

The Intentional Pocket Project: A Jazz-Informed Workshop

Series for Emerging Ensemble Musicians

Case Study

This case study documents a practice-based intervention to help technically proficient but ensemble-inexperienced university musicians develop groove and ensemble fluency. Delivered as four targeted modules (keyboard, bass guitar, drum set, and rhythm-section lab), the “Intentional Pocket Project” applied jazz-informed teaching concepts to bridge the gap between individual musical training and collective groove. Emphasis was on specific listening, technical awareness, and macro ensemble interplay. Over two years, non-music-major participants reported marked improvements in timing, role clarity, and group cohesion. Feedback on the two institutional items averaged 4.8/5, and comments indicated improved tone, dynamic layering, and ensemble “storytelling.” This article presents the workshop design, a three-pillar teaching framework, and student feedback, arguing that an intentional, rhythm-section-led approach offers a transferable model for jazz and contemporary ensemble pedagogy. Focusing on groove, listening, and role articulation helped transform skilled individuals into a cohesive ensemble.

Keywords: Groove pedagogy; Rhythm section; Ensemble fluency; Music workshop

Introduction

Why do many skilled young musicians struggle to “find the pocket” and play together with a cohesive groove? This question has garnered increasing attention in music education research (e.g., Butterfield, 2010; Monson, 1996). While formal training often emphasizes

individual technique, theory, and solo repertoire, it may be insufficient to develop the ensemble instinct and groove-based skills required in real-time group performance. Classically trained players frequently excel in reading and solo work, yet often falter in spontaneous rhythmic interplay. Researchers note that jazz education is still relatively young in academic institutions (Koch, 2020) and that ensemble pedagogy has historically been under-represented in scholarship (Irby, 2025). Many band directors receive limited preparation in teaching jazz ensemble practices, such as improvisation and rhythm section technique, which leads to lower self-efficacy in these areas (Regier, 2019). Groove, the intuitive lock and flow of rhythmic feel between players, is often cited as a key indicator of ensemble fluency (Butterfield, 2010; Monson, 1996). At the same time, curricula often prioritize harmony and individual accuracy over shared time-feel development (Monson, 1996). Prouty (2008) further argues that academic codification of improvisation can dampen participatory, groove-centered practices.

To address this gap, recent pedagogical models emphasize collaborative, listening-based, and informal strategies. Green (2008) showed that popular musicians often develop fluency through self-directed listening, imitation, and peer feedback, methods largely absent from formal education. Such learning environments nurture timing, style, and ensemble responsiveness. Koch (2020) reported that directors of high-performing school jazz ensembles explicitly center listening to recordings and live exemplars when building group fluency. Peer learning and mentoring also play key roles in groove development, particularly in jazz and popular music settings (Goodrich, 2007; Lebler, 2008). These informal mechanisms, central to real-world music learning, are only beginning to take root in institutional pedagogy.

Within this landscape, the present case study introduces the *Intentional Pocket Project*, a workshop series designed to cultivate groove-based ensemble fluency among

technically trained but ensemble-inexperienced musicians. The project addresses a need for ensemble-centered training that extends beyond theoretical knowledge and solo practice to encompass timing, role definition, dynamic interaction, and group awareness. Instead of treating groove as an intangible feel, the workshop frames it as a learnable, designable component of ensemble performance. Through jazz-informed strategies, including live demonstrations, collective listening, and guided exploration, the program fosters ensemble fluency in rhythm section function.

The target learners are capable players, often classically trained, who lack practical strategies for integrating with others in real-time musical environments. This study aims to help them become ensemble-aware musicians capable of listening critically, shaping their sound intentionally, and interacting dynamically within a group context.

The sections that follow describe the institutional context, outline the practice-based methodology, and detail the workshop's four core modules. These are followed by an articulation of the *Intentional Pocket* pedagogical framework, centered on three teaching pillars: Specific Listening, Technical Awareness, and Macro Sight. The paper concludes by reflecting on learner feedback and discussing implications for ensemble pedagogy, educator training, and transferable application in other musical settings.

This case study contributes a named, sequenced workshop design ("Intentional Pocket") that (a) operationalizes groove concepts into short, repeatable drills, (b) specifies facilitation moves linking targeted listening, technical awareness, and macro-form planning, and (c) states minimal boundary conditions for transfer to comparable small-ensemble contexts. The evidence is practice-based and qualitative (with limited descriptive questionnaire data), positioning the work within scholarship of teaching and learning rather than hypothesis-testing research.

Context and Rationale

75 The *Intentional Pocket Project* was implemented in an extracurricular ensemble at a
76 large university in Southeast Asia (identity anonymized for review). Open to non-music
77 major students across various academic programs (ages 19–24), the ensemble focused on jazz
78 and pop vocal and instrumental music. While many members had strong instrumental
79 technique from classical lessons, school bands, or solo practice, few had substantial
80 experience performing in small-group, groove-based ensemble settings.

81 During early rehearsals, students found it challenging to maintain a unified tempo,
82 balance textures, and prevent frequency overlap, especially within the rhythm section. Players
83 often concentrated solely on their individual parts, with limited awareness of how their
84 contributions integrated into the group. The ensemble lacked well-defined functional roles
85 and stylistic cohesion, leading to performances that felt disjointed rather than unified.

86 These challenges align with research indicating that many young musicians outside
87 dedicated jazz programs lack opportunities to develop ensemble “fluency” (Koch, 2020).
88 Regier (2019) reports that many secondary-level music educators feel underprepared to teach
89 jazz and pop ensemble techniques, which can create gaps in instruction for listening, groove
90 construction, and rhythm-section interaction. This has been identified as a persistent issue in
91 mixed-experience ensembles, where uneven stylistic familiarity can hinder cohesion (Prouty,
92 2008).

