

Water Bottle Drum Circle

This is a basic warm-up activity which can be done with just about any instruments. We suggest 'water bottle djembes' if possible, but you can do it with just about any traditional percussion instruments or junk instruments.

'Water bottle djembes' are empty 11 or 15 litre plastic water bottles, which can be turned upside-down and played with the hands. Often these can be found for free or very low cost from spring water delivery companies.

The students all sit in a circle, on chairs. This is really important, as they need to have clear communication with each other and with the teacher.

Students need to pick up their bottles all at the same time, and place them down on the ground in front of them when they are not playing. We recommend setting the room up in advance with the chairs in a circle in the room, and the bottles to the side. When ready to do the activity, have the children quietly stand up, go and pick up a bottle and return to their chair without making any noise or playing their drum.



Step 1 : The entire group copies the teacher's 4 beat pattern.

The teacher begins by playing a four beat pattern such as:



And the entire group copies that pattern, and then the teacher continues by playing another one, and the group echos, and then another and so on. The teacher keeps doing this until the group is playing well and in time. Usually most groups can do this well after just 4 or 8 patterns.

The teacher should deliberately vary the dynamics (volume) and sounds. Use a variety of hitting on the middle of the drum, toward the edge and on the side. This keeps the students listening well and concentrating.

The teacher should keep the repeats in nice musical 4 or 8 bar phrases, and when ready to finish and stop use a simpler final one, such as:



And then use a vocal cue when they echo - such as:



and- STOP

Which brings them to a nice complete ending, and you can move straight onto step 2.

Step 2 : Students take turns to improvise a four beat pattern, and the rest of the group copies that pattern

After the teacher leads a few more echo patterns, each student will make up a pattern and the group will copy it, and go around in a circle, with everyone copying each students pattern.

This sounds complicated and challenging, but it really isn't! After completing some echoing from the teacher in Step 1 this becomes a natural extension to it.

The teacher should say something like this:

“You did a great job there copying my patterns. Now we’re all going to take turns making up a four-beat pattern, and everyone is going to copy it. So I’ll have another go in a moment and when I’ve done a couple I’ll point to [jane] here and she will make up something, and everyone will copy [jane]. Then we’ll move straight along to [jack] and [jack] will make up something and everyone will copy him. Then to [susan] and around the circle until everyone has had a go.

Its important to go around the circle exactly. Even if a child is nervous about making up something - still copy whatever they do. You can always say something like ‘When it gets to your turn: it doesn’t matter how complicated you make it; if you wish just play four beats like this:

♪♪♪♪ or one big hit like this: ○

The teacher needs to keep the flow going - and count aloud if it helps. They also need to keep eye-to-eye communication with the students, so they know when it is their turn to play.

Eventually after several sessions of this students will confidently improvise a four beat pattern and be able to stay in time with it.

Step 3 : As above, but with a backing track to keep them perfectly in time

After a few times, using a backing track with this activity will help to get the students playing in time.

Our backing track supplied consists of eight bars with one beat, and then eight bars with a contrasting beat. This keeps things interesting, and in musical phrases. You can use a variety of different backing tracks for this activity and different tempi.

Variations:

1. Use the backing track sometimes, and play without the backing track sometimes. Too much reliance on the backing track to keep them in time is a bad thing, but always doing it without it will not push them to stay in time.
2. Use **dynamics** (variations in volume) - have them try to use some dynamics in their improvised pattern, and have everyone copy using the dynamics.
3. Experiment with **sounds**. The students can scrape the bottle with their fingers, hit the side, do anything else that will give a different sound, including even using the voice!
4. Try changing the **length** of phrase - once they can do four beats well you can try eight beat patterns or two beat patterns.
5. Try different speeds and feels. You can try a triplet or compound time beat as well.