



Vocal Jazz Improvisation

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Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine ways to structure the Vocal Jazz Ensemble curriculum to support learning how to improvise as well as how this affects students' ability and their sense of belonging as they improvise alone in front of their peers.

Research Questions

1) How does intentionally structuring the Vocal Jazz Ensemble curriculum to teach/learn how to improvise affect students' ability and their sense of belonging as they improvise alone in front of their peers?

- a) What teaching strategies are helpful in terms of improvisational skill development?
- b) What teaching strategies are helpful in the development of "belonging?"

Design of the Study

- Participants: undergraduate students (N = 20) enrolled in the Vocal Jazz Ensemble at UW-Whitewater
- Mixed Methods approach to research – Embedded Design.
 - Pre- & Post-test Survey including demographic information related to background jazz/improv experience, degree, amount of time practicing, how student practices, dispositions toward improvisation
 - Pretest/Posttest (survey) – belonging
 - Pretest/Posttest (rubric) – improv skills assessment – melodic & rhythmic
 - Field observations in the skills assessments, field observations during the rehearsals
- Due to a violation in normality of some of the variables non-parametric statistical tests were used: frequencies, descriptive statistics, Spearman rho Correlation Coefficient, and Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test.
- Quantitative data was entered in SPSS and analyzed.
- The remainder of the qualitative data were entered into HyperResearch, sorted/reorganized using open and axial coding.
- The data were all considered, and conclusions were drawn based on both forms of data, how they converged and diverged.

Treatment:

1. Vocal Jazz Ensemble rehearses 2 days each week for 1 hour each time.
2. Improvisation activities are included in the warm-ups of nearly every rehearsal for approximately 10 minutes
3. Improvisation activities included:
 1. Improv circle
 2. Scat singing
 3. Licks/riffs
 4. Call & response
 5. Improv in pairs
 6. Trading 4s
 7. Twelve Bar Blues
 8. Improv over changes in the charts in preparation

Analysis

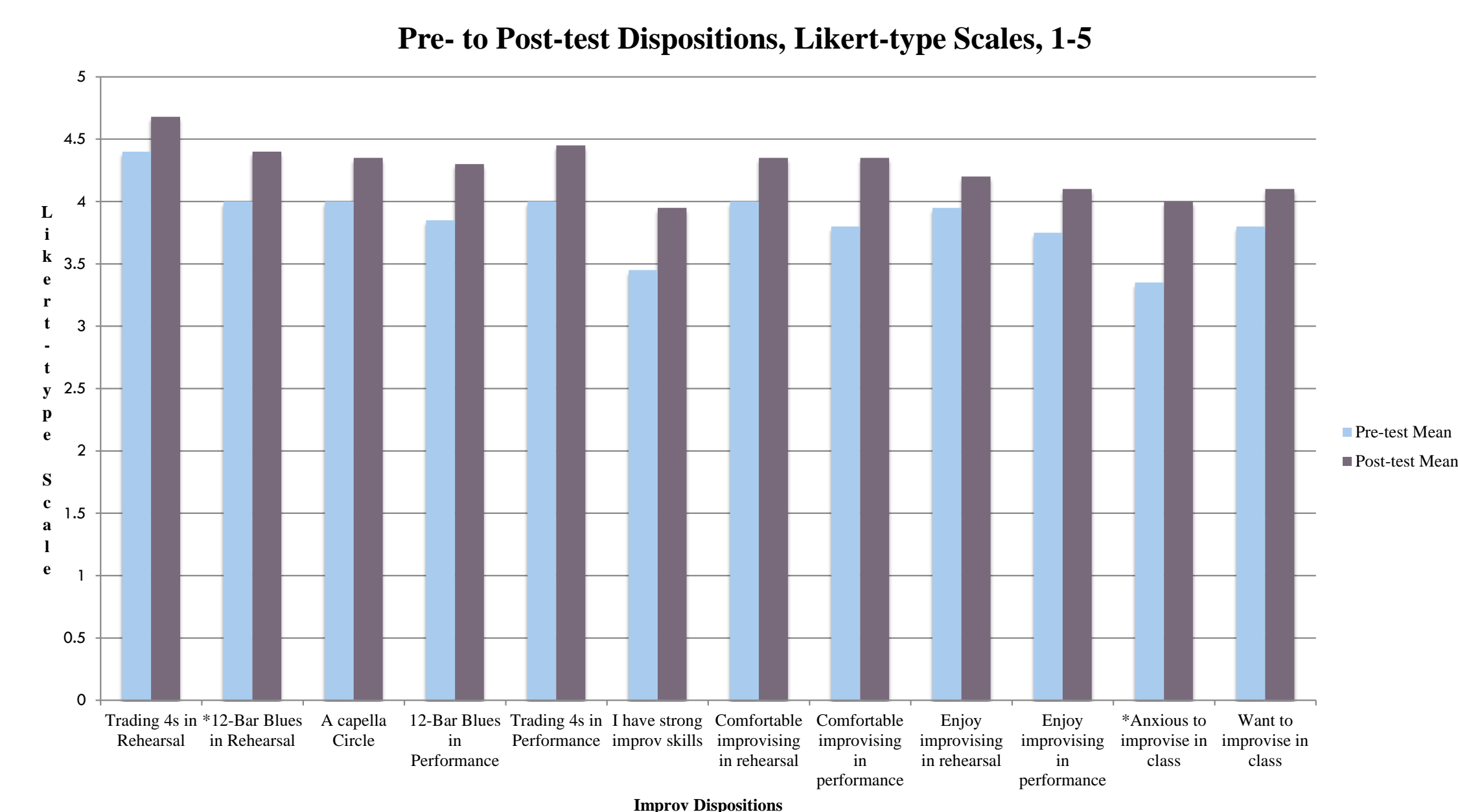
Relationship between "belonging" and improv dispositions: There was a medium to strong correlation between "belonging" & six dispositions related to improvising, N = 20, included in Table 1.

