

Collaboration and Singing: Tools for Self-Discovery

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Singing, the process of songwriting, and student collaboration, when used together as tools for self-discovery, provide a powerful combination that facilitates learning and growth. Because this union is so influential, music educators should explore the strategy of combining these activities in the music classroom. This paper explores the experiences of a group of grade nine students who participated in a unique program developed in a Toronto-area school. The program, Arts Service Cumulative Evaluation Northwardbound Trip (ASCENT), uses constructivist principles to encourage students to write and sing their own compositions.

The focus of the paper is fourfold: 1) to highlight the significant contributions of ASCENT, the first program of its kind in Canada, to the larger holistic curriculum of the school; 2) to describe the content of the musical experiences, i.e., singing and songwriting in a collaborative and individual setting; 3) to describe student reflections and perceptions; and 4) to present reflections about the students' experiences. This paper concludes that the ASCENT program provides music educators with a natural opportunity to include important collaborative events in the educational lives of students—tools for self-discovery.

Today's activities were a breath of fresh air from traditional school. I found that the freedom to create whatever music I wanted yet still balancing that with the need of others and the organized structure helped to create an enjoyable experience. With this in mind I hope that I am able to participate in this again. (Emma Hobson, 15, Appleby College)

Introduction

Wouldn't it be nice if our students wrote this about our classes everyday? In the spring of 2002 our school (Appleby College) embarked on a new initiative to replace written exams with practical assessment for all of our grade nine students. The initial idea was suggested by a faculty member who was interested in creating a program that was more in keeping with current educational research.

More specifically, he was interested in the research that suggests "collaborative work and alternative assessment provide a more child-centred environment and encourages self-discovery." Researchers such as Perkins (1999), Duckworth (1996), and Reid (1997) suggest that by encouraging student collaboration we not only encourage diversity and inclusiveness, we encourage our students to take responsibility for their learning. Moreover, as educators teaching in a collaborative setting, we become "more aware of not only how students learn, but what they learn" (Prawat, 1992, p. 267).

Thus, the ASCENT program was born. The program runs for three weeks with two of the days being dedicated to arts programming. The purpose of the ASCENT program was to a) give the students experience in a real life setting, b) help students to come to understand the value of collaboration when working together toward a common goal and c) put into practice what they had learned over the course of the year.

The participants in the ASCENT program were students enrolled in the Ontario Ministry of Education rotational arts course, Comprehensive Arts (ALC10). In this course students were given 11 weeks of instruction in the following arts disciplines: Drama, Dance and Stomp (music). In this course the students receive minimal instruction and limited experience in any given discipline and, therefore, do not become experts; but rather, are given exposure to, and experience in, a variety of arts disciplines.

As music educators, our disciplines require us to have experience with a variety of assessment models including traditional written exams, practical, and performance-based assessment. Traditional written examinations have been the educational standard for years,

and the idea of creating an assessment model that would allow students to work together and be responsible for each other's success would prove to be complex. In this setting one of the main challenges would be keeping in mind the students who would take part in the ASCENT program. The student participants in the ASCENT program were: a) not all musicians (i.e., some of them were visual art students) and b) had varying degrees of expertise, experience, and musical knowledge. The only musical component that all of these students were guaranteed to have had, would have been the 11-week Stomp program in their ALC course.

My final challenge when planning the ASCENT program was to consider the students who were more comfortable working independently and liked the security of being responsible for only themselves. While most of the arts experience would be collaborative and performance-based, I made sure to include two written reflections that would give students who felt more confident with a traditional assessment model, an opportunity to excel in a medium with which they felt more comfortable—writing.

While I'm not suggesting that the following example of collaborative work is new or even cutting edge, what I am saying, is that I was so excited with the outcome that I had to share the news with music educators everywhere. The depth of expression and the richness of the students' writing demonstrated the degree to which the experience had moved them. After experiencing this alternative mode of expression, one of the participants said:

[It] allowed me to challenge myself and ultimately realize that I could do something I thought never imaginable.

Comments such as these inspired me to write about our singing and songwriting experience.

When designing the program, my challenge was to create an experience where the students would be involved in a creative, collaborative exercise that would incorporate skills that all of our students possessed. Elliott (as cited in Bryce, 2001) says: "A musical event offers many layers of meaning for discovery and as an educator our role is to find examples that include these layers and thus would be likely to be interesting to study" (p. 34). Given the varying degrees of the student's musical expertise and keeping Elliott's quote in mind, I chose singing and pop music as the area of study for the program. In doing so, I was using a style of music that would be familiar to many, if not all of the grade nine students and a medium that all of the students possessed—their voices.

In the end, I designed a program that initially had two purposes: 1) to introduce the different styles of popular music to students, and 2) to get the students working collaboratively on a musical event that encouraged discussion and singing. Upon completion, I realized that the exercise had several other values as well: self-empowerment and self-expression through collaboration; developing an appreciation for performance anxiety; and group discussion and teamwork. When I began, little did I realize that all of these outcomes would be achieved through an exercise of songwriting with a Canadian singer-songwriter named Mike Ford.