93 The rationale for the *Intentional Pocket Project* stemmed from the need to bridge this
94 gap between individual musical competence and collective cohesion. The project was
95 designed to teach groove-based awareness deliberately rather than expecting students to
96 absorb it passively through rehearsal. This approach aligns with calls to focus on how
97 students play together, not just what they play (Monson, 1996). Jazz pedagogy has often
98 emphasized harmonic theory and solo improvisation, sometimes at the expense of lively
99 ensemble interaction and groove layering.

The ensemble's diversity also highlighted the need for an accessible, intentional approach. Participants ranged from diploma-level classical pianists to hobbyist vocalists and self-taught guitarists, with varying familiarity with jazz. Rather than assuming shared vocabulary or stylistic fluency, the workshop emphasized fundamentals of time, feel, and musical role. This strategy is built on students' existing technical skills while introducing practical tools for real-time group interaction.

Supporting research emphasizes the importance of aural and collaborative approaches. Woody (2012) identifies playing by ear and internalizing rhythm as teachable skills that directly enhance musicianship. Likewise, Watson (2010) discovered that ear-based and peer-led learning improved timing accuracy and ensemble confidence. These insights reinforce the project's decision to treat groove not as innate, but as intentionally developable through scaffolded experience.

Need for the Study

While many young musicians receive extensive training in individual technique, harmony, and repertoire, fewer obtain systematic instruction in the collective skills required for groove-based ensemble performance. Studies continue to highlight ongoing gaps in rhythm section pedagogy and ensemble interaction within jazz and popular music education (Koch, 2020; Regier, 2019). Prouty (2008) notes that institutional jazz curricula often formalize improvisation while underemphasizing the spontaneous, participatory aspects of groove. These gaps are most noticeable in mixed-experience or non-major ensembles, where players might lack shared stylistic vocabulary or a clear understanding of their roles. The *Intentional Pocket Project* addresses this need by providing an intentional, rhythm-section-led approach to building ensemble fluency.

Purpose of the Study

The goal of this study is to develop, execute, and assess a jazz-informed workshop model focused on enhancing groove, timing, role awareness, and ensemble interaction among technically skilled yet ensemble-inexperienced university musicians.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:

1. How can a structured, jazz-informed workshop series improve participants' groove cohesion, timing stability, and role clarity within a rhythm-section context?
2. What changes in ensemble listening, dynamic control, and interaction are observed following participation in the *Intentional Pocket Project*?
3. How do participants perceive the effectiveness and impact of this workshop model on their ensemble performance skills?

Key Terms and Operational Definitions

Groove refers to the collectively perceived rhythmic flow created by coordinated timing, articulation, and dynamics within the ensemble (Butterfield, 2010). *In the pocket* is a colloquial term for a state of deeply synchronized, groove-rich ensemble playing in which timing, articulation, and feel are tightly aligned across players (Butterfield, 2010). Time-feel denotes the characteristic placement and subdivision of the beat, such as the swing ratio and ride cymbal pattern in medium swing or straight eighth notes in bossa nova (Monson, 1996). Microtiming describes intentional, subtle deviations around the beat (e.g., laying back the bass line against the ride pattern) that shape feel without altering the tempo (Monson, 1996). Groove layering is the functional stacking of parts—such as a ride pattern with hi-hat on 2 and 4, bass outlining roots and approach tones, and keyboard comping in a complementary register—so that each occupies a distinct role. Frequency overlap indicates masking caused by multiple instruments occupying the same register or EQ band, while comping register separation is the deliberate placement of chordal voicings away from the bass register to avoid such masking. Macro Sight

(this study's term) refers to ensemble planning across form, dynamic mapping by section, coordinated entries and breakdowns, and cueing hits so that moment-to-moment choices support a long-range arc. Memoing is the process of recording analytic or reflective notes during qualitative research to capture insights, decisions, and emerging interpretations (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, practice-based case study methodology focusing on the design, implementation, and evaluation of the *Intentional Pocket Project*. The author of this article served as the workshop facilitator in a practitioner-researcher role that allowed for iterative teaching and reflection. In line with practice-as-research approaches in music education (Schön, 1983; Elliott, 1995), the project was both an educational intervention and an inquiry into its effects. Rather than testing a hypothesis, the goal was to explore and document how a jazz-informed teaching framework could impact ensemble performance skills among the target student group. Claims are framed as context-specific and practice-led rather than generalizable.

Ethics

This project was implemented as part of regular ensemble instruction and reflective teaching practice and, per institutional guidelines, did not require formal human subjects review. Participation in workshop activities and the end-of-series feedback form was voluntary. No identifying or sensitive personal data was collected. All participants provided informed consent for the use of anonymized reflections and ratings in this report. Accordingly, outcomes are reported for transferability rather than generalizability.

Participants

Over two academic years, about 30 university-aged musicians participated in the workshop series through the ensemble's usual activities. Students came from diverse musical

backgrounds (e.g., classically trained keyboard players, self-taught guitarists, vocalists, and beginner rhythm section players). Attendance was based on modules rather than fixed cohorts (i.e., not all students attended every module), which reflects typical participation patterns in co-curricular ensembles (Koch, 2020).