Table 1: Correlations between "Belonging" and Improvisation Dispositions, N = 20

| Improvisation Dispositions | R | p |
|---|--------|------|
| I feel confident that I can improvise alone over a 12-bar-blues in rehearsal | .477* | .034 |
| I feel confident that I can improvise by myself when the rest of the group is doing a cappella circle | .519* | .019 |
| I feel confident that I can improvise alone over a 12-bar-blues in performance | .614** | .004 |
| I feel confident that I can improvise "trading fours" with another person during a performance | .547* | .013 |
| I feel comfortable to improvise in rehearsal in front of my peers | .519* | .019 |
| I enjoy improvising in performance in front of an audience | .603** | .005 |

Positive changes in dispositions related to improvisation from pre- to post-test. There was a significant growth in confidence to improvise using "trading fours" and level of anxiety to improvise (indicated by *) from pre- to post-test surveys.

Figure 1: Changes in Improvisation Dispositions, Pre- to Post-test



Participants' Perception of Development from Pre- to Post-test

Figure 2: Participant Perception of Improv Skills

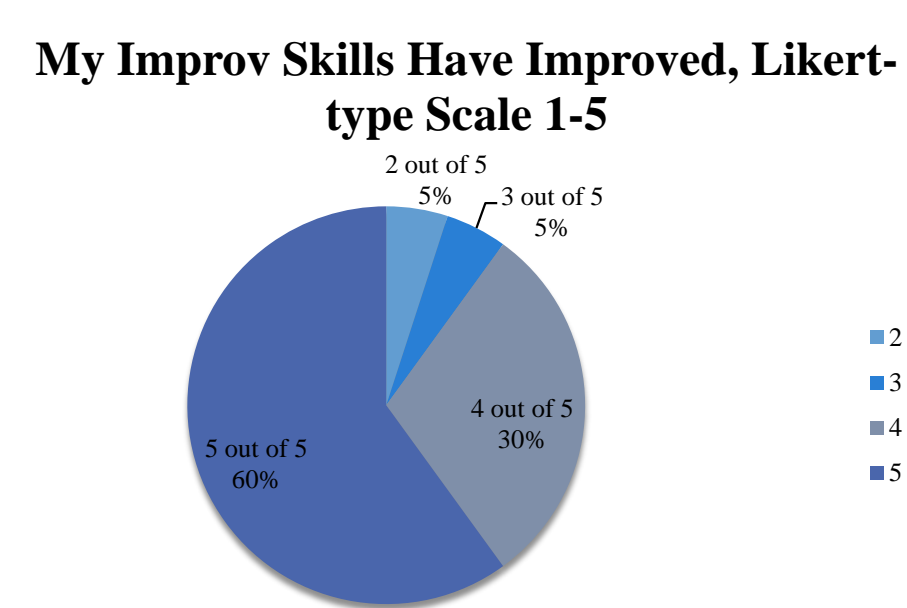


Figure 3: Participant Comfort to Improvise in Rehearsal

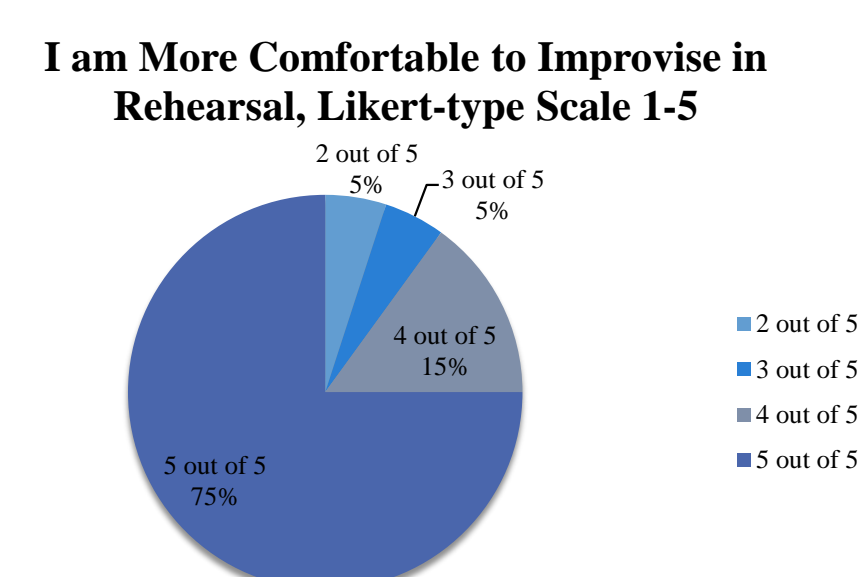
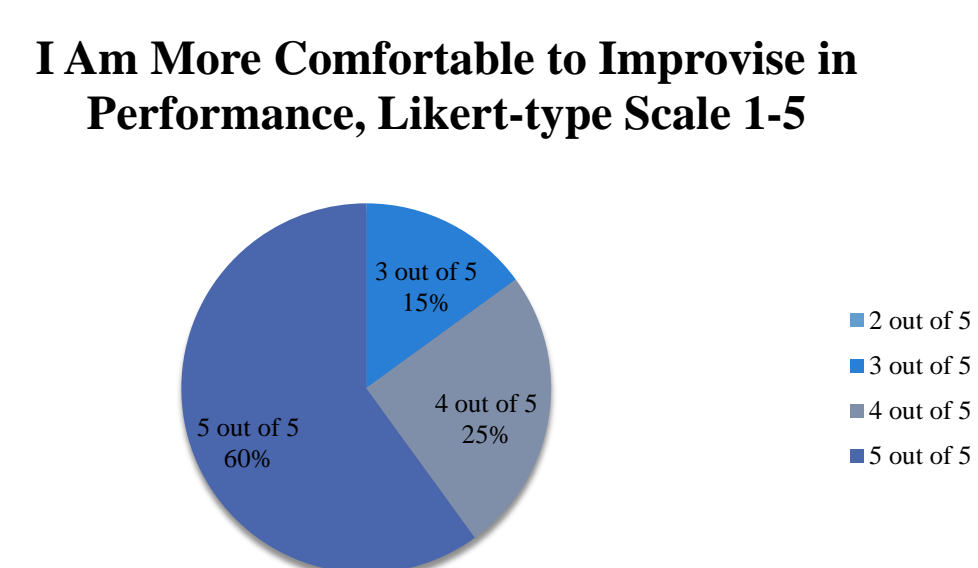
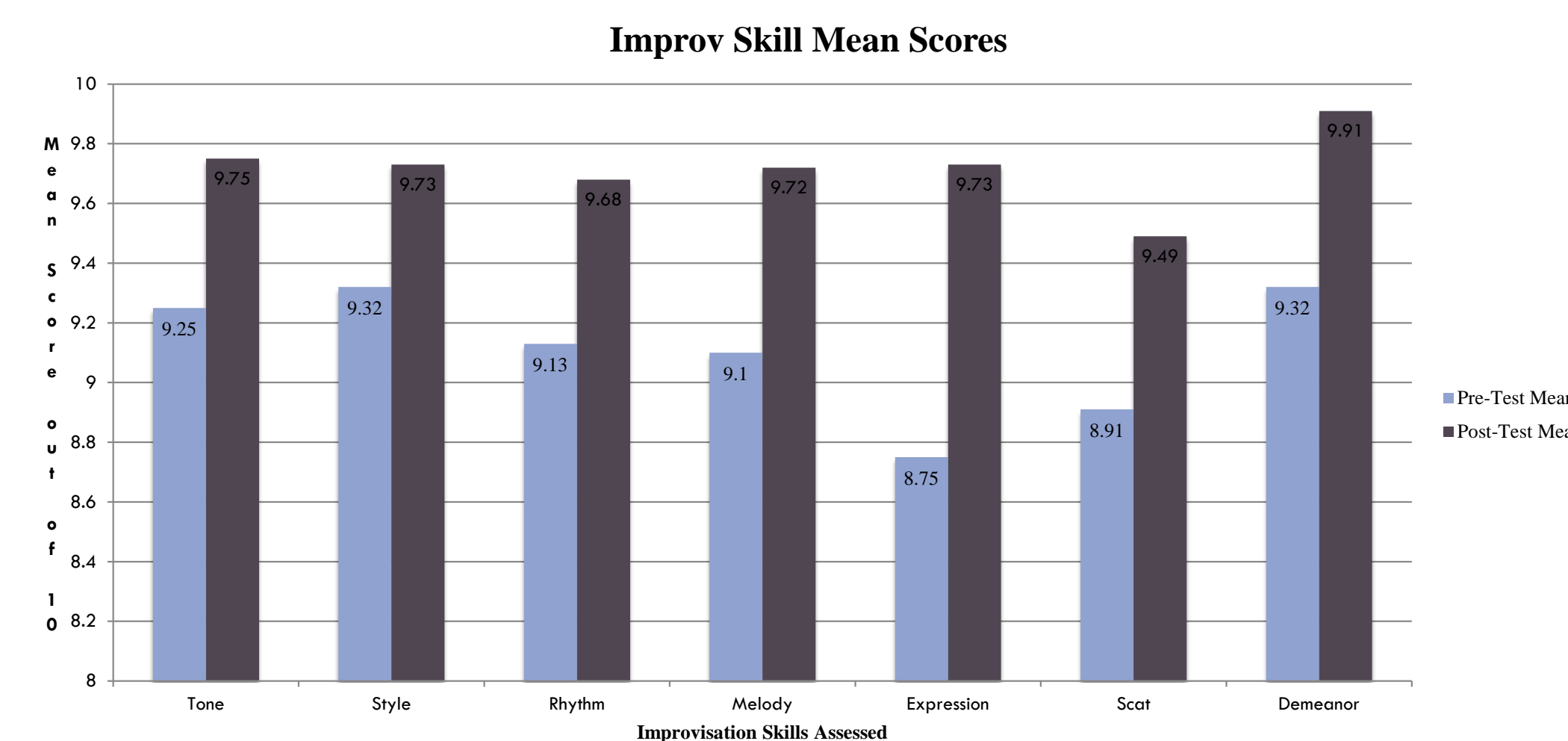


