

The Importance of Improvisation Within the Rhythm2Recovery Model

One of the big changes in focus of our therapeutic approach using rhythmic music and reflective discussions has been the move away from teaching structured rhythm parts towards improvisation. When I first began utilising rhythmic music in my practice I followed the teaching methods of my drum instructors, teaching rhythm parts and putting these together to form rhythm songs. I was careful not to teach culturally specific rhythms in order to avoid 'cultural appropriation', working instead with universal patterns common across cultures such as the Heartbeat rhythm. I had very limited exposure to working with improvisation, other than through my involvement in the community drum-circle world, but that small insight, inspired by the work of [Arthur Hull](#) has gradually come to dominate my practice.

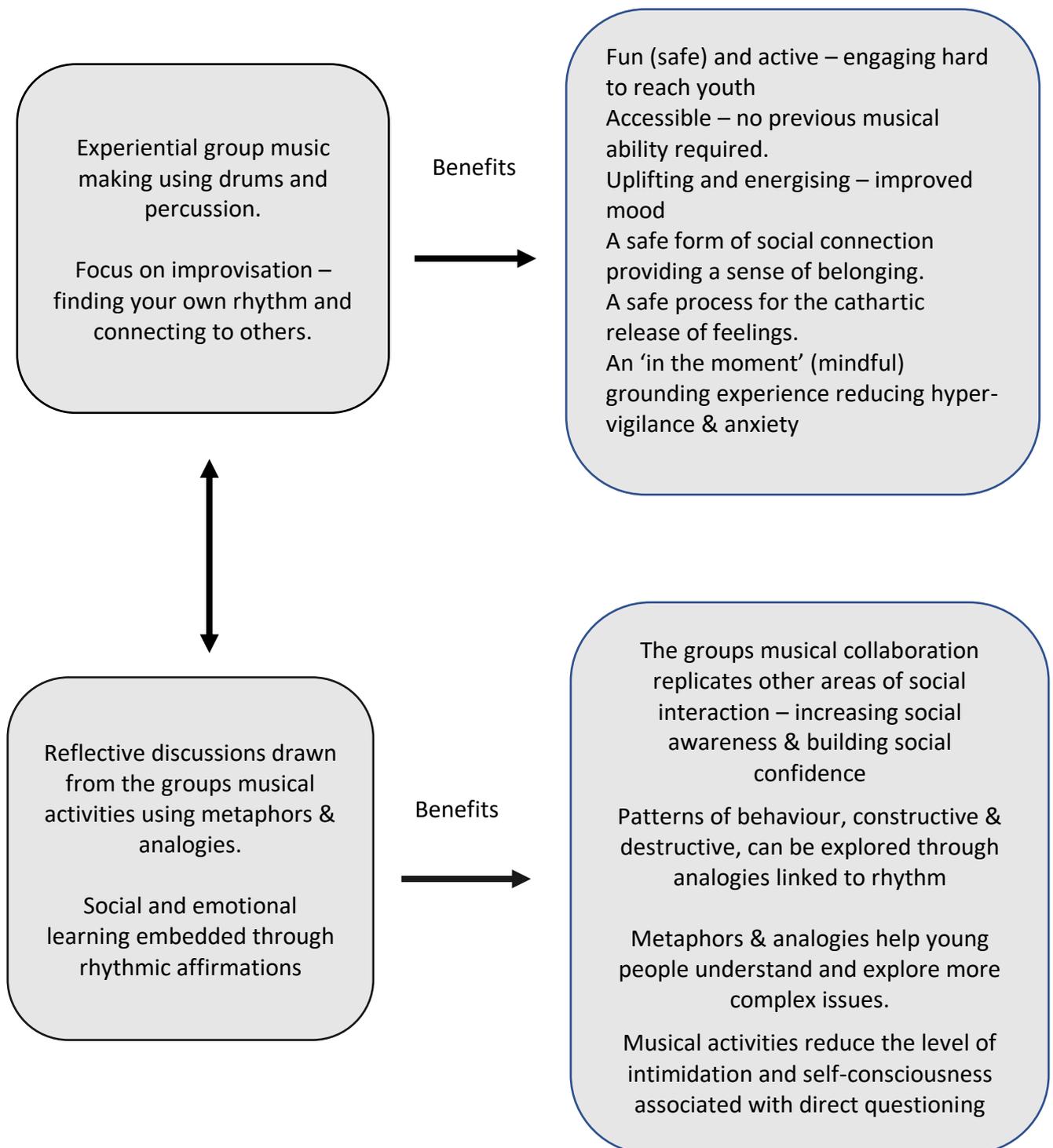
The teaching of rhythm parts and performance of rhythm songs had many positive outcomes and still has a minor role in the work we do today - there is a strong sense of achievement in mastering a specific rhythm and all the collaborative social skills are emphasised and practiced as individuals worked within their sub-groups to hold their part within the greater whole. There are opportunities for challenging oneself and personal growth as well as community recognition and a great boost to self-esteem when these songs are performed to approving audiences, usually as the final stage and celebratory conclusion of a group therapy program. Many useful analogies and metaphors can be drawn from this practice to open discussions on a range of themes that foster psycho-social awareness and understanding.

