

Rationale for Jazz Education: Todd Wilkinson

As an educator I am convinced that jazz and music education are fundamental components in student development. I believe that musical knowledge and appreciation are the birthright of every child and am convinced that jazz education is essential to the health of my community.

Jazz improvisation and performance create a simile for the relationship of the individual and community. Jazz is democratic in character, which is why it could only have been created in America. By combining solo improvisation with group interaction, jazz represents the essence of the democratic community process. Jazz moves, changes, and alerts the individual and the community simultaneously through task-oriented experiences, informing the *one* to the *many*, and vice versa. In this way the jazz metaphor can be woven into the very fiber of our communal lives and spirit. Jazz enhances one's understanding of self, and in turn helps us to understand others. Jazz is plastic and tolerant, yet works within a framework of rule and tradition. Jazz is a language, complete with nuance, metaphor and cliché; the more one invests into its perception, the more one receives. Jazz is social by nature; it is a musical 'conference call,' where individuals negotiate in real time within the context of a group. For these reasons, jazz education can help bring about more cohesion and contentment when understood and appreciated by the larger community.

Unlike most student coursework, jazz education isn't dependent on *impressing* information - in most subjects students are given material and the better they can repeat it, the higher their grade. *Individuality* and *personal touch* are generally discouraged. Jazz education is about *expressing* information - students are encouraged to put their own interpretation into the material. Jazz improvisation is one of the highest forms of individual expression, where investigation, risk-taking, and exploration are encouraged. It is through their own self-expression that students truly come to appreciate meaning and content in the expression of others. In mastering the jazz language, every student has the opportunity to progress from imitation into assimilation, and hopefully, achieve an appreciation of innovation.

A jazz performance is dependent on improvisation, and improvisation requires a continual process. Though preparation is essential, the essence of jazz improvisation is in the doing: the footsteps not the destination. In other words, in improvisation the process is a main feature of the product. The *intent* is almost as important as the *outcome*, and the successful improvised performance is a satisfactory solution itself. The act of performing is just as important as the performance, and this is why jazz is always better when observed *live*. Jazz is bound-up in the moment. The jazz experience is very much like the person who fishes not just to eat, but for the pleasure of fishing, throwing the catch back in the water so they can return to fish some more. Like a conversation, jazz requires astute listening skills, a sense of understanding, empathy and timing.

Jazz is realized through interaction, and we all become like the people with whom we associate. Peer association modifies our personality; therefore if our children are going to become academically strong they should be spending time in front of other successful students. The Music Educators National Conference reports that students in the arts outperform their peers between 41 and 64 points higher in the College Board SAT tests. Students in jazz ensemble tend to be quick-minded and smart. They make

Dr. Todd R. Wilkinson – Director of Jazz Studies, Ottawa University, Ottawa, KS

intellectual connections, usually develop an excellent sense of humor, and often become sensitive leaders.

Jazz performance develops the appetite for learning and creates habits of self-discipline, and personal tenacity. These qualities then carry over into every facet of behavior in school and the community. Jazz musicians are disciplined in and become skilled at concentration, alertness, memory, and self-control. And since jazz improvisation involves risk-taking, it therefore takes a certain amount of courage and self-confidence.

There is a strong correlation between music and the disciplines of science and math: music theory and performance uses the same reasoning process. There are also important team-building skills. Jazz groups have integral listening requirements that create group and self-awareness. The performers must develop of motor skills, hand/eye coordination, and stylistic elegance, much as sports teams run drills, plays, and techniques. Jazz also encourages us to further use our knowledge for higher callings, namely in assessing values, ethics, creative decision making, and problem solving. Jazz is not so much the *answer*, but is more like a set of *questions* requiring individual and/or group responses. Thus the more profound the music is to the performers, the more exciting the music is to the listeners, and both performers and listeners become bound together, and culture develops.

A major goal of public education is to produce healthy, happy, and prosperous citizens and an enjoyable community process. Jazz education hones the mental tools that are crucial to this goal. The following intellectual qualities are enhanced by jazz education.