Figure 4: Participants' Comfort to Improvise in Performance



Significant Growth in Improv Skills from Pre- to Post-test: Singing Test

Figure 5: Mean Scores on Improvisation Singing Skills



Factors That Influence Improvisation Dispositions

Anxiety related to improvising

| Improv Dispositions | Pre-test r | Pre-test p | Post-test r | Post-test p |
|---|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|
| I feel confident that I can improvise using "trading fours" with another person while everyone else is doing the same thing | .522* | .015 | | |
| I feel confident that I can improvise alone over a 12-bar blues during rehearsal | .758** | ≤.001 | .641** | .002 |
| I feel confident that I can improvise by myself when the rest of the group is doing a cappella circle | .793** | ≤.001 | .539** | .014 |
| I feel confident that I can improvise alone over a 12-bar-blues or a similar chord progression in performance | .870** | ≤.001 | .639** | .009 |
| I feel confident that I can improvise "trading fours" with another person during a performance | .798** | ≤.001 | | |
| I feel like my improvisation skills are strong | .743** | ≤.001 | .627** | .002 |
| I feel comfortable to improvise in rehearsal in front of my peers | .859** | ≤.001 | | |
| I feel comfortable to improvise in performance in front of an audience | .838** | ≤.001 | .535* | .003 |
| I enjoy improvising in rehearsal in front of my peers | .827** | ≤.001 | | |
| I enjoy improvising in performance in front of an audience | .812** | ≤.001 | .453* | .015 |

