

**LISTENING THROUGH THE MUSIC:
IMPROV AS A TOOL FOR CONNECTION**

WORKSHOP 1

About this Workshop

Our ability to communicate and collaborate across cultural and linguistic differences can determine the success of many of our endeavors, from the assembly of a project staff to effective mediation. Certain approaches to music can serve as powerful tools for such listening and connection.

This introductory workshop explores the three essential ingredients for such collaborations: the abilities to tune in, connect, and respond spontaneously and meaningfully to one another. Exciting, quickly learned music improv and movement games offer ways to cultivate these abilities, setting the stage for effective group improvisation, both in the realm of music and beyond.

About this Summary

This is an experiential workshop. The games are best learned by participating as a student would. This hand-out offers a recapitulation of the games we played. While it includes examples of the instructions I gave in leading these games, these should be modified according to your group's level and to your own experience of the games.

NOTE: To play the games as we have played them, you will need to be comfortable with very basic drumming. Alternatives are suggested for those who do not feel comfortable doing this.

Ages: 14 years old — adult

length: 90 minutes

Group size: maximum of 15

Ingredients

- ✚ A space large enough for unobstructed movement. A dance floor or carpet is ideal.
- ✚ A hand drum for each participant. If hand drums are not available, substitute with recycled percussion instrument (e.g. plastic water jug, plastic bucket, pots, etc).
See our workshop summary for MAKING YOUR GROOVE on tips for turning ordinary household objects into exciting instruments.
- ✚ Your own comfort with basic hand drumming and with providing a simple, steady rhythm for the group OR



- ✚ A stereo and recorded music: Choose instrumental music that has a moderate, walking tempo in 4/4 or 2/4 meter.
- ✚ *Optional:* a recording device.

I. ICE BREAKER

There are many great ice breakers, and you may have favorites to use. This is a simple name game that encourages participants to loosen up and have fun while maintaining a safe space.

General Goals:

- Learn each other's names
 - Become comfortable with simple risk-free movement
 - Begin with an easy, fast-paced movement game
1. Facilitator: "In this game, each one of us is going to say our name and make a gesture. The group is going to copy say that person's name and make their gesture back to them."
*Model with your name and make a gesture. The group echoes your name and gesture.
Go around circle.*
 2. Facilitator: "This time, say your name and make your gesture. Then say someone else's name and make their gesture. That "activates" them. They then say their name, make their own gesture, and then someone else's name and gesture, "activating" that person."
Model how to do this! Now that participants realize that they will have to recall each other's names and gestures, you may wish to repeat step 1.
 3. Facilitator: "This time, I'm going to start walking to someone else as soon as I say my own name and make my gesture. As I walk I'm going to say that person's name and make my gesture. And by the time I reach them, they have to be off to someone else. I'm going to take their spot."
Model for the group.

Encourage the group to keep the movement going at a fast pace.

Focus on learning two or three people's names, not everyone's. Succeed by limiting yourself and getting them right!



II. GO STOP MELT

Objectives:

- Enhance group cohesion through development of listening, watching and sensing.
- Foster teamwork and cooperation skills
- Cultivate individual leadership
- Practice taking direction from others
- Experience group synchronization
- Develop ability to maintain connection while contributing different elements within a team

Phase 1.

Facilitator: “This game is called Go, Stop, Melt. What do you think you are going to do when I say go?”
Participants begin to walk in the space, moving at various speeds. Some may explore different types of movement, e.g. a light jogging or jumping.
Allow the group to experience “going” for a few moments.

Facilitator: “Stop!”
All movement stops. The group remains “frozen” for a moment.

Facilitator: “Melt”
Participants slowly “melt,” descending to the floor by bending knees and torso and letting head and arms hang. Finally they lie on the ground and cease moving.
Allow them to remain in this position for a moment.

Facilitator: “Go”
The group resumes movement

Repeat the Go-Stop-Melt sequence with different intervals between each command.

Phase 2.

Facilitator: “If I tap you, you become the leader. You tell the group to go, stop, or melt. Once you’ve given two or three commands, find a way to secretly tap someone else so they become the leader. Ready? Go!”
The group begins moving and the facilitator taps someone. That person gives a few commands and then taps someone else. In this way, the leadership is passed around the room.

