Improvisation: You can TEACH it and DO it!
Curtis Winters, Orem Junior High

Eight “Improv Pathways”

1. **Vocab Pathway.** Students are introduced to new key words and concepts in student-friendly language.

   | Inversion: A chord in which the bottom note is any chord tone other than 1. | Audiation: Imagining the sounds of music in your head instead of hearing the sounds with your ears. |
   | Basic Chord | Inverted Chords |
   | 7 | 1 3 5 |
   | 5 | 7 1 3 |
   | 3 | 5 7 1 |
   | 1 | 3 5 7 |
   | Ear-to-Hand Coordination: Ability to play the notes you are hearing or audiating on your instrument. Often called “playing by ear”. |

2. **Group Improv Pathway.** Students improvise with a small group rather than as soloists. Group Improv exercises involve three patterns played simultaneously. They are presented in both iconic and symbolic forms of notation. After learning to play the patterns, students take the next step of improvising by altering them rhythmically and/or by adding passing tones.

   Improvise in small groups, like a traditional Dixieland band.

   Play these patterns in groups of 3 or 4, and improvise by:

   **Easy:** Using the given scale tones, but changing the rhythm each time you repeat the pattern.

   **Challenging:** Changing the rhythm AND using passing tones between the given tones.

3. **Idea Pathway.** Students explore various ideas pertinent to jazz and improvisation, such as how to bend notes, and how to create a walking bass line.

   Your instrument should sound expressive like the human voice.

   **Bending** Notes on the Trombone
   Trombone players can use their embouchure to scoop or bend notes, but usually prefer to use the slide. To scoop simply reach out one position beyond the target note and gliss up into it, or gliss out and back for a bend.

   Scoop 3 5 6 7-6-7
   Bend
4. Pattern Pathway. New sets of notes are introduced and used to build melodic patterns. The patterns are practiced through call & response exercises with recorded CD tracks on some days, and with live teacher interaction on other days. Students use iconic (number) notation, but teachers can use standard notation versions, if desired.

5. Comping Pathway. Students develop comping concepts and skills. These exercises involve the entire band, but are primarily intended to prepare the rhythm section to perform improvised comping during the solo sections of jazz charts.

---

**Level 4 - Scale Tones 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A1</th>
<th>A2</th>
<th>A3</th>
<th>A4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Patterns in Standard Notation**

---

**Guitar Voicings for the B-Flat7 Chord**

Play lower 2 notes with the Left Hand and upper 2 notes with the Right Hand.

---

**Piano Voicings for the B-Flat7 Chord**

*Note: Jazz musicians usually call note 2 “the 9th” and note 6 “the 13th”.*
6. **Improvisation Pathway.** Students practice improvising with specific, directed note choices, and explore different ways to build a solo. Students are given opportunities to improvise in a large class as: 1) everyone solos at the same time, 2) 1-2 students per row solo at a time, 3) each section solos at a time, and/or 4) one student solos at a time.

![3. Improvisation Pathway](image)

What about the drummer? They can work on playing improvised rhythms while playing timekeeping patterns, such as these:

- **Timekeeping 1**
- **Timekeeping 2**
- **Timekeeping 3**
- **Timekeeping 4**

**I & IV Chord “Guide Tone” Patterns**

- **3-7 Interchange**
- **7-3 Interchange**

7. **Transcribing Pathway.** Students transcribe patterns and short solos by listening, finding the notes on their instruments, and writing down the scale tone numbers on Transcribing Worksheets.
8. History Pathway: Students learn about influential jazz styles and performers, such as Dixieland jazz, big bands, and great jazz players on each instrument.

Jazz Charts. The jazz charts can be introduced and rehearsed at any time during or after this curriculum. However, each chart contains melodic, harmonic, comping, and improvisational elements that are taught throughout the lessons and warm-up exercises. There are currently three jazz charts available as combo arrangements. The swing chart (Once in a While) and the rock chart (One for the Road) use only the “I” chord. The bossa nova chart (Dos Sabores) uses the “I” and “IV” chords.

Student Lessons. Students are provided with 8 “lesson” pages that are customized for each jazz band instrument: alto & baritone saxophone, tenor saxophone, trumpet, trombone, guitar, piano, bass, and drum set. These lessons are correlated with the first 8 weeks of instruction outlined in the Curriculum Guide. Lessons 9-16 are still being developed.

Fingering Charts. At-a-glance fingering charts (above) are currently available for the Concert B-Flat Mixolydian scale of each instrument. More will soon be developed for other scales and chords.