However, it becomes clear to anyone working from a model relying solely on teaching rhythm parts, cultural or otherwise, that there are a number of draw backs in relation to therapeutic outcomes, particularly in a group-work situation and rhythm songs generally require the size of a small group to be played effectively. Equally, an increased focus on improvisation provides a range of advantages. Perhaps the most critical difference between the two approaches relates to access. No matter how simple one might describe a set rhythmic pattern, for some people it will still be very challenging and despite significant perseverance from the participant and a tolerant and empathetic teaching style from the facilitator the struggle may overwhelm the individual, leaving them with feelings of shame and separation from others who master the part more easily, and causing them to leave the group (drop-out).

Not only are the struggles of mastering set rhythm patterns difficult for some participants, but learning and teaching rhythm parts can also deter therapists or educators themselves, who may be lacking in musical confidence. My own experience is that therapists or educators who are challenged in learning rhythms and drumming generally can often make the best facilitators as their struggle gives them increased empathy for, and awareness of, those participants in their groups who face the same challenges and their example of persistence in the face of

adversity is also a useful one to draw from. However, it is unfortunate whenever anyone, participant or facilitator withdraws from a program because of a lack of progress and the accompanying self-doubt. The importance of delivering quick success in this endeavour is essential to engaging those individuals who lack self-confidence with music and in life generally.

A Model of Rhythm & Reflection Combining Experiential Group Music Making with Reflective Practice



The healing power of improvisation is widely recognised within the field of music therapy, and in particular within specific approaches such as Nordoff-Robbins' 'Creative Music Therapy'. Much of this practice relates to work with individual clients and involves techniques such as mirroring, matching, modelling, empathetic reflection and dialoguing (Wigram, 2004). In Rhythm2Recovery we call upon each of these processes within different exercises to support therapeutic outcomes. In music education the benefits of improvisation have also been extolled through approaches such as Orff Schulwerk which uses improvisation to foster creativity, self-expression and self-efficacy. Studies from music therapy and music education approaches using improvisation have shown significant benefits along a range of physiological and psychological-social indicators (MacDonald & Wilson, 2014; Yun & Ji-Eun, 2013).

Self-efficacy, as derived from improvisation in the Orff Schulwerk approach, autonomy and independence are other key outcomes from a focus on improvisation within Rhythm2Recovery where we encourage people to become masters of their own musical expression and contribution to the circle. Many of the individuals who present for therapy are often in very powerless positions within society and also in regard to their own health, with experts and specialists advising on and sometimes mandating their every action. Many young people also experience this powerlessness and some actively rebel against it, so that instructional techniques that replicate this inequality provoke significant resistance. Being told how to play and what to play may well fall into this category. As music educator Christopher Small says:

*Music is too important to be left to the musicians,
& in recognizing this fact, we strike a blow at the experts' domination,
not only of our music, but also, of our very lives.*

*If it is possible to control our own musical destiny,
provide our own music rather than leaving it altogether
to someone else to provide,
then perhaps some of the other outside expertise
that controls our lives can be brought under control also.*

(Christopher Small 1977)

In group work the value of improvisation and self-expression opens up a range of analogies that address identity, individual difference, diversity in society, tolerance and understanding for those who are different and also issues relating to social responsibility, social obligations, values, teamwork, collaboration and community connection. The group (musical) represent a community – family, friendship circle, team, workplace school, sports-team etc. Within the community each member comes with their personal strengths and contribution, with this diversity enriching and strengthening the community's output and potential. At the same time, finding harmony amongst such diversity sits at the core of many individual and societal challenges, and what allows for and enables this can be examined through this

same symbolism. Musical improvisation in group work allows you to be yourself but still find connection within your community and demonstrates the value and inter-dependence of both.

The other key therapeutic factor derived from improvisation and the accompanying 'self-efficacy' it promotes is 'Creativity'. Creativity is at the heart of all effective therapies and intrinsic to learning generally. When we enter the group, we begin a journey of self-discovery – we play, create, explore and imagine, unshackling ourselves from the constraints of the world we left behind. Playing structured patterns can be aligned to getting stuck in a problematic routine, while improvisation allows us the flexibility to try new options, drawing on our own resources, in order to find a new way forward. Creativity allows for adaptability in various life situations by leading to solutions, methods and processes to tackle old problems and contemporary challenges. Creativity is a constructive asset, conducive to personal empowerment.

We often think of creativity as a personal quality, and indeed there are many studies that show the value of creativity at this level. But it is also a collaborative and social experience developed in and through communities and groups. Social creativity, using group improvisation, shapes creative individuals within it, encourages social cohesion and celebration, reinforces a dynamic inter-relationship between the personal and the social, and can be enriched from the interaction of differing cultures and values (Carlile and Jordan, 2012). When we look at the complex challenges facing both individuals and society, the importance of a creative mindset, the ability to generate, articulate or apply inventive ideas, techniques and perspectives often in a collaborative environment becomes more and more essential.

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