

Recreational Drum Circles for University Students

By Robert Damm

Recreational Drum Circle class, presented as an official university course option, is an excellent way to realize the community-building goals of an institutional First-Year Experience (FYE). Many colleges and universities have instituted an FYE program to help students transition from high school to college and, thereby, achieve long-term success at the university. These programs support new students by fostering a feeling of belonging in the university community.

The outcomes of a drum circle class correspond to FYE goals in many ways. The drum circle provides an invaluable social experience because the participants depend on each other for the ensemble to succeed. The drum circle celebrates diversity because everyone who participates has something to offer the circle and all are welcome. Recreational drumming is a sharing experience that promotes community interaction and, because the group is united in a common goal, members gain a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Drum circle activities ideally promote awareness of self, acknowledgement of peers, self-esteem, listening, communication, teamwork,

and the principle of synergy. FYE seminars are generally classes that feature active learning, discussion, and hands-on experiential learning opportunities. Certainly the drum circle is a model of active engagement. In the drum circle, there is no audience; everyone participates actively. Everyone in the circle plays together, creating his or her own rhythms that fit into the music created by the whole group. Given the instrumentation typically included in a drum circle, there is no more literal representation of hands-on experience than playing jembes, congas, tubanos, frame drums, and other membranophones expressly designed to be played with the hands.

The class size of FYE seminars is usually limited to fewer than 20 students to ensure that the students have the opportunity to know their teacher and to build friendships with their classmates. A drum circle of 20 participants is workable, perhaps even ideal, as there are not so many drummers as to make anyone feel lost or irrelevant, but enough participants to provide a sense of security from being in a group. In my case, the classroom space where we meet allows for 20 chairs to be arranged in a circle/oval but would not easily accommodate more.

My university has offered a number of FYE classes since 2008. The classes are offered through the Center for Teaching and Learning. In the fall semester, the staff in this office invites all faculty to submit proposals to teach a 1-credit-hour course for the following fall. Faculty members are encouraged to choose a topic that would provide first-year students with a special opportunity to become engaged in the excitement of a specific discipline, inside or outside their chosen major, and the intellectual stimulation of an enjoyable introduction to the academic culture at the university.

New students are informed of the FYE classes during orientation and given a brochure that promotes the FYE: *We believe every new student should take one course just for the fun of it: a small class with an excellent teacher to teach you something really interesting in his or her field. Our special First-Year Seminars carry one hour of course credit toward graduation and may be used in almost any major. Each seminar is on a different, interesting topic. Research shows that students who connect to the university in this way are more likely to enjoy and succeed at college.*

In 2014, a total of 23 FYE courses were offered including CSI: MSU; Football 101; Extreme Medicine: Understanding the Medical Cases on House, M.D.; It's All Greek to Me; and Grow Your Own Salads and Soups: Vegetable Gardening. A brief course description accompanies each course title.

The description for Recreational Drum Circle class was: *Drums and other percussion instruments provide an exhilarating and engaging experience in rhythm, ensemble, and improvisation. Class members will experience the unique enjoyment of in-the-moment music and the many extra-musical outcomes emphasized in recreational drum circles. No prior drumming experience is required!*

Certainly drum circles meet the criteria of an engaging, hands-on, experiential learning opportunity. Kalani described drum circles in a 2011 article about interactive drumming: *Community drum circles are entry-level improvisational experiences, aimed at having fun in an*



inclusive setting. They don't require any specific musical knowledge or skills of the participants, and the music is co-created in the moment. The main idea is that anyone is free to join and express himself or herself in any way that positively contributes to the music.

Kalani went on to specify the characteristics of guided interactive drumming: *Guided interactive drumming experiences are directed, rhythm-based activities, often pre-planned, delivered by an individual or group, for the purpose of creating a sense of unity among members. Participants play drums and percussion instruments (often provided by the leaders) to reach such non-musical goals as to experience something new together, unite under a common theme or idea, increase energy and excitement, develop leadership skills, and meet new challenges as a group. Guided interactive drumming often challenges participants with clear, attainable musical goals, such as following the visual and verbal cues of a leader, playing a steady beat together, reproducing simple rhythmic patterns, and uniting through rhythm.*

THE LESSON PLAN

In the recreational drum circle class, I included a mix of drum circle strategies as well as a guided interactive drumming format. I scheduled the class for Mondays from 9:00 to 9:50 A.M. so that the students would have a fun, engaging, and positive way to begin each week.

