



**Jazz Articles** by Bob Taylor  
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**Article 16:  
Teaching  
Improvisation**

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## Teaching Improvisation ... Differently

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(Note - This is not your typical teaching approach ... I think it's better!)

Teaching an improvisation course is pretty straightforward, right? Basically, you just need to accomplish two things: 1) overwhelm your students with a stack of music theory notes, and 2) bore your students by having them each wait 3 minutes to take 30-second practice solos in class.

What I just mentioned would be rather humorous, except that a) I've done that myself, and b) I've watched plenty of other teachers do the same thing. Is there a better approach than this? Let's see about that ...

► Should there be a penalty for "piling on" the theory?

### In Theory ...

I remember the first improvisation "class" I taught – as a college student I helped teach a week-long summer jazz camp at BYU, for high school students. I tried hard and had a lot of fun, but I remember an interesting phenomenon – as I lectured, the theory discussions went by pretty fast. I was amazed at how much jazz theory we had covered by the end of the week. We learned major, minor, dominant, ii-V-I's, altered dominants, chord progressions, substitutions ...

... but by the end of the week, most of the students had that glazed look in their eyes – they had been overwhelmed!

OK, but what was I supposed to do – slow down the theory, or repeat myself? And with a large class like that, trading solos would be far too time-consuming. About the only thing that worked was breaking out the jazz LP's (the prehistoric era, before CD's) and listening to solos. Of course, that was better for the newbies than the kids who were already familiar with the artists and recordings.

Eventually I did discover a better approach, one without theory overload and one with ample time and means for practicing what's learned. (More on that later ...!)

### The Challenges

► What are the basic challenges to teaching improvisation?

So, let's stop for a moment and recognize the problems with the typical approach to teaching improvisation:

- Theory is easy to dispense – you just find a book, or use your own knowledge, and pour it out.
- However, most theory is much harder to absorb than it is to dispense.
- Theory is dispensed (and piled on) because it's measurable – it lends itself well to multiple-choice or fill-in questions on tests, so you have an “objective” learning and grading system.

So, what we need is an approach to learning improvisation that accomplishes at least these two things:

- 1) Theory that's intertwined effectively with practical application
- 2) A practice model that enables simultaneous group practice, at each individual's skill level
- 3) A curriculum that blends these two together, with ample teaching notes

Let's examine these elements as the foundation for our improvisation class.

► How does the Visual Jazz approach help to blend theory and practice?

#### 1. Intertwining Theory and Practice – with Visual Jazz

With most theory approaches, the temptation is to learn a bit of theory and then copy an example of it right into your solo. Unfortunately, this encourages rote learning over discovery, and practice time is absorbed mostly in learning a few pre-defined licks that capture the theory.

The advantage of the Visual Jazz approach is this:

\* The improvisation theory you learn can be wrapped around a **permanent visual model**. This encourages you to see the theory you learn as part of a visual/audio creation. That way, your theory and the practice work together to help you build real shapes as you solo. You're more likely to use the theory in creative ways if you're absorbed in building a creative project as you play.

The powerful **SHAPE™** method of Visual Jazz helps you create meaningful melodic ideas for your solos, to which you can add and integrate increasingly sophisticated jazz theory as you go. For example, effective melodic shapes can be played with color tones, non-harmonic tones, or outside tones; they can be shifted rhythmically in many ways; and they can be developed with a wide variety of tools. Theory becomes intertwined with practice to build creative musical shapes – a model that continually inspires you to move forward in your learning.

The two practical applications that make the SHAPE model work are 1) Flexible Scales and 2) Virtual Practice. More about these tools later in the article ...

► What is Simultaneous Group Practice?

## 2. Simultaneous Group Practice

The second element of a successful improvisation class is finding a way for students to get enough practice time in class, at their own skill level. Sounds like a tall order ...!

As mentioned before, the typical approach is for each student to take a turn soloing on a tune – and this usually leads to a lot of waiting and a lot of repetition of the chord progression.

But ... what if all the students could practice their solos at the same time?

First reaction – that's crazy! It would sound terrible, and students would each play louder just to hear themselves in the racket. True, but here's where flexible scales and virtual practice come in! Instead of soloing with instruments, students would practice the improvisation exercises vocally (humming, whistling) while fingering each individual note in synch with what they see, hear, and hum.

