



## General Introduction

Music is an important part of life in Africa and fulfils many roles. Music is used in religious rituals, at ceremonies such as weddings, funerals and the birth of a child, as well as an accompaniment to day-to-day activities. There is music for working in the fields, tending cattle and collecting water as well as vastly contrasting music used for anything from lullabies to war songs.

Everyone participates in music making and there is a wonderful saying that “In African music there is no audience, only participants”. There are also professional musicians and master drummers who are highly valued. The use of music gives a cultural perspective to every aspect of daily life in Africa.

The prolific use of drums in African music demonstrates the importance of rhythm as the main ingredient in music making. African drumming is a language that can send messages, tell stories and communicate emotions. Drums in Africa come in many shapes and sizes and have many different playing styles. The drum has a high cultural status in Africa and there are many rituals that surround making, teaching and playing drums. When we play the African Drums and rhythms we are immersing ourselves in thousands of years of cultural and social history and sharing the universal joy of music making.

*Excerpt from Andy Gleadhill's African Drumming Book 1, Page 3-4*

### **What Is Special About West African Drumming And Why Should You Do It?**

From a Westerner's perspective, one of the most immediate attractions to Djembe Drumming is the idea that you can take a drum, hit it and make a sound without any limitations regarding the noise that you make. It is immediately accessible to most people on a very basic level, and the moment that somebody strikes a Djembe in a pleasing pattern is the moment that they wish to develop that idea into something that pleases them further. It is a very easy instrument to gain praise as a beginner, and an average skill level can be obtained reasonably quickly. It is quicker to learn and develop than traditional orchestra instruments, and its scope for compositional development is quite high in both traditional and fusion settings.



## How Could You Introduce West African Drumming To Your School?

You can either go in big with a project like this, or you can go in small.

A smaller approach would be to acquire a set of five or so Djembe and create a drumming group for lunchtimes or after-school, or with a particular performance in mind. You could spend six weeks learning and practicing a particular rhythm or two and structure a performance following some traditional ideas. The drumming group could obtain ownership of the resources by decorating the drums with ribbon and such in order to identify with the group.

A larger approach would involve rolling out Djembe Drumming as a scheme of work within your establishment. A class set of Djembe and other instruments could be used to teach students about rhythm initially and then move on to other skills such as Call and Response, polyrhythm, cross-rhythms and structure. A lunchtime club that ran through the whole year could be established and the more enthusiastic students from each class could invest their time in larger performances. You may even prepare for each end of term performance and have students from across the years actively taking part and creating a positive atmosphere at the start of end of year assemblies and so forth.





## **What Could You Achieve?**

### **In a day:**

- Generate an interest in other ways of making music.
- Foster an interest in other cultures and histories.
- Identify particularly good rhythm students.

### **In a term:**

- Teach and learn an entire rhythm.
- Layer more than one rhythm together to create a new texture.
- Create a set structure for a performance.
- Delegate a leader, practice leadership skills.
- Develop listening and improvisational skills.

### **In a year:**

- Establish a regular club.
- Develop the identity of music within the school.
- Hold/take part in several performances.
- Compose own rhythms.
- Research subject matter in further detail as a project.

### **In three years:**

- Create a mentor system that allows older students to teach newer members of the club.
- Hand over control of performances to the students.
- Perform in the community.
- Use the resources as part of transition days, utilising the young experts.



## **Benefits**

Investing long-term in a set of Djembe and its use is worthwhile on many levels. Done properly it will benefit the students, the teachers delivering and teaching the content, and the establishment and community on a wider level.

- **Benefit to students**

Taking part in a collaborative Djembe circle and performances can increase a student's interpersonal skills; over time they will learn to adapt to the group and respond to the gaps in the performance as well as leaving space for others. Eye contact and non-verbal communication skills will increase effectively.

Intrapersonal skills can be improved, such as independence when soloing away from the main rhythm or holding a cross-rhythm. Rehearsing rhythms in their head at home can lead to positive reinforcement of skills in isolation, in turn leading to happier and less anxious 'down time'.

An evaluative feedback process can be encouraged, as the student hears the stimulus, responds in kind attaching a value to the process and the new skill they have developed. They then better organise the information in their heads through repeated sessions, leading to them identifying with the skill and the group as part of their own identity to be proud of, with a sense of belonging and community, as well as having a valuable skill that they can share with others.

There are also several positive character traits that are encouraged through this sort of activity, including a Love of Learning, Self-Control, Curiosity, Open-Mindedness, Creativity, Gratitude, Fairness, Leadership, Modesty, Appreciation of Beauty and Spirituality.

- **Benefit to teachers**

Teachers and session leaders will benefit in exactly the same ways as the students, but there are added bonuses from an academic leader perspective.



Group collaboration can be systematically encouraged and the playing field is levelled with every student on a similar instrument. The teacher as leader has the opportunity and responsibility to model good technique and good practice to the students, which leads to a respect of their skill instead of conformity of authority – a much healthier interpersonal relationship between student and teacher.

It is easy to structure your planning to fit in line with Bloom's Taxonomy, should that be something required of you. Take this as also an opportunity for effective differentiation in the lesson plans, whilst retaining an ability to stay alongside the popular 'differentiation by outcome'. Initial activities involve remembering, comprehending and applying knowledge. Later, analysis of traditional works can be brought in to encourage synthesis in their own compositions. Musical creativity can then be encouraged for the students to fuse the music with any other concepts they choose and a feedback loop begins with their evaluation of their work either through performance or recordings, which can then be improved upon and so forth.

A group such as this can be effective with as few as four players and can accommodate as many performers as you are comfortable with. As such there are no caps on the number of members of the group and as long as you have a consistent core membership then progress can be made each week, with a sense of challenge being presented to new members, as well as praise for their quick initial progress, progress which is assisted by good modelling from more able or regular students and is aided by their performance in that the new members' errors are often hidden in the mix; the new student knows where their mistake will have been and can correct it for next time but will not have interrupted the flow of the session through dropping out and coming back in again. It really is quite an inclusive way of working and less able students can be given simple pulse based bass rhythms to work with.

- **Benefit to whole school and community**

Schools can benefit from a Djembe club at lunch times or after school. Not only does it give the individuals a sense of belonging and ownership, a consistent register of attendees can be used as evidence of the club's impact and can be



cross-referenced against their attendance in general and other statistics within the SEF as required.

As part of specific cultural weeks, or with other funding, you could consider a cross-curricular approach to the activity and invite an African Dance teacher in to collaborate with other students. Many are available as a troupe and will bring one or two musicians with them to play for the dancers. With some dialogue and forethought you could create a custom solution for your own school which would allow you to get the most from your investment in these artists.

The school as a whole can benefit from an investment in musical groups such as this as they raise a positive profile in the community if given the chance to shine publically.

With a short set routine in place, performances out and about in the community can draw attention and are quite often a good fundraising opportunity.

An investment in some decorative sashes or ribbons for the performers and their Djembe can add to the sense of identity for the group and there will be a strong visual link between the music and the school itself, increasing the perception of its standing and success.

To take things a step further, a community group or series of short workshops could be offered out to parents with members of the school group assisting and teaching. You could take the group into primary feeder schools to show the potential future students the sorts of things that they can look forward to at your school and foster interest from before day one.

Performances in care homes for the elderly and those in hospitals or similar settings and can provide an opportunity for the school (and pupils) to make a really valuable contribution to the community.