Number of improv solos in rehearsal

| Improv Dispositions | Pre-test r | Pre-test p | Post-test r | Post-test p |
|---|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|
| How do you feel about improvising in class? Very anxious to Not anxious at all | .444* | .044 | | |
| How do you feel about improvising in class? Do not want to to Really want to | .490* | .024 | | |
| To what degree do you think you can learn how to improvise – from I cannot learn to I can learn | .493* | .023 | | |
| I feel confident that I can improvise "trading fours" with another person while everyone else is doing the same thing | .436* | .048 | | |
| I enjoy improvising in rehearsal in front of my peers. | .480 | .028 | | |
| I enjoy improvising in performance in front of an audience. | .543 | .011 | | |
| I feel confident I can improvise by myself when the rest of the group is doing the a cappella circle | | | .525* | .017 |
| I feel confident that I can improvise alone over a 12-bar-blues or similar chord progression in performance | | | .553* | .011 |
| I feel confident that I can improvise "trading fours" with another person during a performance | | | .515 | .020 |
| I feel comfortable to improvise in performance in front of an audience. | | | .692** | ≤.001 |
| I enjoy improvising in rehearsal in front of my peers. | | | .499 | .025 |
| Number of scat solos improvised in a concert | | | .811** | ≤.001 |

| Improv Dispositions | Pre-test r | Pre-test p | Post-test r | Post-test p |
|---|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|
| How do you feel about improvising in class? Very anxious to Not anxious at all | .470* | .032 | | |
| How do you feel about improvising in class? Do not want to to Really want to | .568** | .007 | .594** | .006 |
| I feel confident that I can improvise alone over a 12-bar-blues or a similar chord progression in performance | .512* | .013 | | |
| I feel confident that I can improvise "trading fours" with another person during a performance | .464* | .034 | .548* | .012 |
| I feel comfortable to improvise in rehearsal in front of my peers | .438* | .047 | | |
| I enjoy improvising in rehearsal in front of my peers. | .469* | .032 | .468* | .039 |
| I enjoy improvising in performance in front of an audience. | .573** | .007 | .644** | .003 |
| I feel comfortable to improvise in front of an audience | | | .711** | ≤.001 |

Words from the Students

Throughout the years, I have experienced some amazing music teachers and have greatly enjoyed playing in everything I got to be a part of. It was a combination of everything that inspired me to seek a career in music.

Although I have had many great music teachers that have guided me on my path towards the music profession, I believe I owe almost everything to the individual who first introduced me to the world of music, Nancy Ester.

I had students that really wanted to learn and which made me want to teach. It was the most rewarding experience; I felt like I was making a difference in their lives in a positive way, no matter how small.

Most of my educational experiences were rather unpleasant. I was never very good at doing homework, or following rules, and because I was a bit more intelligent than other students, I was very bored most of the time, so I caused trouble. In high school this began to drastically affect my grades, as I only did enough to graduate and very little else. If it weren't for music it is unlikely that I would have graduated. Most of the pleasant memories I have of high school are focused on music.

I got involved in clarinet only because it was required for all students to at least try an instrument in my school district. I had full intentions to quit because my first band director demoted me in chair placement in front of the whole band, but I was determined to prove to him that I was a fantastic clarinet player.

One day, I was sitting in orchestra class clowning around, I was acting childish and said something to the extent of, "Okay everybody, time to start class! If you can hear me, but your bow on top of your head!" My teacher just turned to me and said under her breath, "Amber, you'd make a really good music teacher, you know that?" I was so ecstatic and it was that moment that it simply dawned upon me, that teaching was what I was destined to do for a living. It wouldn't even be considered a job! I'd be getting paid for loving what I'm doing. I don't think there's anything more rewarding than when you see somebody who has been struggling succeed.