After a few minutes, signal the group to stop (e.g. by ringing of a bell, saying “freeze,” etc)

Phase 3.

Facilitator: “This time, anyone can be the leader at any time. Whenever you want to, you can tell the group to stop, go, or melt. Your job is to make it work, and to make it feel good. Everyone understand?”



There will most likely be some chaos. Let it continue for a few moments, to see whether it will change and to allow participants to experience this type of movement and command-giving.

After a few minutes, stop the action with the same signal as before.

Facilitator: “Is this working?”
Members of the group indicate that it is not working.

Facilitator: “What can make it better?”
Allow individuals to propose ideas and resume the game.

Once suggestions are attempted, stop the group

Facilitator: “Is this working?”

Allow for more suggestions and attempts. If no one suggests it after a few of these discussions, suggest that the group slow down, allowing for space between each command.

Phase 4.

Facilitator: “Now, no one says anything, not with their voices, and not with their hands, not with type of sound. But you still have to go, stop and melt at exactly the same time. Your job is to make it work and to make it feel good. Everyone understand?”

*The group begins to move. At first, the movement may be disconnected.
Allow this to continue for some time and observe the evolving group dynamics.*

Facilitator (if necessary): “Look up. You are part of a community.”

Brief Discussion.

It is often useful to process the experiences in *Go, Stop Melt*.

Suggested questions include:

- ✚ What worked?
- ✚ What didn't work?
- ✚ Who felt like a leader? Who felt like a follower? Who felt like both?
- ✚ What's the point? Why are we playing this game in a workshop in musical improvisation?



II. STEP THE BEAT — FOR FACILITATORS COMFORTABLE ACCOMPANYING THE GROUP WITH BASIC DRUMMING

NOTE: If you are not comfortable with basic drumming, please skip to “Step The Beat — Using Recorded Music.

Objectives:

- Develop an awareness for the even beat of your footsteps.
 - Further develop an awareness of other participants and arrive at a group tempo.
 - Be able to feel the beat inside, feeling it when the music stops as well.
 - Be able to stop and start together
1. Facilitator: “Take a walk around the space. Focus on your own walking tempo. What kind of walk do you have right now?”
Allow the group to walk for a minute before giving the next instruction.

Facilitator: “Concentrate on the evenness – the steadiness – of your walk.”
 2. Facilitator: “Shift your attention to those around you. Gradually find a common tempo. Give me some sort of subtle sign when you think you’ve found the group’s tempo.”
 3. Once the group’s tempo is established, the facilitator begins accompanying the group on a drum, playing simply and being sure to use the group’s tempo. For an example, see below.



An example of a drumming pattern for walking

4. Facilitator (keep drumming): “When I say ‘hands’, stop walking and feel that beat coming up through your feet and into your hands. Pulse your hands on the beat.”

“Hands!”

If possible, give this command on the last beat of a measure, so the stop happens on the first beat of the next measure.

The group stops and pulses the beat in the hands.



Facilitator: “When I say feet, bring that pulse down from your hands and back into your feet and step the beat.”

“Feet!”

If possible, give this command on the last beat of a measure, so the group starts walking on the first beat of the next measure.

The group resumes its walking.

Repeat with various body parts, returning to the walking after each one.

Facilitator: “When I say ‘pulse,’ stop walking and pulse any part of the body.

“Pulse!”

If possible, give this command on the last beat of a measure, so the stop happens on the first beat of the next measure.

At times, lower the volume of your drumming to see whether the group can maintain the beat without your help. If so, remove the drumming altogether for a few measures, and then bring it back in.

5. Facilitator: “When I say ‘long,’ stop walking and make a long gesture with your body. Keep feeling the beat inside!”

“Long!”

If possible, give this command on the last beat of a measure, so the stop happens on the first beat of the next measure.

The group stops and makes a long gesture with their torsos, arms or legs.

“Feet!”

Repeat one or two times.

Facilitator: “On the next ‘Long,’ connect with someone across the room. Find a way to let them know you’re with them.”