Creativity:

Creativity is the *wellspring* of finding and choosing possibilities. To become successfully creative, these 'mental muscles' must be trained and exercised often. Creativity takes practice and demands choice. Jazz supports the intellectual wonder, imagination, appreciation, and sensitivity needed for the creative thinking and assessing possibilities. It offers up individual alternatives to what initially may appear the only obvious solution. Jazz improvisation stimulates the imagination and give rise to a highly intellectual activity we call *joy*.

Communication:

Jazz is a highly communicative and extremely spontaneous. It requires the individual members to listen carefully to one another, spontaneously producing music that has collective merit and that creates a unified whole. It is an invitation of welcome to all involved. Even the audience can affect the outcome through their responses. Jazz is historically an aural tradition: a folk art passed from master to apprentice: teacher to student. In this way jazz musicians have become a family, sensitive to traditions and reliant on socio-cultural threads. The study of jazz history reinforces our heritage and informs us about our modern American experience. For this reason alone, jazz is beneficial in school and community environments.

Since jazz is a musical language beyond words, it can only be explained verbally with musical terminology. To quote an old adage, "Talking about music is similar to dancing about architecture." As an example, dance has its descriptive limitations, because its unique abstract expression is sufficient only to describe the dance itself. This is a

Dr. Todd R. Wilkinson – Director of Jazz Studies, Ottawa University, Ottawa, KS

function of all art. This is the true beauty of expression. Thus there is no substitute for the jazz performance. It is truly unique and independent of outside definitions. BY it's very nature, music expresses those things that cannot possibly be put into words, and it is especially effective at communicating emotional states. Music elicits incredible emotional reactions, without it motion pictures would be bland. No words or visual display can come close to the emotional impact music conveys. Jazz communicates at the deepest levels of our consciousness; it touches our souls.

Critical Assessment:

Music is one of the key areas where individuals can develop a consistency between intellectual and emotional understanding. It forces us to face reality and deal directly with truth. As a student, there is no way to lie about, nor ignore the result of a performance. However, improvisation also proves that *mistakes* are relative to the context in which they are made, and better be labeled as *feedback*. Jazz gives us the chance to bridge the cognitive and affective data of life, and I feel this is the true recipe for *genius*. Jazz allows us to conceptualize, not just respond to stimulus. Jazz helps to create formulas instead of just solutions, allowing us to be proactive rather than simply reactive. Jazz performance opens the mind and helps us to avoid tunnel vision. Jazz education develops discerning opinions, leading one into quality of character.

Commitment:

Jazz performance is never casual, not even for a second, and it's is not possible to be partially committed during a jazz performance. To play jazz at a high level requires constant intensity, total participation, and focus of attention like no other subject. Mastering improvisation teaches the student persistence and returns rewards for not giving in to frustration. Like sport, jazz is a performance art requiring years of dedication, practice, and repetition. A strong work ethic is one of the greatest personal attributes demanded by our community, and is one of the key benefits of a jazz and music education. Through persistence one experiences tribulation, and by persevering, one eventually develops patience, tolerance, and compassion. These in turn are essential qualities of wisdom.

Positive Self-Worth:

Every individual is unique and exhibits potential for self-fulfillment. Developing a personalized artistic signature offers us a special place in life. Jazz gives us a vehicle to express our individuality while engaging our fellow beings. In a jazz performance we can affirm that we do make a difference, and that we do have value. Jazz expression gives our life meaning. It bolsters our self-identity by affirming our value as a vital member of the group, the team, and the community, and through this awareness jazz encourages us to be responsible in our actions as a contributing member. Many young people lack self-esteem. They are shy, hesitate to ask questions and are reluctant to defend their own convictions. If their musical talents are developed, nurtured, and sought-out, then their internal sense of value increases, and they have worth. Self-worth is a very important component of a fruitful life. Self-worth gives us confidence, allowing us the humility to admit mistakes and make corrections, or stick to our convictions and defend them when they are cross-examined.

Just as there can be no music without education, I believe there can be no education without music. It is my mission to provide a high quality jazz experience for my students and community.

Dr. Todd R. Wilkinson – Director of Jazz Studies, Ottawa University, Ottawa, KS