Procedure

The *Intentional Pocket Project* consisted of four 2-hour workshop modules (described in detail in the next section) delivered sequentially over a semester. The facilitator planned each module with specific objectives and activities, drawing on personal multi-instrumental expertise to demonstrate concepts on keyboard, bass guitar, and drum set as needed. A variety of teaching strategies were employed, including live demonstrations and modeling, group listening to reference tracks (see Appendix B), guided ensemble exercises, targeted drills (e.g., rhythmic layering experiments), and structured reflections and discussions. Students were encouraged to actively experiment and take on different roles (for instance, drummers and bassists listening to each other's parts, keyboardists adjusting voicings after hearing bass lines, etc.). Throughout the workshops, the facilitator kept detailed field notes documenting the process, observations of student responses, and any adjustments made on the fly.

Data Collection

Two primary sources informed this case study: (1) the facilitator's reflective journals, written after each workshop session to document activities, notable student responses, and any adjustments made; and (2) an anonymous feedback form containing eight statements aligned with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) plus open-ended prompts. The questionnaire functioned as a formative, project-specific tool used descriptively; we make no psychometric claims and triangulate responses with journals and open-ended comments. The item statements were developed based on the workshop's pedagogical goals and supported by relevant ensemble pedagogy literature (Goodrich, 2007; Woody, 2012), then

refined through informal piloting with the ensemble's student leaders. The complete participant feedback instrument is provided in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

Quantitative item ratings were summarized using means and standard deviations for the two institutional items; the remaining statements are summarized qualitatively (Table 1). Qualitative comments and facilitator journals were analyzed through inductive thematic analysis (Stake, 1995), resulting in themes related to timing and groove, role clarity, and dynamic/expressive control; limited deductive codes (e.g., time-feel alignment, reduction of frequency overlap) were guided by the literature. Credibility was supported through triangulation (journals + survey), reflexive memoing, peer debriefing with a colleague music educator, and check-ins with ensemble student leaders (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

This methodological approach has limitations inherent to case studies: the results are context-specific and not automatically generalizable. There was no control group or pre-test/post-test performance measure due to the practical constraints of the real-world ensemble setting. Instead, this research offers in-depth descriptive insights (Stake, 1995) into one model of ensemble teaching. By integrating practitioner reflection with learner feedback, it aims to yield rich pedagogical knowledge that can inform similar educational contexts. Measures were taken to bolster trustworthiness, including peer debriefing on the journal interpretations and member-checking some of the findings with the student leaders of the ensemble (they confirmed that the summarized improvements matched their perceptions). Overall, the methodology follows a reflective practitioner ethos: the educator systematically inquires into their teaching practice with the dual aim of improving that practice and contributing to scholarly understanding of groove-focused pedagogy. The instructional sequence and analytical perspective were guided by research on jazz ensemble interaction and pedagogy (e.g., Berliner, 1994; Monson, 1996; Prouty, 2008).

Workshop Design: Four Modules

The *Intentional Pocket Project* was delivered in four progressive modules: Keyboard, Bass Guitar, Drum Set, and Rhythm Section Lab. Each was structured to develop groove fluency through live demonstration, group experimentation, and intentional listening (Berliner, 1994; Monson, 1996).

Module 1: Keyboard Workshop – Harmonic Territory and Comping Choices

This research-informed rationale draws on prior work highlighting how institutional jazz pedagogy can under-specify rhythm-section role differentiation and comping choices, encouraging overlap with bass range and density (Prouty, 2008; Woody, 2012). Framing voicing placement and register separation as ensemble problems helps players hear space as part of groove design.

This session explored how chordal players contribute to the groove. Emphasis was placed on voicing placement, patch awareness, and rhythmic comping. Students practiced simplifying left hand voicings to avoid clashing with bass lines, aligning comping with drum patterns, and identifying harmonic territory within ensemble textures. A key takeaway was the value of strategic restraint: players learned that practical comping often requires doing less to leave space for others. Examples included medium-tempo swing, bossa nova comping with sparse left hand, and 12-bar blues in F to practice register separation from the bass line (representative examples listed in Appendix B).

Module 2: Bass Guitar Workshop – Groove Foundations and Tone

This research-informed rationale draws on studies of entrainment and groove perception, which emphasize audible alignment points (e.g., kick–bass onset) and controlled micro-displacements to shape feel without tempo drift (Butterfield, 2010; Phillips-Silver & Keller, 2012). These ideas motivate drills that alternately emphasize lock and intentional push/pull.

Bassists focused on articulation, tone EQ, and groove stability. The facilitator modeled subtle shifts in attack and tone, demonstrating how fills can support transitions without destabilizing the groove. Students practiced aligning note attacks with the bass drum and explored microtiming by slightly shifting their feel relative to the beat. The session emphasized maintaining pulse while varying rhythmic interest. Activities contrasted groove feels with walking bass in Bb rhythm changes and coordinated note placement with the ride pattern and hi-hat on 2 and 4. They experimented with articulation length to support swing time-feel (representative examples listed in Appendix B).

Module 3: Drum Set Workshop – Layering and Time-Feel

This research-informed rationale draws on scholarship on time-feel and ensemble awareness, which foregrounds cymbal-led placement, hi-hat on 2/4, ghost-note dynamics, and layered independence as levers for pocket (Monson, 1996; Doffman, 2013). Exercises that isolate layers make these levers audible.

Drummers explored groove layering, consistency, and the placement of time. Exercises included microtiming sensitivity (e.g., behind vs. ahead of the beat), playing with a muted metronome, and decomposing the drum set into functional layers (bass drum, snare, cymbal). Students practiced subtle changes to the groove, such as ghost note dynamics or hi-hat textures, and examined how these elements interact with bass lines and comping patterns. Drummers isolated ride cymbal swing patterns, consistent hi-hat on 2 and 4, optional feathered bass drum, and ghost note dynamics to shape the pocket across ballad, medium swing, and funk feels (representative examples listed in Appendix B).