Alternate walking, pulsing and ‘long.’ At times, lower the volume of your drumming to see whether the group can maintain the beat without your help. If so, remove the drumming altogether. To gauge how well the group has internalized the beat, DO NOT bring the drum back in when the group resumes its walking. See how long the group can maintain the beat without your help.



6. Facilitator: “Walk around the room. You can walk, pulse or make a long motion when you feel like it. Use these motions to interact with the other members of the group.”
Observe the group’s dynamics and interactions.

Brief Discussion.

Suggested questions include:

- ✚ What’s the point? Why would we play this game in a workshop on musical improvisation?
- ✚ Can you still feel that beat inside you? Show me...

II (ALT). STEP THE BEAT — USING RECORDED MUSIC

NOTE: If you have just accompanied the group for Step the Beat skip to the next game!

Objectives:

- Develop an awareness for the even beat of your footsteps.
 - Be able to feel the beat inside, feeling it when the music stops as well.
 - Be able to stop and start together
1. Facilitator: “Take a walk around the space. Focus on your own walking tempo. What kind of walk do you have right now?”
Allow the group to walk for a minute before giving the next instruction.

Facilitator: “Concentrate on the evenness – the steadiness – of your walk.”

2. *Turn on the recorded music and fade it in.*

Facilitator: “Find the tempo in this music and walk to its beat. Keep focusing on the evenness of your footsteps.”

Allow the group to listen and step for a brief interval.

3. “When I say ‘hands’, stop walking and feel that beat coming up through your feet and into your hands. Pulse your hands on the beat.”

“Hands!”

If possible, give this command on the last beat of a measure, so the stop happens on the first beat of the next measure.

The group stops and pulses the beat in the hands.



Facilitator: “When I say feet, bring that pulse down from your hands and back into your feet and step the beat.”

“Feet!”

If possible, give this command on the last beat of a measure, so the group starts walking on the first beat of the next measure.

The group resumes its walking.

Repeat with various body parts, returning to the walking after each one.

Facilitator: “When I say ‘pulse,’ stop walking and pulse any part of the body.

“Pulse!”

If possible, give this command on the last beat of a measure, so the stop happens on the first beat of the next measure.

At times, lower the volume of the music to see whether the group can maintain the beat without your help. If so, fade the music all the way out. You may have to stop and re-start the music in order not to run out!

4. Facilitator: “When I say ‘long’, stop walking and make a long gesture with your body. Keep feeling the beat inside!”

“Long!”

If possible, give this command on the last beat of a measure, so the stop happens on the first beat of the next measure.

The group stops and makes a long gesture with their torsos, arms or legs.

“Feet!”

Repeat one or two times.

Facilitator: “On the next ‘Long,’ connect with someone across the room. Find a way to let them know you’re with them”

Alternate walking, pulsing and ‘long.’ At times, fade the volume of the music to see whether the group can maintain the beat without your help. Fade the music all the way out. To gauge how well the group has internalized the beat, DO NOT bring the music back in when the group resumes its walking. See how long the group maintain the beat on its own, without the music.



5. *Resume the music.*

Facilitator: “Walk around the room and interact, without touching. You can walk, pulse and or make a long motion when you feel like it.”

Observe the group’s dynamics and interactions.

Brief Discussion.

Suggested questions include:

- ✚ What’s the point? Why would we play this game in a workshop on musical improvisation?
- ✚ Can you still feel that beat inside you? Show me...

III. PATTERNS WITH DRUMS

Goals:

- Be able to play short patterns on the drum
- Remember the patterns that you play
- As a group, be able to echo patterns played by others
- Be able to work together, layering one pattern on top of others
- Be able to conduct the group, signaling loud, soft, start, stop.

