

Jazz Pedagogy for the Non-Jazzer

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Research has found that many band directors are hesitant or fearful of teaching jazz band. Some instrumental music educators do not feel that their undergraduate programs adequately prepared them to teach jazz (Brumbach, 2020). Many educators have never taken a jazz pedagogy course or performed in a jazz ensemble, and most directors that do have jazz performance experience gained it by performing in a high school or college ensembles (Brumbach, 2020). Instrumental educators who do not play a traditional jazz instrument may have had few or no opportunities to participate in a jazz ensemble.

Music educators are often tasked with teaching the jazz ensemble as part of their duties. One study, however, found that band directors reported low confidence in teaching jazz compared to concert or marching band (Koch, 2020, p. 80). In fact, only 27.5% of band directors in Oklahoma reported taking a jazz methods course while in college (Koch, 2020, p. 80). 70.2% of the directors in the study who reported teaching a jazz band had never taken a jazz methods course (Regier, 2019, p. 60).

The director with little to no jazz experience should not let this lack of experience be a stumbling block to jazz pedagogy. Research shows that one's ability to teach jazz is more related to overall musicianship than the ability to play jazz (West, & Titlebaum, 2019).

Before music teachers take on the challenge of jazz instruction, it is important to outline the reasons why teaching jazz is worth the challenge. Jazz offers many opportunities that are not inherently found in traditional concert band music taught in schools. The jazz ensemble generally teaches part independence, having only one player on each part. With this arrangement, each student is a "soloist" and an integral part of the ensemble sound. Jazz is also a truly American art form with influences from Africa, Europe, and early American musical styles such as Work Songs, Blues, Spirituals, Rock, and Latin music (Steinel, 2000). It is often closer in style to the

pop music that students already listen to when compared to the concert literature that many bands perform. Jazz promotes individual creativity. Perhaps the most prominent reason for jazz education, but also the biggest stumbling block to successful jazz pedagogy, is the art of improvisation. The National Association for Music Education includes improvisation as a standard set by the National Music Standards (NAfME; 2014) but it is an often neglected component in secondary music classrooms.

Secondary jazz education continues to grow, even without a formal curriculum available. This lack of curriculum is likely because in jazz, the charts themselves are the curriculum (Papich, 2019; Poulter, 2008;). Using solely the charts as curriculum may prove challenging for the director with little jazz or improvisation experience. One reason for a lack of curriculum might be because of the way jazz has traditionally been learned and taught, aurally and through experience. Some individuals even believe that jazz should not be formally taught (Coker, 1987, p. vii) but instead only learned through experience. While there are many books available about how to play jazz, jazz is truly an aural tradition (Carter & Miles, 2008). This means that if you really want to learn to teach and play jazz, you have to listen to it. In the words of Wynton Marsalis, “The only way to learn jazz is by playing, and listening to those who can play” (Carter & Miles, 2008, p. 15).

Directors teaching or aspiring to teach a jazz ensemble should begin with listening, both on their own and with their students. While it is true that jazz is an aural tradition and one cannot bypass the importance of listening and learning through experience, the need for formal jazz instruction is needed in today’s growing jazz education environment. Research has found that high functioning jazz teachers require students to play traditional jazz instruments in the jazz ensemble, use major and pentatonic scales to teach improvisation, model for the students, have

students listen to jazz and watch jazz videos, bring in clinicians, and use call-and-response activities (West, 2014, p. 35). There is, in fact, a surplus of resources for individual instruction by the ABCs of jazz education (Jamey Aebersold, David Baker, and Jerry Coker) and many others, but there seems to be a lack of readily available lesson plans and classroom curriculum.

Most improvisation books are designed for individual use and not classroom instruction. A comparison completed in 2017 examined the instructional content of five current jazz method books. The analysis found that rehearsal techniques comprised only 10% of the instructional material, and only 3% of the content was devoted to improvisation (Watson, 2017). Given that these are areas that educators feel timid teaching, the Jazz Lesson Plans and Forum website resource are intended to provide supplemental material in these areas for the educator with limited jazz experience.

For the music director with little to no jazz experience, jazz pedagogy can be intimidating. Lack of training and experience may be a deterrent to developing a jazz program. The Jazz Lesson Plans and Forum curriculum presents a starting point for the hesitant jazz educator. It is not all-inclusive, and there is much left for the director to learn, but by having access to a few simple lesson plans and resources, directors have a place to begin.

In order to find success in jazz education, the teacher must have a desire to learn, at least at a basic level, for oneself. This begins with listening. Listening to jazz must be a priority, both for the teacher and for the student. Jazz is an aural art form and listening is vital for successful educational outcomes. The jazz educator should also strive to develop basic improvisation skills. This may sound intimidating for some, but it should not cause the prospective jazz educator to give up hope. Improvisation does not need to be difficult, and it should be enjoyable!

In his book, *The Jazz Theory Book*, Mark Levine says that the “prerequisites for becoming a good jazz musician” are *talent, direction, education, and ambition* (Levine, 1995, p. viii). Many talented students have missed out on the opportunity to enjoy jazz because of their teachers’ fear. Take comfort in the fact that you do not need to know everything! Be willing to learn, be willing to listen, and provide your students an opportunity they may not have anywhere else. Many students have the talent and ambition, but lack the direction and education. These students do not need teachers who know everything about jazz. They simply need teachers willing to present students with the opportunity to experience the world of jazz. That is the purpose of this resource.

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