The benefits:

- 1) There's more individual practice time done in less clock time.
- 2) Students can practice an exercise at their own skill levels, by customizing the flexible scale and the approach. The result is some seriously good ear-training!
- 3) More exercises can be done per class period.
- 4) Chord progressions are not repeated ad nauseum, trying to give each individual separate practice time.
- 5) There's no wasted time with warm-ups, setting sound levels, dragging amps and equipment back and forth, etc.
- 6) The virtual exercises can easily be translated to instruments for practice after class.

Note: Instruments can still be used at times, especially to introduce combo concepts, but virtual practice is the key for group improvisation learning!

### 3. The Curriculum

► What is the Classroom Method?

The method that puts all of this together into an effective curriculum is the Classroom Method for The Art of Improvisation. It contains the lesson plans, theory and practical exercises to build a solid, visual foundation in improvisation.

The Classroom Method is available in Teacher's Guides and Student Guides, in three courses of study. The TOC for the Course 1 Teacher's Guide is shown below; for more information and IAJE reviews, see [www.visual-jazz.com](http://www.visual-jazz.com).

#### About this Teacher's Guide

Using the Note Boxes  
Student Guide and CD  
Customizing the Guides  
**Teaching Improvisation**  
Breakthrough Elements  
Background and Philosophy  
Prerequisite Skills  
Teacher Skills  
Student Skills  
Dealing with Experienced Improvisers  
10 Minutes a Day  
Designing Your Course Outline  
Semester Schedule  
Classroom Challenges and Opportunities  
Evaluation and Testing  
Sample Quizzes

#### Part 1: Getting Started

##### About Improvisation

A: The Five Levels of Improvisation  
B: The Seven Elements of Improvisation  
Balance and Diet  
C: Skills You Need  
D: Jazz Improvisation Myths  
Myth #1: You're Born With It  
Myth #2: You Need Perfect Pitch  
Myth #3: You Can't Practice Without Your Instrument  
Myth #4: Classical and Jazz Don't Mix  
E: Definitions of Improvisation  
Q1: How Do You Make It Up?  
Q2: What Makes It Good or Bad?  
Bad Habits of Improvisation  
Q3: What Are Notes?  
Q4: What about Wrong Notes?

Q5: Who Communicates?

Q6: What Do You Communicate and How?

F: Jazz Improvisation and Other Arts  
Painting and Jazz Improvisation  
Classical Composition and Improvisation

Language and Jazz Improvisation  
Standup Comedy & Jazz Improvisation  
Chapter Review

##### Values and Creativity

A: Why Learn to Improve?  
Self-Expression  
Creativity  
Teamwork  
B: Learning Values through Improvisation  
#1: Discernment and Wisdom  
#2: Integrity  
#3: Leadership  
#4: Informed Risks  
#5: Diversity  
C: The Creative Process  
Steps in the Creative Process  
D: Five Barriers to Creativity  
Barrier 1: Only One Way to Solve a Problem  
Barrier 2: Our Creation Must Be All "New"  
Barrier 3: We Don't Know Materials/Tools  
Barrier 4: We Don't Visualize the Results  
Barrier 5: We Let Fear or Ego Defeat Us  
E: Creative Improvisation  
Can Improvisation be Pre-Planned?  
Improvisation and the Creative Process  
Chapter Review

#### **Part 2: Sessions**

##### **Session 1: Virtual Practice & Flexible Scales**

Part 1A: Virtual Practice  
1A-1: What is virtual practice?  
1A-2: How do I use virtual practice?  
1A-3: Virtual practice with other scales  
Part 1B: Flexible Scales  
1B-1: What are flexible scales?  
1B-2: How do I use flexible scales?  
1B-3: How do I use flexible arpeggios?  
Part 1C: Workout

##### **Session 2: SHAPE**

Part 2A: Flexible Scale Levels  
2A-1: Using different rhythms  
2A-2: Using skips of thirds  
2A-3: Combining skips and new rhythms  
Part 2B: Learning SHAPE  
2B-1: What is SHAPE?  
2B-2: Music in 3 Dimensions  
2B-3: How do I use SHAPE?  
Part 2C: Workout

##### **Session 3: Chords and Scales**

Part 3A: Chords and Symbols  
3A-1: How do I read chord symbols?  
3A-2: Major 7 chord symbols & spelling  
3A-3: Dominant 7 chord symbols & spelling  
3A-4: Minor 7 chord symbols and spelling  
Part 3B: Basic Scales  
3B-1: What is the Lydian Scale?  
3B-2: What is the Mixolydian Scale?  
3B-3: What is the Dorian Scale?