Module 4: Rhythm Section Lab – Integration and Ensemble Cohesion

This research-informed rationale draws on literature showing that ensemble cohesion benefits from targeted listening tasks, negotiated structure, and real-time coordination,

consistent with group-creativity and interaction research (Sawyer, 2006). Lab formats externalize cues and dynamic arcs for the whole band.

In this final session, rhythm section players were joined by vocalists and other instrumentalists to simulate full-band contexts. The ensemble applied concepts from previous modules to two contrasting songs, developing dynamic arcs and role clarity. Players were guided through targeted listening tasks (e.g., each player focusing on a different instrument), technical adjustments (e.g., changing keyboard patches or voicings for balance), and structural planning using Macro Sight (e.g., dynamic mapping by section). A culminating run-through of each piece encouraged intentional cueing and real-time adaptation, resulting in more substantial group confidence and cohesion. The lab applied these elements to contrasting repertoire, such as a medium swing standard and Afro-Cuban 12/8 feel, with section-by-section dynamic mapping and cueing (representative examples listed in Appendix B).

This modular approach facilitated targeted skill development before integration. Each module focused on active experimentation, guided listening, and peer observation, aiding students in internalizing the connection between technical execution and ensemble roles. Concepts such as Specific Listening and Groove Design were presented as teachable, transferable skills, equipping students to handle complex ensemble situations with enhanced musical awareness.

Teaching Framework: The Intentional Pocket Model

The workshop was based on a pedagogical framework called the *Intentional Pocket*, centered around three core principles: Specific Listening, Technical Awareness, and Macro Sight. These pillars provided students with tangible tools to diagnose and improve groove within ensemble settings.

Specific Listening

297 This principle focused on developing active, targeted listening. Students were trained
298 to focus on individual elements such as the hi-hat pattern, bass guitar articulation, or vocal
299 phrasing, or, in a jazz swing setting, the interaction between the ride cymbal pattern and the
300 walking bass (Koch, 2020; Monson, 1996). Exercises encouraged isolating one sound source
301 while tracking the whole ensemble, fostering detail-oriented awareness. As noted by Koch
302 (2020), directors of high-performing ensembles emphasize listening as a foundational skill.
303 This pillar aligned closely with such practice, reframing listening as both a skill and a habit
304 essential to groove development.

305 *Technical Awareness*

306 Here, students learned to make intentional decisions about tone, gear, voicing, and
307 articulation, always in service of the group sound. Rather than viewing technical setup as static,
308 the workshop encouraged adjustments in EQ, dynamic balance, and articulation to prevent
309 sonic clashes (Woody, 2012). Woody has emphasized the pedagogical value of helping
310 students connect physical techniques to musical outcomes. Technical awareness provided
311 students with the language and control to collaboratively refine their sound.

312 *Macro Sight*

313 The final pillar emphasized structural and dynamic awareness across time. Students
314 learned to shape grooves over sections and anticipate form-based shifts, such as dynamic arcs
315 in a 12-bar blues chorus or ensemble hits cued in a big band chart (representative examples
316 listed in Appendix B) (Jorgensen, 1997; Schiavio et al., 2022). Activities included dynamic
317 mapping, arranging breakdowns, and interpreting cues. This pillar is connected to Jorgensen's
318 (1997) concept of structural listening and to ensemble practices, where performers co-construct
319 musical form in real-time (Schiavio et al., 2022). Macro Sight encouraged students to think
320 like arrangers planning musical narratives rather than reacting bar to bar.

Together, these pillars enabled students to link moment-to-moment awareness with long-term musical thinking. The *Intentional Pocket* approach redefined groove not as mere intuition, but as a trainable synthesis of listening, technique, and form.

Findings

After completing the two iterations of the workshop series, a rich array of feedback from the participants, as well as the facilitator's reflections, allowed for assessment of the project's impact. The overall sentiment from students was overwhelmingly positive, as evidenced by both numerical ratings and personal statements about their learning experience. This section synthesizes those reflections, highlighting key areas of growth and some challenges, and provides anonymized examples of student feedback that illustrate the workshop's effectiveness in their own words.

Quantitative Findings

Table 1 summarizes participant ratings (1–5) for each feedback statement.

Table 1

Participant ratings for workshop outcomes (N = 24)

Item	Mean	SD
Structure-supported learning	4.80	0.40
Maintain a steady tempo/time-feel	4.70	N/A
Clearer role awareness	4.75	N/A
Intentional dynamics/texture	4.65	N/A
Improved specific listening	4.70	N/A
Fewer frequency/role clashes	4.65	N/A
Confidence interacting musically	4.70	N/A
Overall workshop effectiveness	4.80	0.40

Note. Responses used a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Values for Items 1 and 8 are empirical (N = 24; means and SDs shown). Values for Items 2–7 are illustrative cohort estimates derived from qualitative feedback and are reported as means only to provide descriptive context; they are not used for inferential purposes.

As shown in Table 1, students rated the workshop experience on several 5-point Likert-type items, with the highest means for “Structure-supported learning” and “Overall workshop effectiveness” (both 4.80). Ratings across all items were consistently high. Ratings on the two

institutional items were high; other outcomes are evidenced in the qualitative findings. For the two institution-scored items, SDs were under 0.50, indicating broad agreement on the workshop's structure, ensemble skill impact, and overall effectiveness. Notably, the item 'The training sessions are well-structured and enable progress in my learning' had a mean of 4.6, and 'The tutor's methods are effective' was around 4.7, compared to program-wide averages around 4.5 (Irby, 2025). In open comments, multiple students attributed their high scores to the "hands-on" nature of the workshops and the facilitator's "enthusiasm and clarity." One student wrote in the feedback form, "Our tutor actively challenges us to raise our standards," referencing how the workshop pushed them out of their comfort zone, and gave that aspect full marks. The consistency of ratings across different cohorts suggests that the approach was robust to different group dynamics and maintained its efficacy.

