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Four Principles of Improv Drum Circles

Principle 2: Create

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Create

The Dial

When I first started doing drum circles the freedom to create was a vast departure from any music lesson I had done. It appeared to be a dichotomy, a switch to be flipped between "improv" and "not improv." The trouble with the improv switch is some students aren't ready to create and others are *extremely* ready to create. Some classes are filled with creative types, and some classes have few.

Let's start with the individuals. Take two wildly different reactions to a common drum circle phrase: "1, 2 make up your own!"

Nine-year-old creative type: "bbbbdddd tikaita tikita BOOOOMBOOOM fiasfsldifliahhdgfliha; CHECKOUTALLMYNOTES!

And…

12 year old non creative type: Wait, what? My own what? How much? Like, lots? Now? Right now? Ummmm like loud? In front of all of these people?

As someone who is akin to that nine-year-old, "make up your own" is like heaven on earth. You get to put your whole self into it, all your talents, ideas, and personality. The groove is like a white canvas where I can paint my masterpiece. The downside is that we spatter paint all over the rest of the players, and don't leave much room on the canvas for other ideas.

The twelve-year-old in this example is cut from a different cloth. They look at the dozens of colours on the pallet, think about the hundreds of things they could paint and are paralyzed, not empowered. I used to say things like "you can do ANYTHING, you can't get it wrong!" Not realizing that with too many options, many don't know where to start.

Not only will you see this difference in the individuals in each group, but it also manifests in class cultures. If you have enough creative types, and a decent foundation of musicality "1, 2 make up your own," can, and has worked beautifully. Other times a wide open canvas may be creating a further separation rather than a closer connection amongst the different personalities.

Rather than thinking about improv as a switch, think about it as a dial that you can carefully adjust to meet the group where they're at. The improv dial moves from "constrained (safety)" to "unconstrained (risk)" and back again. When your dial is on "constrained" students have a limited amount of choices. As confidence and connection grows, open up the dial to include more and more creative choices.

"Constraints aren't the boundaries of creativity, but the foundations of it."

Putting a constraint on your improv not only adds depth to the music before putting breadth to it, it also provides a meeting place for the different personalities in the class. Creative constraint on your dial challenges the creative types to work their ideas into form and provides a bridge for others to move from safety to risk. As the dial opens up the group can creatively move together as one.

The improv dial is not only for students musical choices, but also for the way you structure your program, choose your activities, facilitate your sessions and interact with your students. Everything you do can be placed somewhere on the improv dial based on its level of psychological safety or risk. This session will explore the different ways you can use the improv dial to inject creativity and deeper connection into your improv drum circles.

Five Steps to Creating a Rock-Solid Rhythm

1. Echo Language With Body Percussion

This can be done in the opening of your session to ensure the class is ready for the content. Use "observe & reflect" to show them in the music.

2. Echo Language With Instruments

Continue to use voice with the echos. Adjust your tempo to make it easier or more challenging. Use "Observe & Reflect" to show them in the music.

3. Teach The Notes

Break down the notes by saying while playing "clap-clap-clap bass bass." Use the safety to risk model to build confidence and active participation.

4. Move Between The Modalities

Have students continue to play and move between mnemonics, body percussion, and instrument until the rhythm is solid and to teach the transferability of the rhythm.

5. Create Space

By cutting the rhythm in half, playing for one measure with one measure of rest, the tempo will stabilize and allow students space to learn while staying in the groove.

Facilitator's Notes:

PARTICIPATION > ACCURACY: If they are saying the words, listening to each other, and putting in effort, the power of entrainment, repetition and watching others take suggestions will be more effective than trying to correct individual students.

TROUBLE WITH RHYTHM Are some individuals having trouble with the rhythm?
- **NUMBERS:** attach numbers to the notes to make sure they play a note everytime they say a number. Multi-syllable mnemonics are difficult for young students.
- **LANGUAGE:** If english is their second language try using the numbers method above in their language.
- **HANDS:** have students play with one hand to see if it's a coordination issue. Use one hand at a time as they build coordination.

"Imitate Then Innovate"

This technique will encourage small musical choices with the eventual goal of the participant being able to make *all* of them.