Other Useful Scales (optional)  
Part 3C: Workout

#### **Session 4: Melodic Color**

Part 4A: Color Notes

4A-1: What are the color notes?

4A-2: How do I emphasize color notes?

Part 4B: Color intervals and the 4th

4B-1: What are color intervals?

4B-2: How do I handle the 4th degree?

Part 4C: Workout

#### **Session 5: Rhythmic Color**

Part 5A: Offbeats and Downbeats:

5A-1: How do I emphasize offbeats?

5A-2: Using consecutive offbeat notes

5A-3: Shifting between downbeats & offbeats

Part 5B: Interesting Rhythms & Combinations

5B-1: Using shorter and longer values

5B-2: Using triplets

5B-3: Adding ties and rests to triplets

Part 5C: Workout

#### **Session 6: The Art of Swing**

Part 6A: Swing Rhythms

6A-1: Quarter-notes and quarter-rests

6A-2: Eighth-notes and eighth-rests

6A-3: Dotted quarters, longer notes & triplets

Part 6B: Swing Articulations and Accents

6B-1: Eighth-note articulations

6B-2: Articulations for long notes &

triplets

6B-3: Swing accents

Part 6C: Swing Variations

6C-1: Using even eighth-notes in swing

6C-2: Laying back on the tempo

6C-3: Swing exceptions

Part 6D: Workout

#### **Session 7: Developing with Motifs & Phrases**

Part 7A: Creating and Varying Motifs

7A-1: How do I create motifs?

7A-2: How do I vary motifs?

Part 7B: Creating Phrases

7B-1: How do I create phrases?

7B-2: How do I end phrases?

Part 7C: Workout

#### **Session 8: Chord Progressions Part 1 – Keys & Blues**

Part 8A: Chords and Keys

8A-1: Using Roman Numerals to identify keys

8A-2: Recognize keys in chord progressions

Part 8B: The Blues

8B-1: The blues structure

8B-2: Using blues scales

Part 8C: Workout

#### **Session 9: Chord Progressions Part 2 – ii-V-I's 81**

Part 9A: ii-V-I Progressions

9A-1: Building ii-V-I Progressions

9A-2: Focusing on the 3 and 7

Part 9B: Simplifying and Enhancing Progressions

9B-1: How do I simplify chord progressions?

9B-1: Prefacing ii-V-I progressions

9B-3: Learning Standard Tunes, Part 1

Part 9C: Workout

#### **Session 10: Form and Performance**

Part 10A: Learning Tune Forms

10A-1: Identifying tune forms

10A-2: Common tune forms

Part 10B: Customizing Tunes

10B-1: Handling the tune melody

10B-2: Intros and endings

10B-3: Jazz combo roles

Part 10C: Performance Tips

10C-1: Relaxed concentration

10C-2: About the audience

10C-3: Tips for live performances

Part 10D: Workout

#### **Appendix**

**A:** Chord Progressions, Concert Key

**B:** Chord Progressions, Bb Instruments

**C:** Chord Progressions, Eb Instruments

**D:** Discussion Topics – The Art of Improvisation

Topic 1 – SHAPE, Sound and Technique

Topic 2 – Eyes, Ears and Fingers

Topic 1 – Color Combinations

Topic 1 – 20-20 Hindsight

**E:** The Jazz Combo

Group Performance Skills

The Chords

Bass Techniques

Drumset Techniques

Melodic Roles

**F:** Swing Rhythms

**G:** Sample Quizzes

Session 1 Quiz

Session 2 Quiz

Session 3 Quiz

Session 4 Quiz

Session 5 Quiz

Session 6 Quiz

Session 7 Quiz

Session 8 Quiz

Session 9 Quiz

**H:** Ten Coaching Tips for Improvising