

# A DRUM CIRCLE ENHANCES A DAY OF PERCUSSION

BY ROBERT J. DAMM

“The response I received from people in attendance was overwhelming,” said Mississippi percussion professor Josh Armstrong. “Many people asked if we were going to do that again next year, and just expressed how much fun they had with that particular event. I can’t wait to have our next Day of Percussion and open it with another drum circle.”

In spring 2015, the PAS Interactive Drumming Committee (IDC) encouraged the leadership of PAS chapters to add a drum circle to their Day of Percussion (DoP) programs. Four members of the committee facilitated DoP drum circles in California, Mississippi, Missouri, and Texas and contributed to this article. Comments from participants (facilitators, percussion educators, and students) acknowledge that the drum circle experience offers musical and extra-musical value.

“People at *all* levels of experience with percussion enjoy, engage in, and benefit from community drumming

circles at Days of Percussion,” stated drum circle facilitator Jim Greiner. An examination of these values and participant experiences will provide the support readers may need to add a drum circle to their own state’s DoP.

Many collegiate percussion educators are reluctant to do so because they have never experienced a drum circle or have had a poor experience. To be honest, the first several drum circles I attended were quite disappointing. The reason for my initial negative reaction was that the facilitator, or lack of a facilitator, caused the events to be noisy, chaotic, and unmusical. The participants did not understand when to start and stop, how to play in a way that created sonic space for others, or how to respond to signals indicating call-and-response, trade lead solos, or change dynamics. I was also frustrated because participants were clueless regarding the possible function of a drum or bell to serve as a foundation (ostinato, timeline, or

supporting pattern) upon which other percussionists might play complementary patterns.

The drum circle experience suggested by the IDC is one that will foster musical outcomes such as creativity, improvisation, ensemble, and sense of groove. The drum circle may also provide direct engagement with musical elements: form, dynamics, timbre, texture, rhythm, meter, and tempo. To some degree, the drum circle can also address world music by sharing cultural information and engagement with world instruments and rhythms.

“Too much of our typical percussion curriculum revolves around written, structured musical experiences with finite limits on time and creativity,” said David Speer, host of the West Texas DoP. Drum circle participants do not rely on notation; rather, they bring their individual experiences and knowledge of percussion techniques and styles to produce something new. Participants



Mississippi Day of Percussion at Hinds Community College in Jackson

spontaneously generate rhythms in response to in-the-moment music. The drum circle encourages creativity through providing an occasion for exploration, independence, originality, problem solving, and spontaneity.

“Development of improvisation skills should be a part of every musician’s training,” stated Mark Shelton, drum circle facilitator. “School band programs often focus on tone, technique, and rehearsals but provide students little opportunity to employ those skills in creative settings. The [DoP] hosts’ desire to foster student creativity was evidenced by the inclusion of a group improvisation event alongside the clinics and performances.”

Galen Lemmonz, host for Northern California DoP, observed that, “Our hand percussion clinic was phenomenal because it was nice to see students who study hard to play snare drum, marimba, and other orchestral percussion, play hand drums and develop a groove and have a lot of fun. It is so important that when you play music, you groove. We sometimes get away from that when we have a conductor, so it was good for the students to feel that.”

Musicologists have defined “groove” as a repeating musical framework that may be modified with variations yet maintains a cohesive rhythmic “feel” within the context of a specific musical style. Again, the freedom from written notation in a drum circle releases students from focusing on notation and

allows them to focus on the natural flow of musical phrasing (groove).

“I thought it was really cool how the entire groove took on a life of its own,” wrote a student from Northern California. “I love how the groove starts out one way and, as it progresses, some of the rhythms change, the parts change, and as it evolves it takes on the personalities of everyone [in the circle].”

The drum circle “also provides another means of including non-Western music in our DoP,” said Jason Baker, Mississippi chapter president. Mississippi DoP student Cindy Jennings commented: “Drum circles allow opportunities to learn about other cultures that use percussion instruments in different ways. I believe drum circles allow us to explore the world, percussion, and to learn more about one another.”

World percussion may refer to instruments and performance practices outside the typical scope of snare drum, keyboard percussion, timpani, drumset, and marching percussion experienced by K–12 and collegiate students. “My goal,” said drum circle facilitator Robert Damm, “was to provide a wide variety of drumming experience in the time provided for our drum circle. To this end, I shared a diverse array of drums, rattles, bells, blocks, and similar instruments from around the world—especially Africa and South America. We played a wide range of tempos, textures, dynamics, and styles such as swing, calypso, 5/4 meter, 3/4 meter, 6/8 meter, samba, and several

African-inspired and Caribbean-inspired rhythms.” The Missouri DoP featured a drum circle facilitated by Peter Hussey, Illinois percussion professor, and Matt Henry, Missouri percussion professor. In addition to compositional games, they facilitated some traditional Malinke rhythms.

