



Ollie Tunmer gives a STOMP workshop

FROM BRIGHTON TO BRAZIL

Percussion teacher Ollie Tunmer discusses what he has learned in his fascinating career so far about providing inspirational workshops

The power of music to inspire people from diverse and disparate communities to learn together is a powerful motivator in my teaching. Most of my work has been done in a number of highly varied non-classroom-based contexts, from regular one-to-one drumkit lessons in Brighton to a three-week-long 'junk percussion' summer school at the Children's Museum in Amman, Jordan. The latter of these involved working with ambassadors' children alongside homeless orphans who spoke no English.

Alongside this peripatetic work, I have recently become a secondary classroom music teacher. All of these contexts have brought their own challenges and rewards. It has been a huge honour to facilitate the shared work, play and creative exploration of people of many ages, nationalities, backgrounds and

abilities, all united by the common language of music.

BEGINNINGS

My first experience of teaching was as a workshop leader with Brighton's longest-running Brazilian percussion-based group, Carnival Collective. I had recently graduated from Kingston University and had then traveled across Brazil playing music, culminating in a performance at the Rio de Janeiro carnival. Whilst I felt confident enough in my knowledge of the subject to teach complete beginners, the process of actually passing that knowledge on was not as easy as I'd initially assumed. As I've since come to realise, when you work with pupils

who don't use their brains and bodies in this way every day, you need to equip them with some coping strategies to ensure a collective sense of pulse, memory for different rhythms and the opportunity to engage meta-cognitively with the musical material. I was fortunate enough to work with a group of more experienced facilitators from the band, from whom I picked up the following useful techniques:

- » Getting a group to play a repeated rhythm with their eyes shut encourages them to listen – not just to themselves, but to each other as well. This tactic improves the teaching of rhythm, and, if used over a number of sessions, also helps to develop individual and ensemble time-keeping skills.
- » Use of phonetics (using the rhythm of words as a tool for learning rhythms and for composition).
- » Assigning participants teaching or leading roles – making them responsible for their own learning and putting them in a position of ownership of their music-making.

A little while into my Carnival Collective work I also started delivering individual and small-group drumkit and percussion lessons for the local music service. I was observed once a term but largely left to my own devices. The grade books available at the time provided teaching material, but didn't really relate to drumming in the real world. I suggested practicing the rudiments of drumming along to music – playing triplets along to Bob Marley or practicing paradiddles around the drum kit to some heavy rock songs, for instance. My pupils found this to be much more fun! It also improved their fluency across the whole of their repertoire.

TEACHING THE STOMP WAY

In late 2004, a friend who was doing some research for a new show by the guys from STOMP told me that they were looking for new workshop leaders. Having been a fan of the show since watching it as a child, I jumped at the chance. A few of us did a short audition that included a bit of body percussion and some jamming on a bin! On day one, all ready for a day of bins and brooms, we actually started by discussing what kind of 'learners' we were. This was the first time I'd come across the idea of kinesthetic, auditory and visual

learning. We explored some of the possibilities of teaching the same idea in a variety of different ways. We'd teach a particular rhythm purely by aural repetition, and then explain it in terms of Western notation. These two approaches were always combined with physically playing the rhythm, though sometimes we'd just listen to the rhythm a couple of times first. As someone who is classically trained and who has also learned to play samba – which is an aural tradition – I found it fascinating to analyse and observe the differences between my own learning preferences and those of my colleagues.

At around that time, someone quoted this Chinese proverb to me: 'Tell me, and I'll forget. Show me, and I'll remember. Involve me, and I'll understand.'

The influence of these ideas has prompted me to make my teaching as active as possible, regardless of what I'm teaching. The idea of relating taught material to the interests and experiences of the workshop participants became a key idea at this point in my practice. I remember observing the STOMP workshop trainer working with a group of excluded teenagers. He found out that one of them was a boxer – and proceeded to combine boxing and rhythm to create a body percussion piece that was as interesting to watch as it was to listen to. This also helped in tackling the insecurities that the teenagers felt about doing something that was outside their comfort zone, by utilising their prior learning.

A little while later, I was asked to join the new show that my friend had been researching for – 'The Lost and Found Orchestra'. A few months on, I got a call to say that the bosses had heard that we'd been learning the routines in school car parks during our lunch breaks, and wanted us to learn the show properly. I did the London show, the European tour and workshops for



'Wow' factor: Tunmer

about two years, and have since been involved with the show when my schedule has allowed.

INSPIRE WORKS AND BEYOND

Following this, I got involved with Inspire Works, providers of world percussion workshops. They combine the use of phonetics and a three-stage system of learning rhythms:

- » Say/sing the words in rhythm
- » Say and clap the words and the rhythm
- » Say and play the rhythm on the instrument

Whilst this process is not new in itself – it has its roots in Kodály and Dalcroze pedagogy, and doubtless also in the aural traditions preceding them – Inspire Works use key words that are related to the topic: instrument

names, relevant city / country names etc. This allows for the rhythms and for the vocabulary to be learnt quickly. Key words can also be applied as compositional tools for creating drum breaks and for developing literacy skills. One example that I use to teach a rhythm for the agogô bell (a double cowbell) is 'Let the groove flow on the agogô'.

To develop my career options further, I then decided to study for a modular PGCE in Secondary Music at Canterbury Christ Church University, which allowed me to continue workshops and gigging. The work allowed me to analyse teaching and learning in new ways while also developing my workshop practice at the same time. Some of the key ideas that came from this were:

- » Using targeted and varied questioning (based on Bloom's Taxonomy) as a method of assessment for learning.
- » Including a balance of composition, performance and listening in every lesson, wherever possible.

I have now been teaching part-time in a secondary school in North London for almost two years. I will be leaving classroom teaching in July to focus on workshops and gigs, which have become a far greater part of my professional life since moving to London. My workshops are tailored to suit a mixture of aims and outcomes, but all contain the following elements:

- » Development of instrumental, aural and where required, compositional skills
- » Giving participants a sense of achievement – a sense of what they have learned and how to develop it further
- » Using cultural understanding to create cross-curricular links (looking at where the music has come from and how it has developed).

I try to present workshops in an entertaining way, with some 'wow' factor. As well as showing off a bit, modeling what participants are aiming for can benefit the learning process hugely. Ensemble music-making can have an incredible effect on group cohesion and self-esteem. I have observed participants who clearly felt rather awkward at the start of a session who, by the end of the session, had developed friendships as well as musical and communication skills. [MT](#)

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The Lost and Found Orchestra