

Classroom Connections
By Nyssa Brown
Park Spanish Immersion School
6300 Walker Street
St. Louis Park, MN
nyssa_brown@yahoo.com

Classroom Connections: Problem Solving and Groupwork in the Kodály-Inspired Music Classroom

As a reflective teacher, I am constantly looking for disconnects between my students' learning needs and my teaching. In looking at my 4th, 5th, and 6th grade students, I found they were ready for different challenges and less teacher directed-instruction than I was allowing them. For the past two years, I have been working to meet their academic, musical and social needs through integrating problem-solving group work within our Kodály-inspired classroom.

As Kodály-inspired teachers we do an eloquent job of **guiding** students' mastery of sequential musical concepts, **directing** students' attention toward high-quality music, and **steering** students toward specific vocal production and ensemble sounds. All of these are noble and necessary aspects of a child's music education; I am in no way advocating that these activities disappear. In fact, I am grateful for my undergraduate and Kodály Levels training that have prepared me to ask some of the questions that prompted this article.

- Do students always learn best when the teacher is directing their learning?
- Could interaction with peers aid, instead of detract, from students' learning?
- What could students do with their musical knowledge if I got out of the way?
- Was I helping them too much?
- Do students have more skills (musical, academic, social, emotional) to share than I was allowing them to use in their classroom?
- Could upper elementary students relationships with one another be transformed by working collaboratively and recognizing one another's competence?
- When students are no longer in my classroom, will they be able to use these skills I have helped them develop? Or will they be so dependent on my leadership that they lack the discernment or confidence to be independently successful?

I always tell students, "I don't want you to need me. When you can do it yourself, then I know you have mastered the material. Then I know I have taught you (or provided a space for you to learn)." This seemingly subtle distinction quickly becomes imperative.

Kodály structure/sequence and group work may very well be the perfect combination to provide a framework for student learning, while still allowing students definitive, creative responsibility for the outcome of a musical project. Group work without sequence, parameters, and defined purpose often breeds musical experiences without concrete learning for students. While a Kodály sequence devoid of improvisation, problem solving, purposeful musical decision making, and true synthesis experiences also rob students of independent, personal, and collaborative music making.

Based in the work of Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner, scaffolding and social constructivism become cornerstones in problem-solving-based learning. Jackie Wiggins' book Teaching for Musical Understanding gives theoretical underpinnings as well as practical lesson plans to help music teachers incorporate problem-solving in the general music classroom. In a constructivist approach, where students are constructing their own learning, the roles of the teacher and student change dramatically. The teacher moves from what I call "sage on the stage" teaching, where the teacher holds all of important knowledge and imparts it to students, and instead becomes a coach and facilitator. In turn, students work in collaborative groups, where students are making significant, musical decisions within the intentional, but flexible, framework provided by the teacher.

The steps for setting up problem-solving opportunities in my classroom follow. For more information about components of my planning and training, please see the end of this article.

<p>Preparation/Review:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review prior knowledge. • Practice skills. • Revisit content. • Re-examine frameworks for learning.
<p>Problem/Contract</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of the "real" world • Practical • Job description
<p>Group Guidelines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will the group work together? • What are the guidelines for respectful, successful group work? • How can we live out our classroom rules while working in our groups? • How will it look and sound as we are working respectfully?
<p>Sentence Starters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we start sentences to give respectful, helpful feedback? • What if you disagree with someone? How will you handle that? • What if you feel someone else in the group isn't respecting you or your ideas? How will you respond? • What are some examples of sentence starters which give respectful, direct feedback to one of your group members?
<p>Expectations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be clear <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Show example of finished product. ○ What will the finished product look/sound/be like? ○ How will the students share their work? ○ What are the parameters? • Be flexible <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If students create a more interesting product (which may not exactly match the teacher's original example), allow them to restructure.

Be sure they articulate WHY their musical decisions necessitated that change.

Materials

- Hand them ONE container with all the materials they need.
- If you have back-to-back classes, have the first class re-stock and organize materials for the incoming class.
- Use visuals or checklists to help students know where things belong.

Groups

- Decide on group size ahead of time.
- Decide on how best to group:
 - For ability
 - For building a shared knowledge base between students
 - For increased cooperation between specific students
 - For social skills
- Decide how much choice they get.
 - Beginning of year = less choice
 - Earned trust = more choice

Kids Working/Teacher Coaching

- Kid's job:
 - Follow guidelines.
 - Work collaboratively.
 - Share ideas.
 - Respond with care to others' suggestions.
- Teacher's job:
 - Build vocabulary and conscious knowledge.
 - Encourage students to refine and articulate ideas.
 - Monitor group process.
 - Help groups facilitate respectful process.
 - Refocus groups.
 - Notice and verbalize success.

Sharing

- Use students' tastes, opinions, and knowledge to help them learn.
- Help students to define and verbalize opinions, causing students to create their own understanding.
- Take notes on what they say; create a knowledge bank on board or poster paper.
- Get one good idea from each group.
- Bring out the genius in what they said or did.
- Name their knowledge and tastes with musical vocabulary.

Examples of Lessons

If constructivism in the music classroom interests you, I highly recommend obtaining a copy of Jackie Wiggins book Teaching for Musical Understanding. The book contains many lessons plans designed as entry level, middle level, and higher level problems. Using these examples directly from the book or allowing these examples to inspire your own lesson planning can help to bring group work to life in your own classroom.