1. *Sit in circle. Hand out frame drums. Facilitator leads brief echo game MAKING SURE to use the walking tempo from previous exercise. Keep patterns four-beats long to establish pattern length. After a while repeat one pattern. Keep verbal instructions to a minimum. Try to lead with no talking at all, using body language to communicate to the participants to echo you.*

2. *Facilitator points to a participant. Participant plays a pattern. The group echoes. Go back and forth between people, coming back to people. When a participant recalls the pattern s/he played, affirm their good memory. This will encourage other participants to return to remember one pattern and return to it each time you point to them. The important thing is to stick to one pattern — but it is best to allow the participants to “arrive” at this on their own, rather than telling them to do so. Keep pointing to individuals that have already played as you go around the circle, to reinforce their memory and maintain the group’s attention (if you might call on anyone, at any time, they must pay attention!)*

4. *Facilitator points to a participant (choose one with good beat) and uses a hand motion to prevent the group from echoing. Facilitator points to the same participant and that participant plays her/his pattern. Use a “round and round” finger motion to signal that person to keep playing in a loop. Choose another participant (with solid beat!) and point to them, bringing them in, and motion to them to loop their pattern.*







Using your hands, gesture to the two playing participants to watch and listen to one another. After a moment, point to a third participant, signal them to loop their pattern, and gesture to the three playing participants to watch and listen to one another.





Gradually bring in other participants, layering the patterns. Do not be afraid to take participants out if their pattern does not work — some patterns are good for the base and some are ornamentation. Bring these in later!

Facilitator (if needed): “Listen carefully to one another. If your pattern doesn’t work, adjust it so it fits. Keep feeling that beat inside you. What’s that walking beat we had? That’s your anchor – stick to it!”

2. *Once several participants are playing, model simple conducting*



-  *Use clear eye contact and body language to let participants know who you are conducting*
-  *By raising your outstretched palm, you can communicate an increase/decrease in volume.*
-  *Make up a clear hand signal that will communicate “stop”*
-  *To bring someone in, count to four on the beat (you can use fingers to count them in, rather than speaking). On the fourth beat raise your arms and shoulders high and inhale. On the downbeat of the next measure, Exhale with a strong “phew” and bring your hand back down, pointing to that person. Be very big!*

As a conductor, model how to:

-  *Conduct individuals, telling them to play louder or softer.*
-  *Conduct any portion of the group.*
-  *Tell any portion of the group to stop/ start again*
-  *Once all are playing, experiment with textures. Try taking individuals out, leaving only a few in, creating a “breakdown.” Gradually add people back in*

3. *As conductor, find an ending for the groove.*

4. *Brief discussion:*

-  *What worked?*
-  *What can we improve next time?*

5. *Lead the group in practicing conducting a stop and start, and an increase/decrease in volume, as you just did. Then invite a guest conductor from the group.*

Repeat with different guest conductors.



NOTE: If a simple recording device is available, it is a good idea to record each improvisation. This is an excellent way to identify strong areas and ones that need improvement. It will also act as a focusing tool, if one is needed.

ABOUT GUY MENDILOW

Guy Mendilow is a citizen of Israel, Great Britain and the United States. The son of a musician-turned-professor, Mendilow spent his boyhood migrating from country to country. Wherever his family landed, music played a central role in forming connections: In living room song circles, whether in Jerusalem or Johannesburg, Mendilow saw how strangers could share a musical bond despite extreme differences; as the guest of a controversial bi-racial congregation in apartheid South Africa, he witnessed how song could bring a divided people together despite horrific conditions; and, while a member of the renowned American Boychoir, he learned how music could transform twenty-six middle school boys into a team tight enough to tour internationally and perform in venues like Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center. Since age fifteen, Mendilow has continued to immerse himself in new cultures, seeking opportunities to learn languages and collaborate with instrument builders and musicians. To date, he has lived, taught and performed in South Africa, Israel, Taiwan, Canada, Mexico, Brazil and the United States. He sings in six tongues and is fluent in four.

As an educator, Mendilow is committed to sharing the ways that music can foster communication and interpersonal connection. He works with international peacemaking organizations like **Seeds of Peace**, using music as an aid to mediation between Palestinians, Jordanians, Egyptians and Israelis, and with youth leadership projects like the **Breakthrough Collaborative**. He has led workshops, residencies and teacher trainings at schools across the United States and Brazil and presents at such conferences as the New Jersey Montessori Administrators Council Conference, the Conference on Alternatives in Jewish Education, and the Conference on Social Healing through the Arts in Boston. Mendilow holds a Masters in Music and international Dalcroze Eurhythmics certification from the Longy School of Music in Cambridge, MA.