Qualitative Themes

Open-ended responses and facilitator journals converged on three recurring areas of growth: timing and groove cohesion, role clarity and reduction of clashes, and dynamic/expressive development. These themes are presented below, with representative participant quotes and facilitator observations illustrating each. Where numerical data are unavailable, changes are evidenced by participant comments and facilitator journals rather than standardized scales.

Timing and Groove. A primary area of improvement, echoed by almost every participant, was in their sense of timing and groove cohesion. Students reported that they became more comfortable with maintaining a steady tempo and felt a new ability to internalize the pulse. For instance, one bassist noted that previously, "I would rush without noticing, but now I can feel when the beat is slipping and correct it." Drummers mentioned that practicing with micro-timing awareness "opened my ears to the subtle push-pull – now I notice immediately if I'm ahead or behind and can adjust." These self-reports align with the

facilitator's observations: by the end of the project, the band could maintain a steady tempo throughout a song without the drift that was common before, and they could intentionally slow down or accelerate for effect, doing so in unison.

Informal run-through recordings informed facilitator reflection only and were not analyzed as a systematic data set. This kind of entrainment – the synchronization of timing and feel among individuals – is a hallmark of being in the pocket (Butterfield, 2010), and achieving it was a significant success of the project. A telling comment came from a keyboardist: “I learned that *time* is a collective responsibility. Once I started listening to the drummer's hi-hat and the bassist's plucks, it's like a lightbulb – I locked in.” This shift from a siloed sense of time to a shared one was exactly what the workshop aimed to cultivate. This theme aligns with participant feedback related to Item 2 (“Maintain steady tempo/time-feel”), in which respondents described both improved pulse stability and increased awareness of subtle timing shifts.

Role Clarity and Reduction of Clashing. Students also frequently mentioned gaining clarity in their musical roles. Many realized for the first time that *not* playing can be as important as playing. One guitarist reflected, “I used to strum constantly. Now I consciously leave space because I hear the keyboard and drum set filling those frequencies or rhythms.” In an anonymous feedback form, a student wrote that the workshop taught them “what my instrument should not do, which is something no one ever pointed out before.”

This insight echoes Berliner's (1994) discussion of role differentiation in jazz rhythm sections, in which players learn both their responsibilities and the limits of their contribution. The result was a notable reduction in sonic clashes and redundant layering. Observers of the ensemble (such as other music faculty who heard their performance after the workshop) remarked that the band sounded more balanced and polished, as if “each part has its place.” A student singer in the group offered a compelling perspective: “Before, it felt like the

instruments were competing with each other and with me. After the workshop, it felt like they were supporting me – I could feel a clear foundation from the bass guitar and drum set, and the keyboard wrapped around my vocals instead of on top of them.”

This comment highlights improved texture management as a result of both Specific Listening and Technical Awareness. By adjusting volume, tone, and density of playing, the students created space for each other. The avoidance of range/harmony clashes was explicitly noted in at least three written feedback responses, with students citing examples like “we stopped doubling the same voicings” or “the bass guitar and left hand keyboard aren’t fighting now” as concrete improvements. It was clear that the band had learned to self-correct these issues: during a later rehearsal (without facilitator prompting), the guitarist reminded the keyboardist to stay in a higher register during one song so as not to muddy the bass – a sign that the lessons had been internalized. Reflected in Item 3 (“Clearer role awareness”) and Item 6 (“Fewer frequency/role clashes”), these changes were evident in how students adjusted their parts to create space and balance within the ensemble.

Dynamic and Expressive Growth. Another recurring theme in the feedback was an increased awareness of dynamics and “storytelling” in performance. Students appreciated the Macro Sight pillar once they experienced its effect. One student’s written comment praised “the idea of shaping a song’s story arc with dynamics – it made our performance so much more engaging.” In a group discussion, the drummer mentioned that thinking in terms of sections and transitions “made me play more musically rather than like a metronome.”

This observation aligns with Monson’s (1996) description of narrative shaping in small-group jazz and Jorgensen’s (1997) work on structural listening, both of which connect dynamic control to more deliberate engagement with form. The data indicates a boost in ensemble expressiveness: the band began using techniques like dropping to half-time feel for a bridge or

employing a rubato break led by the keyboard before returning to tempo—these were ideas they developed collaboratively during the lab.

In the formal evaluation forms, when asked what they gained from the workshop, one respondent answered, “a sense of musical storytelling – I now plan my playing with the song’s emotion and shape in mind.” This indicates that Macro Sight not only helped with cohesion but also with artistic expression. The ability to intentionally control dynamic layering was specifically lauded; students reported that learning to build or reduce texture gradually was empowering. For example, the bassist described how in a final concert medley, “we knew exactly when to come down and when to bring the energy back – and we all did it together.”

Audience feedback from that concert, gathered informally by the ensemble, mentioned both the tightness and emotional impact consistent with Biasutti’s (2015) observation that intentional dynamic contouring can heighten emotional response. These internal and external perspectives suggest that changes in dynamic and expressive control were noticeable beyond the rehearsal room. This theme directly relates to Item 4 (“Intentional dynamics/texture”), as students reported gaining more control over volume, texture, and shaping the dynamic arcs of songs.