Warm-Up Exercises. Eight short warm-up exercises are organized into two warm-up “sets”. Teachers may use these exercises during the first 5-10 minutes of rehearsal each day. The warm-up exercises serve four purposes:

Purpose 1. Students develop a solid sense of jazz style through simple rhythmic and melodic exercises played in unison.

Purpose 2. Students become more familiar with scale/chord tones.

Purpose 3. Rhythm section members develop comping skills by learning timekeeping patterns (drum set), standard chord voicings (piano and guitar), and bass lines.

Purpose 4. Students learn to play melodies from the jazz charts.
Lesson Plans. Teachers may use the Lesson Plans to guide their implementation of each student lesson. Currently there are 32 lesson plans, organized as 1A, 1B, 1C, and 1D, then 2A, 2B…etc. The 8 “A” plans cover each entire lesson, and the B, C, and D plans offer suggestions for review and enrichment.

Website. Visit improvpathways.com to utilize and download (for non-commercial educational use only) all materials. I also welcome your questions and feedback. Contact me through the website, or e-mail me at improvpathways@gmail.com.

Recordings. The CD contains recordings of outstanding high school jazz musicians from the Crescent Super Band. There are four main types of tracks:

1. Pattern Tracks. These tracks feature the patterns from each level in sequential order. Each pattern is modeled four times: twice with a voice and twice with an instrument, with space after each for students to imitate the pattern with their voices and instruments.

2. Call & Response Track. This track has no recorded patterns—only a rhythm section accompaniment. The advantages of using this track are (1) the teacher becomes the model for students to imitate, and (2) the teacher can spend more time repeating certain patterns that the students are struggling with. Students can also use the Call & Response track to practice chosen patterns at home.

3. Solo Section Tracks. These tracks feature a rhythm section comping for the solo section of each jazz chart. This allows students to practice improvising at school and at home. Students are encouraged to practice improvising at home with these tracks.

4. Sample Solo Tracks. These tracks feature genuine improvised solos. They serve as models for how a great solo can be built with limited note choices, and students should be encouraged to listen to, imitate, and transcribe them.
Patterns

In these patterns 1 represents the 1st tone of a scale (the Root). See the Improv Pathways Lessons for more information on which scale tones and fingerings are represented by the numbers.

5 Ways to Use Patterns

“Reading” the Numbers
1. Practice “Call & Response” with your teacher while looking at the patterns.
2. Practice “Call & Response” with “Patterns” audio tracks while looking at the patterns.
3. Memorize patterns by practicing them on your own with “Solo Section” audio tracks.

Playing “By Ear”
4. Practice “Call & Response” with your teacher while not looking at the patterns.
5. Practice “Call & Response” with “Patterns” audio tracks while not looking at the patterns.

Level 1 - Scale Tones 1-2-3

Level 2 - Scale Tones b7-1-2-3
Patterns

Level 3 - Scale Tones b7-1-2-3-4-5

A1

1 3 4 5

A2

1 b7 1 2 3 5

A3

1 2 1 3 4 5

A4

5 3 1 b7

B1

5 3 5 3 4 5

B2

3 4 5 3 1 b7

B3

1 3 1 2 4 2 3 5 5 4 3

C1

3 1 3 4 5 5

C2

5 3 2 4 3 1 b7

C3

5 4 3 5 3 1 b7 2 1

Level 4 - Scale Tones 1-2-3-4-5-6-b7-1

A1

3 5 6 b7

A2

5 3 6 5 3 4 5

A3

1 b7 1 5 b7 1

A4

5 6 5 b7 6 5

B1

b7 5 6 5 3 5

B2

3 4 5 6 b7

B3

b7 6 5 4 3 1 2 3 5 4 3

C1

3 5 6 b7 5 1 1

C2

1 5 6 b7 6 5 4 3

C3

b7 5 6 5 3 4 5 6 5 b7
Level 5 - Blue Notes and Altered Tones

Level 6 - Extended Mixolydian Scale
Beginning Jazz Improvisation
Curriculum Guide

Week 1
**Vocab:** Scale and Pattern  
**Patterns:** Level 1 (3 notes)  
**Improvise:** Music improvisation compared to speech; improvise musical conversations with scale tones 1, 3, and 1-2-3  
**Idea:** Various types of music notation explored

Week 2
**Vocab:** Octave, Flat 7, and Transcribe  
**Patterns:** Level 2 (4 notes)  
**Improvise:** Another comparison to speech, focused on the rhythmic aspect of speech; improvise rhythmically using scale tones 1, 2-3, and 7-1-2-3  
**Transcribe:** How to transcribe, first transcription as a class (Exercise 1 - one measure), and introduction to great players on each instrument

