



**Article 6:
Visual Jazz in your
Classroom**

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from *The Art of Improvisation, Sightreading Jazz, and More!*
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Visual Jazz in your Classroom

by Bob Taylor – ©2006 Visual Jazz Publications

I remember a lot of hours that I spent in jazz rehearsals and classroom sessions through the years. Most of the time in the classroom was geared towards performance – learn a piece, polish it, and get it ready for a concert. And, most of the time, it was fun!

But ...

If you're a teacher, you've probably said to yourself (at least 100 times),

“There just isn't enough time to work on sight-reading and improvisation AND get our performance pieces ready!”

If you're a student, you've probably wondered (at least 100 times),

“Why don't we get time to work on solos? And why is it taking so long for our group to improve?”

Here's the problem in a nutshell:

- With all the hours spent in rehearsals, the two main jazz skills – *reading* and *improvisation* – are still under-developed!

► What are the basic jazz skills I need?

The Two Main Skills: Reading and Improvisation

If your group can read (which includes solid jazz phrasing) and can improvise, you've got the basics covered! These two topics are discussed on the Visual Jazz web site at: <http://www.visual-jazz.com/vj-improv.htm> and <http://www.visual-jazz.com/vj-reading.htm>

So how can you boost these skills in the classroom, especially if you've got a full plate of rehearsal material to work on?

Remember the story about the woodcutter who was too busy cutting wood to sharpen his saw? Gradually he spent more and more time chopping and got less and less done. The obvious: he was reluctant to sharpen the saw because it would take time away from chopping. The not-so-obvious: he may have been lacking some good sharpening tools or methods, so sharpening the saw was a pain!

The good news is that Visual Jazz provides some great “sharpening” methods for classroom instruction in reading and improvisation.

1 - Reading in the Classroom - Challenges

At first glance, this sounds like a no-brainer – if you want to improve reading, you just *read* – the more charts, the better. And that’s what usually happens in classrooms where reading becomes a priority. But there are problems with this approach:

- 1) It’s hard to find enough reading material to use – big band charts are expensive.
- 2) Most charts offer “scattered reading” – different sections have reading challenges in different spots in the chart, so often you have to search for ensemble sections to practice.
- 3) Even in ensemble sections, the rhythm section still might not get much reading practice – they still plod through the same old chord symbols.

► How can I improve my reading in ensembles?

1a - Reading in the Classroom - Solutions

When I taught jazz studies at Pasadena City College years ago, I offered a reading and styles class. There were two main objectives in the class: a) help classically trained players learn swing and other jazz styles, and b) increase students’ abilities to read better and faster. Because we had a limited budget and because the class enrollment was so diverse (trombone, vocalist, pedal-steel guitar, cello, you name it ...), big band charts were not the answer.

So I came up with Sightreading Jazz, a reading approach for any and all musicians, in any combination. You can get the full details on Sightreading Jazz on the Visual Jazz web site (<http://www.visual-jazz.com>), but here are the main points of what Sightreading Jazz offers:

- 1) A uniform set of guidelines for phrasing and rhythm. This helps students solve their own reading problems, so the director can delegate troubleshooting to the students.
- 2) Exercises in each important transposition – Concert (treble clef), Bb, Eb, and bass clef – so musicians have what they need.

- 3) Exercises that offer an “immersion” experience in reading – everyone is reading all the time. Players aren’t counting measure of rest, and directors aren’t hunting through charts to find good reading spots.
- 4) Exercises that are customizable – so you aren’t repeating the same stuff, and you can make each exercise easier or harder to fit your reading needs.

The Classroom Approach for Reading

To use Sightreading Jazz in the classroom,

- a) Get student packets and a Teacher’s Guide (see the web site).
- b) Reserve 5-10 minutes at the beginning of rehearsal to “sharpen the saw” with Sightreading Jazz. Use the guidelines, rhythm exercises, and pitch exercises to give students a intense, customized, and enjoyable sight-reading experience.

After a Sightreading Jazz warmup, you’ll notice a big difference in concentration and attention to detail when you move on to rehearsing your charts!

► How can I develop soloing skills in ensembles?

2 - Improvising in the Classroom - Challenges

Here’s what usually happens – soloists get to practice improvisation during their solos in the chart (barely a minute or two per rehearsal) or at home. The problems:

- 1) Soloists don’t get enough improvisation practice time.
- 2) Non-soloists usually get no improvisation practice time at all.
- 3) In a time-crunch environment, there’s little focus on musical interaction between soloist and rhythm section. If the soloist can navigate through the chord changes without crashing and burning, that’s usually good enough.

2a - Improvising in the Classroom - Solutions

When I taught improvisation classes at Brigham Young University, I was determined to improve the traditional model of students soloing one after another on one long tune. Sure, everyone gets a chance to practice that way – but each student gets only a precious few seconds of solo time, especially when you have to accommodate 10 or more student solos in turn. And inevitably, the other students who should be listening often “tune out” when it’s not their turn ...

So I developed The Classroom Method for The Art of Improvisation. The key to the group learning experience in improvisation is the use of *flexible scales* and *virtual practice*. That approach effectively lets all students solo at the same time, without instruments, creating an immersive improvisation experience. Does that actually work? It does, and very well – see The Classroom Method for details!

The Classroom Approach for Improvisation

To use The Art of Improvisation Classroom Method,

- a) Get Student Guides and a Teacher’s Guide (see the web site).
- b) Reserve 5-10 minutes at the beginning of rehearsal to “sharpen the saw” with The Art of Improvisation. The courses are divided into 10-minute learning modules that can be easily used, one per rehearsal. You can learn improvisation right along with the students, and there are plenty of coaching tips in the Teacher’s Guide to keep you going.

After Art of Improvisation warmups, you’ll notice a big difference in how your soloists see and develop meaningful improvisation ideas, rather than relying on licks and pattern memorization. And your pool of soloists will grow, as students realize how enjoyable it is to play decent-sounding solos.

► What about separate classes for reading and improvisation?

Visual Jazz in a Dedicated Curriculum

If you have separate classes in improvisation or reading, the Visual Jazz approaches will take your students farther and faster than you might realize. The Classroom Method of The Art of Improvisation makes an ideal classroom curriculum, with teacher notes, learning objectives, play-along recordings, quizzes, and more – all in convenient and easy-to-use binder formats.

You can find a complete review of The Classroom Method of The Art of Improvisation in the 2006 Convention Issue of the IAJE Jazz Educator’s Journal. Or, check out a summary version at: <http://www.visual-jazz.com/iaje-class.htm>

You may also want to consider a dedicated reading class, where students can sharpen their reading and phrasing skills on an ongoing basis. This can serve as a useful introduction to jazz skills, where students can build essential reading skills before joining a jazz ensemble, or as an enhancement experience for those already in a jazz group.

Sightreading Jazz is an ideal tool for customizable reading, and it works for any combination of musicians.