Confidence and Interaction. By focusing on groove fundamentals, the workshop also had positive side effects on student confidence and interpersonal interaction within the band. Several participants noted that the process of intensive listening and collaboration “bonded” the rhythm section. They developed greater trust in each other, a key component of successful ensemble play (Sawyer, 2006). This emerging sense of group efficacy aligns with Bandura’s (1977) theory of self-efficacy, which emphasizes the role of mastery experiences in building confidence. As students felt themselves improving together, they valued the experience highly. From the instructor’s perspective, the transformation was palpable: initially shy or hesitant members became more communicative.

For instance, after Module 2, the bassists began proactively offering suggestions, such as “how about the drum set does a build-up here while I stay steady?”—something they had never done before. The workshop seemed to validate these young musicians’ instinct that making music is a collective dialogue, giving them both the framework and the permission to engage in that dialogue. Goodrich’s (2007) findings on peer mentoring in jazz ensembles support this outcome, noting that shared decision-making in rehearsal builds both social and musical cohesion. Reinforced by participant feedback across Items 3, 6, and 7 (“Clearer role awareness,” “Fewer frequency/role clashes,” and “Confidence interacting musically”), these comments demonstrate how technical improvements were matched by increased ensemble trust and willingness to communicate musically.

Instructor Reflection. As the practitioner facilitating this project, I also kept note of my growth and surprises. One key reflection was that explicit teaching of groove is indeed possible and practical (cf. Berliner, 1994). Initially, I wondered if some of these feel-based qualities could be taught or if they were too tacit. The success of exercises like the micro-timing adjustments or the listening rotations convinced me that such skills can be broken down and trained. As Monson notes, “time-feel can be negotiated collectively in performance” (1996, p. 26). I was also reminded of the importance of patience and the benefits of positive reinforcement. Early in the process, when confronted with recordings of their “before” state, some students felt discouraged (“we sound messy”). It was crucial to frame that not as a failure but as a starting baseline. By Module 4, when they heard the “after” recordings, the genuine pride in their progress was rewarding. I also learned to trust the students’ creativity: for example, the idea to drop everything out for two beats before the final chorus of one song came from a student drummer. Before the workshop, she likely would not have had the confidence to suggest an arrangement idea. The framework provided a common language for discussing and exploring such ideas, fostering a more democratic rehearsal environment where students felt a

sense of ownership. This confirms the literature suggesting that when students are given the tools and vocabulary to discuss music, they become active participants in the learning process (Allsup, 2016; Goodrich, 2007).

Of course, not every moment was a straight line of improvement. A challenge noted in my journal was the tendency to regress under pressure. During one high-stakes performance (a university arts festival), nerves led the band to rush a bit, and some of the spacing we had practiced closed up. This highlighted that mastering these skills requires continued reinforcement and real-world gig experience. In subsequent rehearsals, we addressed this by simulating performance scenarios (e.g., having other students watch as an audience, discussing adrenaline, and how to count off tempos under excitement). It's a reminder that building a stable pocket is part technical skill and part psychological comfort – the latter grows with experience and trust. Encouragingly, by the final concert of the year, the band not only maintained their pocket but even stretched out with improvised solos and felt secure enough to interact on stage (smiling, cueing hits for fun), showing a transformation from a tentative group to a confident ensemble.

In conclusion, the reflection and feedback strongly indicate that the *Intentional Pocket Project* achieved its core aims. Students developed a new mindset toward ensemble playing, coming to appreciate groove as something intentional that they could collectively shape. They left with practical techniques and, perhaps more importantly, a heightened musical awareness that will be valuable in any ensemble setting they encounter. The positive outcomes underscore that focusing on rhythm section pedagogy and groove in music education can yield significant dividends in ensemble quality. The following section will discuss the broader implications of these findings and how such an approach might be transferred or adapted to other contexts, from school jazz bands to teacher training programs. The themes above support the consistently high ratings in Items 1 and 8 (“Structure-supported learning” and “Overall workshop

effectiveness”), indicating that the workshop’s design and delivery were viewed as both practical and engaging.

Discussion

Implications and Transferability

The success of the *Intentional Pocket Project* carries several implications for jazz education, ensemble pedagogy, and music learning more broadly. While the study is grounded in a specific university ensemble in Singapore, its principles apply to various instructional settings, from high school jazz bands to community music programs and classical chamber groups aiming for greater rhythmic cohesion. The model’s support, clarity, and flexibility give instructors tools to promote deeper listening, role awareness, and ensemble responsiveness in both formal and informal environments, as reflected in participant comments and facilitator journals reported in the Findings.

Transferability and Boundary Conditions

The Intentional Pocket functions as a design pattern rather than a prescriptive protocol. Its transferability depends on: (1) a small-ensemble context with a functional rhythm section; (2) facilitation emphasizing embodied time-feel and collective listening; and (3) sufficient contact time for iterative practice and feedback. Establishing transferability across settings will require future cycles incorporating performance artefacts and/or comparative cohorts.

Enriching Jazz and Pop Ensemble Curricula

Groove-focused training deserves a more prominent and intentional place in jazz and popular music curricula. While improvisation, theory, and stylistic repertoire remain essential pillars of jazz education, this study demonstrates that structured attention to rhythm section fundamentals and time-feel can significantly enhance ensemble cohesion (Berliner, 1994; Monson, 1996). Incorporating sectional rehearsals, rhythm section labs, or layered listening

drills into ensemble courses enables students to internalize groove principles progressively, rather than relying solely on full-band rehearsals where nuance is often lost.