In order to arrange the chairs in a circle and place drums and other instruments in the circle, I generally arrived at the classroom about a half hour before class began. I usually set out a mix of drums and hand percussion instruments. A few students typically arrived early; I encouraged them to begin freestyle drumming as a "call" to the other students to come to our celebration. As the other students entered the classroom they would join in the drumming. Almost all of the students would be in place by 9:05, and we would keep the established groove going for another five to ten minutes. Following the conclusion of the drum call, I led the class in singing a welcome song (e.g., "Fanga Alafia"), took attendance, and asked the students how they were doing (or shared an idea from an inspiring book). For the second piece of the day, I usually led the class in a structured musical game (e.g., "Pieces of Eight" from *The Amazing Jamnasium*), culturally inspired groove (e.g., samba), or simple percussion ensemble composition (e.g., "As I Was Sitting In My Chair" from *Conga Town*).

The reason for the structured activity was to teach the students about specific instruments, culturally specific techniques and rhythms, and various musical concepts such as meter, timbre, texture, and form. The students then engaged in freestyle drumming for 10 to 15 minutes, during which I facilitated some dynamics, textures, and directed an ending. This time could consist of one long groove, but more often was

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two or three distinct and separate grooves. I directed the students to move to a new place in the circle and to play a different instrument for each piece. According to my plan for the day,

we occasionally used Boomwhackers, found objects (cans, buckets, boxes, etc.), or culturally specific instruments (e.g., all African drums, bells, and rattles).



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Our freestyle and guided grooves were generally based on a foundational rhythm maintained by the bass drummers such as a specified metric pattern, clave rhythm, or heartbeat rhythm. I often asked for a volunteer to start a piece; this established a tempo, meter, and foundational style. The students learned that for the freestyle jams, they could choose to play any instrument in the classroom. The room where we have class is also a space used for percussion class and percussion ensemble rehearsal, so there is a practically endless source of instruments for the students to explore.

In some cases, the students used keyboard instruments from the Orff collection, which would be tuned to a major or pentatonic scale. The students learned that introducing melodic instruments to the drum circle mix changed the dynamic of the circle. We concluded each class by singing a farewell song (e.g., “Shalom Chaverim”), after which I thanked the students for their participation and wished them a great week of classes. Depending on the tone of the day, I emphasized peace, joy, creativity, unity, communication, friendship, entrainment, or other specific theme.

Following the academic calendar schedule, we met for 14 weeks and did not have a final exam. On the last day of class I provided refreshments. A three-minute video highlighting drumming and student comments may be accessed at this site:

<https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B8W-Ih6bw-8sTRmU4aUZ5NGY1c28/edit>

MORE CIRCLES

In addition to the drum circle class, I also facilitate drum circles for other university students. Residence staff offer monthly activities to build community within hall populations; drum circles are a great way to celebrate diversity, unity, and other themes of community. These events are usually scheduled for a week-night beginning at 6:00 or 7:00. The residence hall director puts up posters the week of the event and reminds students about the program. The director is also responsible for arranging chairs in a circle in the meeting space (lobby) before I arrive with the drums and other instruments. When the weather allows, drum circles are conducted outside. This certainly enhances the atmosphere of the program by allowing for references to nature. Typically, 30–40 students participate in a residence hall event. The program usually includes one hour of drumming followed by refreshments (snacks or pizza). I worked with one hall director to have a drum circle using only homemade instruments (buckets, boxes, and shakers) with glow-in-the-dark paint and black lights.

I also facilitate open drum circles on campus for students to come-and-go as their schedule may allow. In this case the drum circle is set up on the drill field (commons area in the center of campus) or outside the student union. These

drum circles are arranged to celebrate cultural diversity or holidays such as Earth Day. In this case, students play for five or ten minutes in the circle and then move on as another group of students, who have gathered to watch, take their place. I found it helpful to invite students in one of my music education classes or members of the SAI fraternity to co-facilitate these open drum circles. This practice draws students into the circle by quickly establishing a strong groove with a core of people whose purpose is to actively welcome newcomers to the circle.

Because drum circles so effectively build a sense of community, they are a perfect fit for the FYE initiatives being implemented in colleges and universities. It is true that faculty in college and university music departments are very busy teaching music majors the skills and knowledge they need to become performers and teachers. Additionally, there is tremendous value in demonstrating service to the institution by contributing to the success of all incoming students through drum circles.

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