Choice	Description	Level
Style	Have students keep the rhythm and the notes the same but add their own style	*Level 1/2/3:* Choose a style; the feeling, the look, the way they move
Volume/Dynamics	Keep the rhythm and notes the same while creating variance and choice in the dynamics	*Level 2:* Choose a note as an accent note *Level 3:* Crescendo & decrescendo
Movement	Replace some or all of your notes with movements that land on the beat of the rhythm	*Level 1:* Move entire rhythm into a body movement *Level 2/3 :* Choose a note or some notes and replace them with a movement
Copy	Do a half group sculpt (P3.5) and have the half that stops find a rhythm to copy	*Level 1/2:* Find one person to copy *Level 3:* Find a rhythm to copy than add a complementary pattern
Complement (Change Notes)	Use the same rhythm but different notes	*Level 1/2/3:* Choose different notes, textures & body percussion (limit to 2 or 3 to alleviate chaos)
Complement (Add/Remove)	Add a couple notes or take some away while maintaining the structure of the rhythm	*Level 1:* Take or add one *Level 2:* Take a few or add a few *Level 3:* Play the first or second half of a 4/8 beat pattern
Complement (Half & Half)	Use half and half model to create complementary patterns	*Level 1:* 2-beat rhythms *Level 2:* 2-beat rhythms *Level 3:* 4-8 beat rhythms

Performance to Improv

Generally, young people are familiar with a performance-style musical education where they learn a rhythm, melody, or song and practice it together. You can begin by using this familiar model of teaching to create safety, and then adjust the "improv dial" as comfort grows:

Performance Ensemble	Half & Half	Ensemble Improv
The level of creative risk involved in practicing set ensembles or rhythms is low, particularly in a group setting. For students new to improv, especially over 10 years of age, keep improv to a minimum until confidence is established.	This is where most young groups and confident older groups can start. Adjust your improv dial during the session, or as your program develops, to move towards improv drum circles.	The more choices the students are responsible for, the higher the creative risk is. Teaching and facilitating a session of only improv games and jams will put your group on the road to ensemble interdependence.

Facilitator Card:

As a general rule here are some qualities you might expect from different age groups:

- **LEVEL 1 (5 - 8 yrs):** Willingness to create is very high. For this age your biggest challenge will be structure, not creativity. Use the willingness to create to build in musicality.

- **LEVEL 2 (9 - 12 yrs):** As awareness of social hierarchy grows, oftentimes the willingness to authentically express oneself shrinks. Any small move from safety to risk is a win.

- **LEVEL 3 (13 - 18 yrs):** At this age, their musical sensibilities have increased and they want to sound good! Starting this group with a funky ensemble will build confidence and help them see the potential of rhythmic music.

Student Choice

Making specific directions or requests will provide an initial foundation of comfort. After that has been established, your cues can become increasingly more general. If your group is feeling safe and comfortable, expand their choices and reduce your direction.

Teacher Directed Specific	Teacher Directed General	Teacher Mirrors Student	Student Demonstrates Specific	Student Demonstrates General
"Move your shoulders just like this."	"Move your shoulders how you want to."	"I like how Tomtom moves her shoulders, let's try it too."	"Who can show me how to move our shoulders?"	"Who can show me a funky dance move?"

Facilitator Card:

"Either Or": One of the safest ways to make a choice accessible to a student who is anxious is by providing an "either or" choice: "Hey, Vasudhara, should we move our hands high or low? Should we play it loud or soft?"

Stacking "Either Or": If you can tell the student is nervous, thank them for their "either or" selection and move on. If you can, stack a number of "either or"s to demonstrate a framework for how you might make a creative choice. "Head or hands?" "High or low?" "Sharp or soft?"

"So you're saying we should move our hands up high, really sharp? Show us how we should do it!"

Everything Goes: If they fix their hair while they're thinking, use it. If they say uuummmm before they move, use it. If they stop in the middle, turn it into a rest.

Choosing Students

How and when you choose students is one of the best ways to build confidence and cultivate a culture of participation. Create safety by consciously choosing who to focus on first, and then move to risk when everyone feels welcome to add creative ideas.

Popcorn Style: Teacher Chosen	Popcorn Style: Student Volunteer	Circle Game: Everyone Participates
Before or during the circle, choose a mix of introverts and extroverts. Start with extroverts so there is no hesitation during the first demonstrations. This establishes participation as a matter of process.	Self-motivated participation is the best-case scenario. Always mix this method with choosing students who don't volunteer. See below for including more reserved students.	Pick active participants to be the starting place in your circle. Don't use this style of activity until you feel confident that you'll get participation from everyone.