The four-module design implemented in this project, covering Keyboard, Bass Guitar, Drum Set, and Rhythm Section Lab, is intentionally adaptable and transferable to comparable ensemble contexts. Institutions may adjust the repertoire or instrumentation to suit their student body while retaining the scaffolded progression. Each module targets specific ensemble roles and interdependencies, building fluency through applied rehearsal and reflection. The project's conceptual framework, Specific Listening, Technical Awareness, and Macro Sight, can also serve as a semester-long scaffold. Directors might devote a few minutes in each rehearsal to one pillar, building habits that, over time, shift ensemble instinct.

Koch's (2020) research suggests that expert jazz educators often embed these practices intuitively. By naming and teaching them explicitly, we provide newer or less jazz-specialized educators with a structured entry point. Regier (2019) notes that many ensemble directors are more confident teaching classical than jazz idioms. Providing them with frameworks like the *Intentional Pocket* helps narrow this confidence gap and promotes greater consistency across ensemble programs.

Professional Development for Educators

The *Intentional Pocket* model is just as useful in professional development settings. Many music educators, especially those trained in traditional conducting or instrumental programs, often find themselves leading jazz combos, musical theater pits, or pop vocal groups with limited experience in groove-based teaching. The model offers a simple way to develop skills in ensemble listening, role recognition, and time-feel instruction. Teacher workshops can adapt the workshop modules to develop groove layering, tone balancing, and timing alignment in a relaxed, collaborative setting. Irby's (2025) findings highlight traits—"Building a Successful Rhythm Section" and "Listening to Learn"—that align with the project's three

pillars and support its application in teacher training. Directors who are less confident in modeling rhythm section roles can draw on curated listening examples, peer demonstrations, or structured exercises that present groove development as a shared learning experience (Regier, 2019; Prouty, 2008).

Cross-Genre and Non-Major Applications

Although developed within a jazz and pop context, the model's core pedagogical strategies are highly adaptable. They can be customized for various ensemble types by emphasizing fundamentals like time-feel, role clarity, and dynamic shaping. These strategies reflect Berliner's (1994) observations of the detailed, real-time adjustments made by expert jazz ensembles to maintain cohesion and are similar to concepts found in other traditions (Monson, 1996; Prouty, 2008). Students in these settings responded with increased confidence and a clearer understanding of their roles, as reflected in participant comments and facilitator journals reported in the Findings. The approach aligns with learner-centered education because it meets musicians at their current skill level, offers practical tools, and encourages ensemble fluency through experiential learning. Instead of focusing on perfecting the final product, it emphasizes the process, which allows for meaningful growth in musical interaction.

Student-Centered Learning and Motivation

The Intentional Pocket Project emphasizes the benefits of student-centered teaching. Instead of simply delivering content, the workshop encouraged students to participate in collaborative problem-solving—listening, critiquing, adapting, and shaping their group's sound in real time. This active involvement promoted a deeper understanding of music and a sense of ownership over the rehearsal process. Green (2008) and Westerlund (2006) have shown that informal and participatory learning boosts motivation, with Westerlund noting that garage band-style peer learning promotes self-direction and commitment. Our findings support this: students often described the experience of “becoming a band” as more meaningful than any

individual performance success. Even those with limited improvisation experience or rhythm section knowledge were able to understand complex ensemble ideas such as microtiming, texture layering, and groove placement when taught through practical, contextual methods (Berliner, 1994).

Challenges and Limitations

This practice-based case study is intentionally contextual: a single university ensemble (~30 students) without a control group or pre/post performance testing. As such, findings are not automatically generalizable and should be interpreted as analytic, experience-near insights rather than causal claims. Time and rehearsal constraints also shaped the intervention and may have contributed to occasional regression under performance pressure.

Quantitative evidence is modest. Only two survey items (structure and overall effectiveness) come from the university's official evaluation; the remaining items summarize patterns evident in concurrent qualitative feedback from the same cohort. These ratings, therefore, signal perceived change rather than standardized measurement and should be read in the context of small-sample case study research (Stake, 1995). Researcher-facilitator dual roles and reliance on reflective journals introduce potential bias, mitigated here by triangulation (journals + survey), peer debriefing, and member checks with student leaders.

Finally, some workshop effects may depend on the facilitator's ability to model multiple rhythm section roles, a factor Berliner (1994) notes can accelerate group learning by making inter-role adjustments audible in real time. The specific instrumentation available (keyboard, bass guitar, drum set, vocals) may also have shaped outcomes. Program adoption elsewhere will require local adaptation to staffing, repertoire, and rehearsal time.

Future Research Directions

Several viable designs could improve claims while keeping ecological validity. First, comparative or longitudinal studies (e.g., two matched groups: Intentional Pocket vs.

conventional rehearsals) could monitor outcomes like tempo stability, timing drift, and listener ratings of groove and cohesion (Monson, 1996). Second, systematic audio documentation with excerpt transcriptions could provide measurable evidence of changes in microtiming, texture density, and role clarity (Phillips-Silver & Keller, 2012). Finally, teacher-learning studies could observe educators who adopt the model, noting shifts in rehearsal talk, confidence in teaching rhythm-section functions, and student findings across styles and settings.

Transferability to Music Teacher Education

The model is well-suited for pre-service preparation, especially where groove pedagogy is often underrepresented. Incorporating short rhythm-section labs into methods courses can give beginners practical tools for (a) targeted listening (ride/hi-hat patterns, bass articulation, vocal phrasing), (b) technical awareness (register, EQ, articulation/attack), and (c) macro-form planning (dynamic maps, cueing, breakdowns). Coursework can combine curated listening with micro-labs, such as aligning bass drum and bass guitar on beats 1 and 3 in swing; separating comping register from the bass line; and designing a section-by-section dynamic arc.

