Using the “option play” to address the unique needs of each individual student

In football, the option play is an offensive tactic that reacts to the defense. It allows the quarterback to be flexible and control the play as it develops. He can hand off to the fullback for a dive, turn the ball upfield for an end sweep, or pitch out to the halfback. The quarterback reads the defense and decides which play will move the ball forward.

If we think of our goal as helping a student realize his or her potential as an improviser, and of the defense as any one of the many possible obstacles in the student’s path, it becomes clear that the same approach will not allow every student to “break through.” This is what makes teaching improvisation in a classroom setting difficult. More than most other subjects or disciplines, jazz improvisation is developed in a very personal way. The teacher must be able to recognize the student’s needs and adapt the teaching style and technique accordingly. In this article, I will attempt to identify several types of students and suggest pedagogical methods that have proven successful with each. [i]

The Essentials

Before examining curriculums that are “tailored” for a particular student, it is useful to review activities that have proven vital to all of us in the pursuit of becoming a better jazz improviser. These include but are not limited to the following:

Command of the Instrument

We must be able to execute what we hear with our ears and our mind’s ears. Scales, arpeggios, long tones, flexibility exercises, etc. are of course vital. [ii]

Listening

Immersion in the sound of jazz is essential. This is the source for everything from sound and feel to harmonic and melodic vocabulary.

Transcription

I have never spoken to a single jazz player who does not credit the act of transcribing and learning the solos of great players with much of their success.

Learning the “Vocabulary”

It is necessary to learn the “essential elements of the jazz language” as Jerry Coker calls them. This involves choosing “licks” or patterns, (preferably acquired through listening and transcribing rather than reading them in a book), learning them in every key and practicing their application. The more licks and patterns, the better. Many students feel, before they have done much of it, that this stifles creativity. My answer to them is “if it worked for Bird and Trane, you might want to give it a try.”

Get out there and play.

There is no question that the play-along recordings produced by Jamey Aebersold and others have been an invaluable aid to countless players at all levels. However, they could actually prove detrimental if they are used as a substitute for playing with warm, breathing human beings. Both activities are important. It’s not possible for most of us to practice with a live rhythm section for four hours every day. But, of course, playing with and in front of people is the only way to fully experience a music as communal and interactive as jazz.

The Options

The activities mentioned above are essential. It is the order and emphasis that varies with each student. Each student comes to this music with different strengths and weaknesses and, perhaps more importantly, with different experiences. With the most gifted, it may appear that the teacher has nothing to do but stay out of the way. But we must be alert to what if anything may be impeding the student’s progress. Then we can choose the best strategy. While no two students are identical, for the purpose of discussion, we can refer to a few general types.

The “Great Ear”

Some students seem to have no problem mimicking what they hear. They are blessed with great tonal memory and recognition of harmonic quality and progression. They may not know the label for a sound, but they recognize it and can find it on their instrument. First, we must do no harm. To overwhelm such a student with theoretical jargon might only serve to discourage. He or she must be encouraged to continue to develop the ear through harmonic and melodic transcription. More and more adventurous sounds could be introduced while explaining the theory in a logical, step-by-step way that moves from general to specific.

It is fairly common to encounter students with great ears who, because of the ease

with which they can “pick things up,” have not developed their reading skills. One good technique to address this is to have them play a short passage. Then the teacher writes down that passage and the student reads it from the page. Doing this repeatedly over time helps the student associate a sound with a symbol. Writing down a transcribed solo is also helpful in this regard. Generally we encourage singing and playing a transcription before writing it down, but that may be fairly easy for this type of student. It is the notation and analysis that they really need to develop.

The “Smart kid.”

The designation, “smart kid” is not meant to imply that other students are not smart. It simply means that this kind of student has an easier time understanding the theory than the student with the “great ear,” but does not have strong aural skills. If we accept the premise that just about anyone can improve his or her aural skill, that is what we must emphasize with this student. All of the time-tested exercises are helpful. Of course, developing the ear is one of the great benefits of transcribing solos. Among other things that have helped many of my students include “I play, you play,” That is, I play a short phrase and the student plays it back. Also, playing random ii-V progressions on the piano, while the student tries to find the key center on their instrument is a good exercise and a good measure of progress. In fact we include this in our auditions.

It would be a mistake to wait for this type of student to develop great ears before moving on to any more advanced vocabulary or concepts. The fact that they are able to understand the theory easily is something we can take advantage of. Often, I go ahead and assign a fairly involved melodic phrase for the student to learn in all keys and apply in a particular place in a progression. After they have heard themselves playing that 3 – flat 9 lick, for example, in the “correct” place hundreds of times, they begin to recognize it in a recording when they may not have before. Gradually, these sounds soak into the mind’s ear and find their way into solos in a more spontaneous way.

The “Big Fan.”

We are all probably “big fans” of many jazz artists. It’s what draws to this music in the first place. It inspires us to try and recreate a little bit of that magic. All students benefit from repeated listening to their favorite artists, but many seem to get deeply hooked on one particular player for an extended period of time. This is not a bad thing. In fact, I encourage it. The phenomenon can best be explained by describing the experience of one of my former students.

A graduate student was a developing jazz alto saxophonist. He showed potential and talent but had lots of room for growth in most areas. Remarkably, he had never heard Phil Woods. I lent him a few recordings and he was “blown away.” He began acquiring every Phil Woods recording he could get his hand on. He ended up with all the same albums I had, plus many I had not even heard of. He transcribed at least one solo a week for almost two years. Not only did he play along with the recording, but he lifted his favorite phrases, learned them in all keys, and did his best to duplicate the sound, phrasing, articulation, etc. of Phil Woods. Needless to say, he never sounded exactly like Phil Woods. No one could. But this student improved more in two years than any I have ever encountered. His love of Phil Woods’ playing gave him everything he needed, the example, the material, and most importantly, the inspiration.

The Point After [iii]

Once in a while a student comes along that just seems to have no obstacles. In many ways, the graduate student mentioned above was one such student. What do we do with such a student? The worst thing we could do is to try to lead him or her down the same path we took just because “that’s the way we did it.” There are as many ways of learning jazz improvisation, as there are people. Our responsibility as teachers is to inspire, to encourage, and to have enough techniques and strategies available to be able to help the students find their own way.

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[i] These methods will not be identified as some kind of football play, as that metaphor has been carried far enough. “Carried.” Get it?

[ii] The question of whether classical literature is required to achieve this technical control could consume ten articles of this length. I would just say that I feel that I am a better and more versatile musician for having studied traditional repertoire.

[iii] Okay, one more.