Facilitator Card:

YES!!! Participation has a compound effect, everytime you get a "YES!" the likelihood you'll get another one increases. Pick the low hanging fruit before you move to more hesitant students.

PASS I avoid "pass" like the plague and you should too. Everytime a student passes it adds to a culture of non-participation. Everytime they participate it gets us closer to our goal of self-sustained musical conversations.

This is not to say you should "force" a student into participating but rather know when they are ready. Some will clearly show you, others will need a nudge.

BACK-UP RHYTHM When your circle is ready and they make it to "circle games," have a back-up rhythm that anyone can use to refresh their memory. After they play the back-up rhythm, ask them to change one note to end on a creative success.

Student Freeze

Even for a willing volunteer, a lot of attention can be overwhelming. If you see a student freeze follow these steps:

1. **Connect:** Connect with the student. Often when a student freezes you'll notice they look "lost in space". Ask them to look at you "Look at me, over here…" to give them a focal point while you calmly repeat the instructions or demonstrate what you saw them do. Often repeating instructions in a gentle tone will tune them back in. If the freezing persists…

2. **Break It Down:** Break it down and do it together. Tell the student you'll try it together, then repeat the directions one step at a time. If the freezing persists…

3. **Return Later:** Let them know you're going to come back to them and tell them you're going to show the class their awesome rhythm/move/dance so they don't miss it! Most times when you return to the full group they'll resume their rhythm and you can say "Yeah! That's what I was talking about!"

Space is good in music but can feel like an eternity if you're in freeze mode, so be prepared to move through the above steps quickly.

Facilitator Card:

> **Reserved Students**
>
> If you have a more hesitant student or group of students in your class use these methods to allow for safe participation:
>
> **MIRROR**: Find something the student is already doing and integrate it in the circle. "I saw Jeni bouncing off the drum, let's try it too!"
>
> **COMPLIMENT AFTER**: For extremely introverted or high needs students you can save your praise for after the circle so they are not overwhelmed by the sudden influx of attention.
>
> **COMPLIMENT OTHERS**: Asking a more reserved student to compliment another student or rhythm can create a space to contribute by supporting someone else.

Rumble Or…

Musical Goals	Controlled stops and starts, controlled volume
Social Goals	Make choices, create questions
Goes with	Rumble If…
Facilitator Cards	Observe & Reflect, Choosing Students

This activity is a version of "Would You Rather" where you have to choose between two things. Use the phrase, "would you rather eat/see/do/choose X or Y?"

Procedure:

- Get students to rumble on their instrument to establish volume, if you are using drum use a "two-finger" rumble to keep the volume reasonable
- Practice an attention call and stop so everyone is stopping together
- Choose two notes on your instrument to represent each choice
- For clarity, use the same note for option 1 and 2 consistently ex: option 1 = low note, option 2 = high note

Topics: Character traits, travel locations, school subjects, sports, food, eras, chores, movies, or careers.

Variations:

Rumble Over/Under… (Level 3 Students) A version of "Underrated/Overrated" where students decide if an item or activity is underrated or overrated. Use the phrase "do you think "x" is under or overrated?" Underrated is represented by rumbling on the bass note and overrated is represented by rumbling on tone.

Rapid Fire: Choose one student to go through rapid fire questions with no more than two seconds to answer.

Leadership/GOOW: Have students choose the questions.

Discussion: What's the hardest choice you've ever had to make? What choices do you consider important? What choices do you consider unimportant?

Rumble Firecracker

Musical Goals	Timbre matching, explore modalities, echo
Social Goals	Directing with positive body language, think on-on-the-spot, clear communication, Observe, Listen & Feel
Goes with	Rumble If…, Rumble 1000 Ways
Facilitator Cards	L.I.M.B, Observe & Reflect,

In Ensemble Improv we want to use clear non-verbal communication to telegraph rhythms, emotions, and intentions. In this game the leader needs to use his non-verbals to direct the ensemble. The ensemble needs to observe, listen, and quickly react to the leadership signals. Ensemble members also want to use different modalities to create exciting on-the-spot "rhythms."

Procedure:

- Have all students play a gentle rumble on their lap or drum (two fingers on the drum).
- Demonstrate one, two, or three loud "firecracker" notes then have all the students play them back immediately.
- Direct which students are going to play the firecracker notes. Once the selected student plays, the whole group plays those notes back.
- Make eye contact with the student you're going to direct, and make sure they are looking back.
- Use the "Disneyland Point" to select students once you've made eye contact.
- Have the younger students in new groups use names as they direct.
- Pass the director role to the students.
- Have students add non-rhythmic movement and voice to their firecrackers.

