvisation is a complex and multidimensional act that involves creativity and performance behaviours in real-time. It also requires processes such as sensory and perceptual encoding, motor control and performance monitoring as well as storing and recalling memory.

"A teaching approach based on the development of processes could be beneficial in music improvisation at several levels. A process-oriented teaching method can provide inputs for developing specific skills such as problem solving and critical thinking to assist the reflective practice during improvisation. The target processes were the following: anticipation, use of repertoire, emotive communication, feedback and flow," explains Biasutti.

This process approach encourages students to think about their creative processes and to self-assess their experiences, thus developing a more complete awareness about the activities performed. In the past, teaching and learning consisted of information being passed-on, memorised and repeated. Now, students have to increasingly find their own knowledge by using information in creative ways, which requires a shift in how students are taught. The paper suggests that this could be achieved by teaching improvisation abilities, whereby teachers become more of facilitators who shift the focus from the evaluation of learning outcomes to the quality of processes that lead to improvisational expertise.

Biasutti concludes "There are several educational benefits to developing improvisational skills also for other disciplines. Improvisation could be considered an adaptive behaviour to a real-time unpredicted event. The response can be shaped through creativity and the divergent skillset that improvisation fosters. Improvisation could become a teaching technique to be used in educational contexts. Promoting improvisational skills would allow the students to develop the ability to adapt to tomorrow's changing world, providing tools for lifelong learning."

More information: Michele Biasutti, Pedagogical applications of cognitive research on musical improvisation, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2015). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00614](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00614)

Provided by Frontiers

APA citation: New approach to teaching music improvisation enhances creativity (2017, June 21)
retrieved 19 September 2019 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-06-approach-music-creativity.html>

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