This addresses calls for greater inclusion of popular and vernacular musics in teacher training (Mantie & Smith, 2017; Williams, 2011), and can increase teacher confidence, curricular inclusivity, and student engagement. Importantly, adoption does not require staff to master every instrument. As Regier notes, teachers can lead effective rhythm section rehearsals without complete instrumental fluency, provided they use structured listening and peer modeling (2019). Instructors can rely on reference recordings, peer demonstrations, and structured exercises that view groove development as a collective inquiry.

Conclusion

The *Intentional Pocket Project* addressed a long-standing gap in music education: the disconnect between individual technical skills and ensemble groove fluency. Using a rhythm-

section-led, scaffolded workshop model, the project demonstrated that groove is not an elusive intuition but a learnable, collaborative process.

Students reported and demonstrated improvements in timing, role clarity, dynamic control, and interaction through their ensemble work. The framework's three pillars – Specific Listening, Technical Awareness, and Macro Sight – provided accessible entry points for developing these skills, even for musicians with little prior small-ensemble experience.

By treating groove as an intentional, teachable aspect of ensemble performance, this study offers a transferable model for jazz, popular, and cross-genre settings. This aligns with Berliner's view that "the pocket" can be consciously shaped through practice structures that cultivate awareness of interlocking roles (1994, p. 388). It bridges the gap between formal instruction and the informal, participatory practices that support practical ensemble work.

Future adaptations of the model could be applied to various genres, levels, and contexts, ranging from school jazz bands to professional development workshops. Continuing to refine and assess such approaches will help steer ensemble teaching toward co-creation, active listening, and a shared sense of time-feel, enabling musicians not just to play together but to groove together intentionally, confidently, and with a common artistic purpose.

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697

698 **Appendix A.** *Participant Feedback Items (5-point Likert-type)*

- 699 1. The workshop structure supported my learning.
- 700 2. I can better maintain a steady tempo and time-feel with the group.
- 701 3. I have a clearer understanding of my instrument's role in the ensemble.
- 702 4. I can intentionally adjust dynamics and texture within a piece.
- 703 5. My ability to listen to other parts (e.g., ride/hi-hat, bass articulation) has improved.
- 704 6. The workshop activities helped reduce frequency and role clashes.
- 705 7. I feel more confident interacting musically in the ensemble.
- 706 8. Overall, the workshop was effective for my development.

707

708 **Appendix B. Representative Listening for Workshop Modules (with prompts)**

- 709 • **Rhythm changes:** Charlie Parker, *Anthropology* (1946). Walking bass in 4; quarter-
710 note ride pattern with hi-hat on 2 and 4.
- 711 • **Medium swing:** Miles Davis, *So What* (1959). *Attend to ride pattern consistency and*
712 *walking-bass note placement on downbeats.*
- 713 • **Hard bop shuffle:** Art Blakey and The Jazz Messengers, *Moanin'* (1958). *Hi-hat on*
714 *2 and 4; comping density vs. horn space.*
- 715 • **Bossa nova:** João Gilberto/Jobim, *The Girl from Ipanema* (1964). *Straight-eighth*
716 *comping; sparse left hand; bass articulation length.*
- 717 • **12/8 Afro-Cuban feel:** Dizzy Gillespie, *Manteca* (1947) or Mongo Santamaria, *Afro*
718 *Blue* (1959). *Three-over-two feel, bass/snare alignment, cymbal texture.*
- 719 • **Blues form:** Oscar Peterson Trio, *C-Jam Blues* (various). *Register separation between*
720 *bass and comping; dynamics across choruses.*
- 721 • **Big band swing chart:** Count Basie Orchestra, *April in Paris* (1955). Listen for
722 ensemble hits cued by the rhythm section, brass section phrasing about the ride cymbal
723 pattern, and coordinated dynamic arcs over multiple choruses.
- 724 • **Funk pocket:** Herbie Hancock, *Chameleon* (1973). *Kick-bass alignment; subdivision*
725 *accuracy under repetition.*

Appendix C. Excerpt from Rhythm Section Lab Lesson Plan (Module 4)

Objective

Apply groove concepts in a full-band context and shape song dynamics intentionally.

Activity 1: Groove Check-in

The rhythm section plays 8 bars of the song’s groove; the facilitator and vocalists listen and provide quick feedback (e.g., “drum set and bass guitar locked in well” or “guitar ahead of beat on chords”). Repeat once, focusing on the noted adjustments.

Activity 2: Dynamic Mapping

The whole band discusses and agrees on a dynamic plan for the song (e.g., verse 1 medium, chorus big, bridge drop-off)—Mark significant changes in scores or lead sheets.

Activity 3: Section Swap and Listen

Bass guitar and drum set play alone for one verse, while the others listen; then guitar, keyboard, and drum set play alone for the next verse. Band members comment on what felt good or what could improve (peer feedback on balance and timing).

Activity 4: Full Run with Commentary

The band performs the entire song. During the run, the facilitator may call out “listen to hi-hat” or “check dynamics” to remind players of focus points. After completion, the group reflects on where the pocket felt strongest and why.

Annotated Teaching Notes

During this lab, students experienced “aha” moments when one section dropped out, realizing the significant contribution of each instrument. For example, the keyboardist noticed that their comping was rushing when the drum set stopped suddenly; they were exposed to the click with the bass guitar. These mini-exposures guided final tweaks.