Final Thoughts

In order to implement collaborative group work successfully, students must demonstrate a certain level of respect and self control. As teachers, it is our job to help students learn these social skills and gauge their readiness to participate in collaborative activities. If some students are ready for this challenge and some are not, send some students off with a group project and keep the others in a teacher-facilitated learning activity.

A simple mathematical equation applies: Less teacher talk = more student learning. It is my experience with Kodály-inspired teachers that we are so concerned about wasting ANY time with students (a concern I whole-heartedly share) that we think we must constantly lead students' thinking. It can be frightening to us, as intentional pedagogical practitioners, to be quiet long enough to see what students know without our help. I think we are afraid of what we might or might not see in their learning and conversations! However, it is my experience, especially with upper elementary students, that when I get out of the way, an incredible amount of learning happens – usually far beyond what I “planned” for them to learn that day.

Students have their own competence that needs to be recognized, and collaborative group work allows them to contribute this to our classrooms in an authentic, inviting way. When students reach a point in the problem where their knowledge of piano, a band instrument, or song from the radio becomes useful, their sense of themselves as musicians and musical decision makers grows exponentially. They also learn to genuinely recognize competence in one another.

Finally, when students take the risk to share ideas, be creative, try new things, it is imperative to acknowledge that bold decision. Often students learn that there is one right answer, as on many tests, and they simply look for the “teacher-approved” way of solving a problem. Personally, one of my goals as a teacher is to help students BE the problem solvers who will make decisions about our collective future, inside and outside of music education. Their courageous practice of finding multiple solutions to a problem in my music class is to be celebrated and commended.

Frequently Asked Questions (and my concise responses)

What about students who come with very limited musical experiences, and therefore, have less musical foundation upon which to build?

- Start with where they are, honor what they know, broaden as they trust you more.
- Find a “hook” from where they are to where you want to draw them.
- Even in a large group setting, ask intriguing questions that ask them to problem solve as a group – including everyone, but relying more heavily on certain students' expertise areas.
- See Jackie Wiggins, [Teaching for Musical Understanding](#), entry level problems.

Don't you still have to do some “old fashioned, direct teaching?”

- Yes, without a doubt. However, this constructivist approach to teaching encourages me to think of alternatives to direct teaching whenever possible.

I only see my students once a week! How can I build skills and provide time for students to construct their own learning?

- This is a challenge. Perhaps you only include 1-2 assignments each year in such a format. The more I try, the more feasible it seems – and the easier it gets to envision and plan. It also seems to take less time to implement.

We have a set curriculum in our district. How can I add this on top of it?

- This isn't "on top of" anything. This could be an exploratory/introductory lesson. This could be an assessment. You could practice an element. The content of your teaching doesn't need to change. Your approach to it might.

Teacher Questioning

In asking students questions, I try to:

- Draw out what they know and ask them to "reason out" what they don't yet know.
- Ask them to think critically.
- Demand they justify their preferences, which is verbalizing their musical understanding and tastes.
- Facilitate thinking - without asking leading questions.
- Guide thinking into broader or more complex realms.

Open Ended Questions Help Students Think Bigger?

- Why do you think . . . ?
- Where did that come from? Where is that going?
- Why does it sound that way?
- Who (which musician) would have made that musical choice? Why do you think that?
- What style of music might have inspired your musical decision?
- What would happen if we changed . . . ?
- How would it sound if we added . . . ?
- What instrument should play that melody? Why?
- If we changed tonality/rhythm/meter, how would that affect the meaning/sound of the music?
- Why do you like that?

Selected Resources for Kodály-Inspired Teaching and Constructivism:

Graduate Programs in Music Education, University of St. Thomas,

- Course: Teaching and Learning (GMUS 601), Dr. Doug Orzolec.

Kodály Training/Studies

Levels at Brigham Young University; The Kodály Institute 3 week summer seminar, Hungary; Undergraduate studies at the Hartt School of Music, John Feierabend, pedagogy.

Responsive Classroom Training - www.responsiveclassroom.org

- approach to teaching students that values social learning as highly as academic learning, focus on building collaborative community and teacher language which empowers students and facilitates student learning.

Teaching for Musical Understanding, Jackie Wiggins

Would you like to learn more? Nyssa Brown will teach a week long course on Group work in the music classroom at the University of St. Thomas, Summer, 2007. Please visit www.stthomas.edu/GPME or contact Karen Howell at 651-962-5870, Email: KLHOWELL@stthomas.edu.

Nyssa Maria Brown is an elementary music specialist at Park Spanish Immersion School in St. Louis Park, Minnesota. In 2006, Nyssa was chosen by Education Minnesota, a state affiliate of NEA and AFT, to represent Minnesota at the national level in NEA's Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence. Ms. Brown was one of ten finalists for 2004 Minnesota Teacher of the Year and received a prestigious Milken Educator Award in 2004 from the Milken Family Foundation. Nyssa is a faculty member of the Kodály Levels Courses at Indiana University and James Madison University. She has spent time in Namibia and South Africa teaching and learning music and has participated in Eastman School of Music's Umculo: The Kimberley Project. She also studied in Hungary at the Kodály Institute's summer seminar. Nyssa released her first CD in October, 2000, "Packwood or Paradise." Ms. Brown graduated from the Hartt School of Music and Hartford College for Women in 1998 with a BMus in Education and a BArts in Women's Studies. Her Kodály certification was earned at Brigham Young University in 2001.