Week 3
**Vocab:** Chord, Arpeggio, Passing Tone, and the “I” Chord  
**Group Improv:** Pattern #1 – change the rhythm and add passing tones  
**History:** Dixieland and group improvisation in early jazz  
**Transcribe:** Transcribe the first four measures of the Swing Tenor Sax Solo

Week 4
**Vocab:** Inversion, Audiation, and Ear-to-Hand Coordination  
**Patterns:** Level 3 (6 notes)  
**Improvise:** Explore putting space in improvised solos – like punctuation; improvise with both space & rhythmic playing using scale tones 3-4-5, 7-1-2-3, and 7-1-2-3-4-5.  
**Idea:** Scoops and Bends on each instrument  
**Transcribe:** Transcribe Exercise 2 (one measure) and measures 5-8 of the Tenor Sax Solo

Week 5
**Vocab:** Root, Walking Bass Line, and 3rd, 5th, and 7th  
**Idea:** How to create a Walking Bass Line  
**Group Improv:** Pattern #2 – change the rhythm and improvise walking bass lines  
**Transcribe:** Transcribe measures 9 – 12 of the Tenor Sax Solo

Week 6
**Vocab:** Mixolydian Scale, Dominant 7th Chord, Chord Symbol, and Comping  
**Patterns:** Level 4 (8 notes)  
**Improvise:** Use a single pattern to build a solo  
**Comping:** Comping Rhythms 1 & 2 with basic chord tones  
**Transcribe:** Transcribe Exercise 3 (one measure) and last 4 measures of the Tenor Sax Solo
Week 7
Vocab: Head, Solo Section, Shout Chorus, and Two Definitions of Improvise
Improvise: Build a solo by using 3 patterns interspersed with pattern tones
History: Big Bands, including functions of the rhythm section & horn section, great band leaders, and the typical form of a big band chart
Transcribe: Transcribe Exercises 4 & 5 (one measure and two measures)

Week 8
Vocab: Altered Tones, Enharmonics, and “Blue” Notes
Patterns: Level 5 (Mixolydian + Altered Tones)
Idea: Growling on each instrument
Comping: Comping Rhythm 3 with chromatic neighboring tones
Transcribe: Explore “Loose Transcribing “ with the Rock Trumpet Solo

Week 9
Vocab: Chord Changes and the “IV Chord”
Patterns: IV Chord Level 2 (4 notes)
Idea: Changing the I Chord into the IV Chord
Group Improv: Pattern #3 (with I & IV Chord)

Week 10
Vocab: Common Tones, Voice Leading, Approach Tone, and Target Tone
Patterns: IV Chord Level 3 (6 notes)
Improvisation: Guide Tone Pattern 1: I & IV Chord 7-3 Interchange
Transcribing: Bossa Nova Trumpet Solo (first 8 measures)
Comping: Stop-Time Comping

Week 11
Vocab: Guide Tones (3rd & 7th) and Interchange
Improvisation: Guide Tone Pattern 2: I & IV Chord 3-7 Interchange
Idea: Creating Funk and Bossa Nova Bass Lines from the Root & 5th over the I & IV Chords
Transcribing: Next 4 measures of the Bossa Nova Trumpet Solo
History: Be-Bop

Week 12
Vocab: Groove, Figure, and Setting Up the Band
Patterns: I & IV Chords Level 6 (Extended Scale)
Improvisation: Telling a Story: Building a solo with pitch and rhythm
Idea: Adding Grace Notes & Mordents/Turns
Transcribing: Last 8 measures of the Bossa Nova Trumpet Solo

Week 13
Vocab: The “V Chord”, Blues Progression, and “The Blues”
Patterns: V Chord Level 2
Group Improv: Pattern #4 (V-IV-I-I)
History: Jazz-Rock and Jazz-Latin Fusion
Week 14
Vocab: Color Tones and 9th Chords
Patterns: V Chord Level 3
Improvisation: Guide Tone Pattern 3: Blues Progression 7-3 Interchange
Transcribing: Blues Trombone Solo (first 8 measures)
Comping: Comping Rhythm 4 with 9th’s over the Blue Progression

Week 15
Vocab: Trading 4’s
Improvisation: Guide Tone Pattern 4: Blues Progression 3-7 Interchange
Idea: Various ways to Trade 4’s
History: Modal Jazz

Week 16
Vocab: The Blues Scale
Patterns: V Chord Extended Scale & Blues Scale
Improvisation: Turning a mistake into a success: “I meant to do that!”
Idea: Instrument-Specific jazz improvisation skills
Transcribing: Blues Trombone Solo (last 4 measures)