The DoP is intended to be educational, with informative clinics generally presented in a lecture-recital mode. Sometimes, selected student soloists and ensembles are featured. The drum circle has potential to promote participation, sharing, teamwork, and a sense of community. The drum circle unites all participants through the wonderful experience of in-the-moment activity, the unique enjoyment of music, and the special power of percussion. Perhaps the most important value of the drum circle is the extra-musical outcomes related to the synergy that happens when it is facilitated in such a way as to provide active participation, a positive social experience, and community interaction.

One extra-musical value of the drum circle is that it removes the barrier between expert presenter and novice student, eliminating the distinctive roles of performing artist versus passive audience member. “The drum circle is an amazing community builder for the students and clinicians at the DoP, which can move everyone away from competition and performance and into creative collaboration as a single, improvising ensemble—a fantastic way to celebrate



West Texas Day of Percussion at Frenship High School in Wolfforth

everyone's accomplishments!" explained John Fitzgerald, IDC Chair. "A drum circle or other interactive rhythm event at the DoP opens up the experience of playing to all of your attendees. No longer is the event one to be experienced passively, but instead, the audience members become active participants, along with the performers, and gives them a deeper appreciation of the highest forms of the percussive arts and a small 'taste' of what it is to be a musician."

Jason Baker agreed: "I wanted to include a drum circle as a way to engage all of the DoP participants, regardless of age and experience level, in a hands-on experience from which all could benefit. In addition, engaging ideas from IDC provided another way to serve the mission of PAS at the state level. Our events are attended by a wide variety of students, performers, and educators. A drum circle allows participants of all levels and interests to take part in an interactive and fun experience that offers something for everyone."

"A drum circle adds a unique

element to a DoP," said Chris Treloar, past president of the Missouri chapter, "by allowing the audience to actively participate in the clinic rather than sitting and listening to the ideas presented during a normal workshop." Ed Girling, Mississippi percussion instructor and first-time drum circle participant reflected, "The drum circle was the perfect ice breaker. It didn't matter what your skill level was, everybody could participate. It was a fun learning experience."

Active participation in a musical ice-breaker results in the extra-musical benefit of a positive social experience. "In any environment, the anxiety of meeting new people can easily become stressful," remarked Sammy Brown, Jr., Mississippi student. "The opening drum circle helped calm the uneasiness of many percussionists. We all came from different schools and we study under different professors, but for this session, we were all one big percussion studio. We all had one goal in mind and that was to make music. The drum circle was a perfect start! The value of a drum circle can't be measured merely

by rhythms, but more so by the smiles of all percussionists in attendance."

A Northern California student expressed a similar reaction: "I loved how when we were playing together I felt relaxed to communicate, and how it turned into a communication of sound. I had fun and learned a lot."

"A drum circle at a DoP brings percussion students together from different institutions and cultures. It encourages unity through rhythmic interactions. If the drum circle is the first event of the day, the participants will start and end the DoP with a strong sense of oneness," said Ricky Burkhead, Mississippi percussion professor. The comment most often made by drum circle participants regarding the value of the drum circle was that the event created a sense of community. Kent Lineberry, Missouri PAS chapter president, noted, "Everyone, and I mean everyone—from the beginning percussionists to the parents and professionals that were there—were engaged, smiling, and drumming. The sense of wellness that permeated the session was palpable."

Mississippi percussion professor Josh Armstrong recounted: "I believe the drum circle that opened our Day of Percussion was one of the most valuable offerings we had that day. The drum circle allowed all of the percussionists from the state to play together and get to know each other, smile and laugh while doing what we all love to do, and what brought us to the day of percussion in the first place. One of the best ways to bond with our fellow percussionists is to play with them. No talking is needed, just drumming. It brought a sense of community to the DoP, and brought us all together in the beginning, which allowed the rest of the day to be that much more informative and communal. Suddenly, we weren't from different schools, we weren't at different levels, we were percussionists coming together and doing what we love."

The drum circle makes a wonderful addition to the DoP because it fosters musical outcomes such as creativity, improvisation, ensemble, groove, and engagement with world drumming. More importantly, the drum circle provides active participation, a positive social



Northern California DoP at San Jose State University (back row, L-R: Galen Lemmon and Steve Hearn)

experience, and community interaction—all extra musical elements that add value to a day that brings people together for the sake of music and, in particular, drumming.

“I think the drum circle is an extremely valuable part of the DoP and definitely worth doing again,” raved Megan Arns, Missouri percussion professor. “Having a drum circle invites everyone in attendance to have a hands-on experience regardless of their age, profession, or skill level. I heard numerous people leave the drum circle saying ‘That was really fun!’ and ‘I hope they do that every year!’ The drum circle is a necessity for every DoP!”

### VIDEOS

View an excerpt of the Mississippi DoP drum circle at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xy0A4Tm5TPw>

View an excerpt of the Northern California DoP drum circle at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4GPPcrSTRg>

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Missouri DoP 2015