ENERGY: Expressive energy is what makes this game fun. Review the **Emotions and Movement** chart and have students pick an emotion and movement to pair with their firecracker.

CHALLENGE: Once the students become comfortable with the game, ask each student director to increase the speed of their selection. This will encourage the students to pay close attention to the director's instructions, and makes the game more exciting.

How Do We Create?

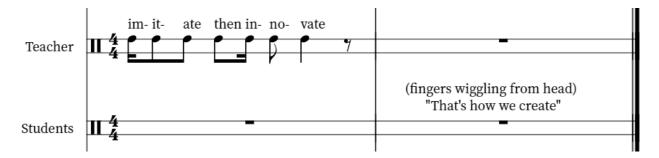| Musical Goals	Recognize rhythm patterns, call & echo high/mid/low, learn second principle of Ensemble Improv, say it/play it
Social Goals	Communicate non-verbally with your ensemble, learn tools for creating in and out of the classroom
Goes with	All Creating Activities
Facilitator Cards	Ensemble Mastery

Creating in Ensemble Improv is about adding your own ideas while maintaining connection to "the groove." Instead of adding something brand new we want to add to what already exists. Use mnemonics to remember the phrase: "How Do We Create? Imitate Then Innovate"

Imitate: To copy

Innovate: To take something that already exists and make something new out of it.

Procedure:

- Discuss what it means to imitate
- Discuss what it means to innovate
- Teach the call & response with the mnemonics until everyone is responding together
- Play a number of call & echo's and eventually drop in the call & response
- Take away your mnemonics just leaving the rhythm
- Speed up the tempo for a challenge

Imitate Then Innovate

Imitate: *to copy*

Innovate: *to take something that already exists and make something new*

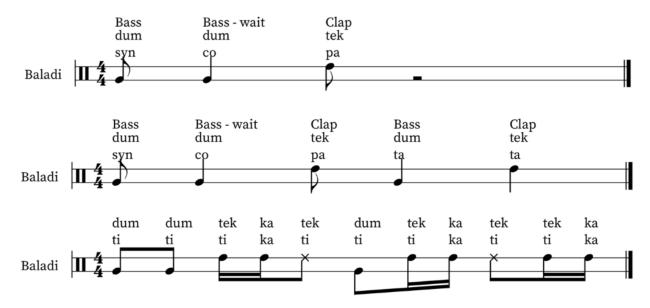|	
Musical Goals	Learn a rhythm, use rhythm language to guide improv, refine instrument technique, improvise different note selections, timbres, dynamics, movements, perform in rondo format
Social Goals	Listen to and articulate rhythms of another classmate, take creative risks, encourage and support classmates
Goes With	Rudiments 1, Rumble 1000 Ways
Facilitator Cards	Observe & Reflect, Teaching Rhythms, Technique, Technical Facilitation 1 & 2, Student Choice, Choosing Students

Influential jazz, trumpeter, improviser, composer and bandleader Miles Davis said "First you Imitate, then you innovate." We are going to copy a rhythm as precisely as possible then add our own ideas to it. Keep the rhythm the same but change the notes.

Procedure:

- Choose an appropriate rhythm and use **"Five Steps To A Rock-Solid Rhythm"**
- Use rhythm hotseat and distraction game to build personal and group resilience
- Select an improv option from the **"Imitate then Innovate"** Facilitator Card
- Demonstrate a number of different ways to play the rhythm
- Have students create their own
- If they are having trouble, have them repeat the mnemonics aloud while they're playing
- Develop a call with your voice or on your body to move from the imitated rhythm to the innovate rhythm then back again
- Perform in ABA format

Baladi (Masmoudi Soghier, Beledi (aka. Baladi))

Baladi means "of the country" and is a style of Egyptian folk dance from the early 20th century which is still very popular. Thus, 'Egyptian Beledi' means 'of the country of Egypt'. Egyptians have Baladi people, Baladi bread, Baladi rhythms, Baladi music and Baladi dance.

SOCA

SOCA stands for "Soul of Calypso" and was invented in Trinidad and Tobago by Lord Shorty in the 1970's and transformed into many subgenres in the decades that followed. The SOCA rhythms differ from its predecessors of Calypso by its "four on the floor," feel; a bass note being played on every beat in a 4/4 song.