The standards indicate that you should be teaching improvisation but you don't have a clue how to start! Relax. The process doesn't have to be that difficult. As with the cultivation of any skill, the key is to break the task down into sequential learning steps. You know how to do that!

The first key to nurturing improvisers in your classroom is to start at the beginning—rhythm comes before pitch. Small chunks, such as 2-beat rhythmic building blocks or 4-beat motives come before 8-beat phrases. Body percussion is the perfect instrument for working with rhythm. Clapping, patting, snapping, and stamping offer a variety of timbres that engage the whole body in music-making.

I suggest beginning every music class with 4-beat body percussion echo patterns, led by the teacher. Four sets of 4-beat echo patterns create a 32-beat chorus, a standard form in our culture. After a few weeks of teacher-led rhythm patterns, students will be ready to improvise 4-beat patterns of their own.

Integrate improvisation with the song literature and learning that occurs in your classroom daily. In first grade, we always begin with sol and mi, quarter note and two eighth notes. “Cobbler, Cobbler” is a typical early first grade song.

Once the students can read the rhythm and the sol-mi melody, you could add the steady beat accompaniment on bass xylophone and/or bass metallophone. Reading and singing a simple sol-mi melody and accompanying it with a steady beat are appropriate goals for early first grade.

Let’s add some improvisation to the learning process. Divide the class in half. Half of the students learn to play the following pattern on glockenspiel or other barred instrument. If you don’t have barred instruments, have them sing the pattern with the text, “Cobbler, cobbler, mend my shoe.”

Once the glockenspiel players can play their motive, proceed through the following steps with the teacher first modeling each step of the process and then the students improvising, playing rhythm sticks or wood blocks.

1. Fill in the four beats of rest with four quarter notes.
2. Fill in with four pairs of eighth notes.
3. Improvise for four beats, using a mixture of quarter notes and eighth notes.
4. If the students are ready, add quarter rest to their choices.

The key to teaching improvisation to elementary students is to start at the beginning with clear, solid structures.
Once you’ve been through the process, put the improvisation together as a B section with the song in ABA form. Trade groups so that the barred instrument players have an opportunity to improvise on rhythm sticks and vice versa.

You can use this B section structure as a model for creating 4-beat rhythmic improvisation activities with many of the songs you teach. “Pease Porridge Hot” uses a sol-mi-do tone set.

Once the students have become competent at improvising 4-beat rhythm patterns, you’re ready to work with melody. You can do this with sol-mi, sol-mi-la, sol-mi-do, and do-re-mi melodies. “Closet Key,” is a do-re-mi song/game that is very popular with elementary music students. They learn the song by rote while playing the game in a seated circle.

The contrasting B Section is designed for 4-beat rhythmic improvisation. Work through the same process as with “Cobbler,” except the 4-beat question motive is spoken, rather than played.

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song. Students sing softly when the guesser is far away from the closet key. They crescendo as the guesser gets closer to the closet key. At the end of the song the guesser guesses who is hiding the closet key and another student becomes the new guesser.

Use the following improvisational structure for do-re-mi 4-beat improvisations on barred instruments. Students sing the 4-beat question and then improvise their do-re-mi instrumental answers. As always, the teacher provides a model and the students imitate that model as they grow their skills.

Once the students have mastered improvising 4-beat patterns, they are ready for 8-beat improvisation. Remember that rhythmic work comes before melodic work. Once they have mastered two- and three-pitch improvisations, students are ready to work with the pentatonic tone set (do-re-mi-sol-la). The following song, composed to a traditional rhyme, provides a playful structure for rhythmic, and then melodic improvisation in 8-beat phrases.

### Whenever I Go Out to Walk

**Melody and arr. by Sams**

- Teacher plays eight steady beats on guiro or other percussion instrument following each sung phrase. Students travel like ducks and geese.
- Teacher models how to improvise 8-beat patterns during those breaks, using quarter notes, two eighth notes, and quarter rest.
- Students improvise (clapping first, then quacking like ducks/geese) while traveling.
- Consider student rhythmic improvisation on guiro.
- When students are successful with the rhythmic improvisation, consider vocal or barred instrument improvisation using sol-mi, then sol-mi-la. First do sol-fa with hand signs and then switch to “quack,“ if you are improvising with the singing voice. If your students are developmentally ready, consider improvisation on do-re-mi or the full pentatonic tone set.

Once the students are capable of improvising 8-beat phrases with the pentatonic tone set, gradually increase the rhythmic and melodic vocabulary used in the song material and the improvisations. Select high-quality songs that provide simple, yet inspiring models for improvisation.

As shown through the songs and steps outlined above, the key to teaching improvisation to elementary students is to start at the beginning with clear, solid structures. Don't ask too much too soon. Mastery at every step indicates that the students are ready for more. Don't move forward until your students demonstrate that they are ready for a more challenging activity.

Giving your students the gift of improvisation opens up a whole world of music-making. The joys of spontaneous music-making are well worth any failures along the way. And yes, there will be failures. You can't learn and grow without failing. Make your classroom a place where taking risks and failing are important steps in the learning process. And don't forget to have fun!

**Ready. Set. Improvise!**

After 31 years in the music classroom, Roger Sams retired; he continues to work as a frequent conference presenter and is a Music Education Specialist at Music Is Elementary. Sams will present at the 2014 TMEA Clinic/Convention as an Elementary Division Featured Clinician.

This article is based on “Structures for Improvisation in Early Elementary General Music” published in the October/November 2013 issue of *Triad*, the Ohio Music Educators Association Journal and is printed here with their permission.

For more developmentally appropriate structures for improvisation and composition, consider *Purposeful Pathways: Possibilities for the Elementary Music Classroom* by Roger Sams and Beth Ann Hepburn.

Thanks to Kathy Petree, Music Teacher at White Rock Elementary (Richardson ISD), for submitting the image of Caroline Ilti featured on the first page. Photo by Delene Ephraim.