Songwriting as a Means of Communication

The objective of the songwriting lesson was to briefly introduce the students to the different styles of popular music; and then, in groups of four, students would be asked to write lyrics to a particular style of pop music. Mike took the students on a historical musical journey across Canada. With only the use of a guitar and a piano, Mike sang songs about St. John's, Newfoundland and other provinces until he had worked his way across the country; all the while, using different styles of music such as rhythm and blues, rap, punk, rock and roll and jazz. During the performance Mike discussed the meanings behind the lyrics of the songs and the power of self-expression through music.

At the end of his musical journey, students were then put into their groups and were asked to write their own lyrics which expressed something that was meaningful to them, or shared something that they would like to say. Students were allotted two hours for the

exercise. During that time, they were able to practice with Mike as their accompanist or they could write their own music and perform that as well. At the end of the exercise, the students were asked to perform their songs for their peers along with Mike. The task gave the students an opportunity to express themselves in a way with which they connected; using their own music, and their own words students were able to express what they wanted in a meaningful way. The following song is an example of one of their compositions. It describes visiting a fortune-teller on the streets of Toronto and then the fear that accompanies their realization of growing up and becoming ultimately responsible for their own life decisions.

Handing her two small quarters it was a symbol of our trust,
 Gathering up my courage I asked her what was to be.
 All I can remember is her saying
 Planet alignments are never stable,
 What people can't see they never understand,
 There won't always be someone there to hold your hand. (Kate Edmunson, 15)

Singing is a powerful source of self-expression and communication. Sloboda (as cited in Reid, 1993) says:

that most people take part in a musical activity such as singing [because] music is capable of arousing in us deep and significant emotions. Musical sounds become symbols for something other than pure sound, something which enables us to laugh, cry, like or dislike, be moved or be indifferent. (p. 71)

The students mentioned time and time again, how this exercise allowed them to express themselves creatively while it also allowed them to take risks that they otherwise may never have taken. As music educators we know that getting adolescent male singers to sing in class can sometimes be a near impossible feat. Through this workshop, I was able to create an environment where the students could a) see and listen to a male pop star, b) work on a project that the students could relate to, and c) sing.

Singing and Songwriting as a Means of Self Expression

Smith (1997) writes, "To be meaningful to children, art that is old must connect with the art that makes up their world. When we recognize that art tells the story of humankind, the connection is easily made (p.17)." The ASCENT songwriting exercise did just that.

During Mike Ford's performance, it became increasingly obvious to the students that the lyrics of the songs often had a political, personal, or emotional message to events that were happening in the world during the time in which the song was written. For example, he sang songs about the Adams Mine protest and the Oak Island Mystery. Mike also sang a song about a Toronto Maple Leafs hockey player named Bill Barilko. This song recounts a player's tragic death and how his body was missing for 10 years. During the 10 years that he was missing, the Toronto Maple Leafs never won a championship. Ten years following his death his body was found. That same year, the Toronto Maple Leafs won the Stanley Cup. The students found that fascinating! In fact, 95% of the student reflections mentioned this song.

Students connected with these songs because the events were about Canada, they recognized the names of cities, and in some cases the students had been to the places that Mike sang about. The Adams Mine protest was on the front pages of the Toronto Star newspaper for weeks. The students knew about the event and had their own opinion about the protest. Hockey is a Canadian past time. Canadians know who the Toronto Maple Leafs are, and furthermore, the young audience was filled with adolescent hockey players. Once again, the students were able to connect with the songs because the stories were about subjects relevant to their own lives.

Each of Mike's songs told a story and as the students listened, they began to realize that the songs were more than just words, but rather, stories and tales of people—real people and their lives. The students were able to make connections between the people writing the songs of years past and themselves. They too began to realize that they could write a story, which expressed something that was important to them. Additionally, students began to see how the lyrics and the different styles of music were also connected. For example: Protest songs of the 60s and 70s were often sung in a hard rock or punk rock style. Characteristics of punk rock music have been described as "something loud, harsh, almost on the verge of violent" (Szatmary, 1987, p.313). Electronic devices were also used to manipulate and intensify the sounds of the instruments. Today, protest songs continue to utilize the characteristics of punk rock; however, rap music which could also be described as, "harsh, loud and almost violent" dominates protest music of our youth today.

Our students wrote songs about the atrocity in Afghanistan, their experience with the ASCENT program, their teachers, and one group even wrote a song about being proud Canadians. The students' reflections shared that they learned how to express themselves through different types of music:

To me, my most valuable experience was learning how to write music and rhythm because it allows you to express what you feel inside, and bring that feeling, whether it is happy or sad, to the outside. (Paul Baldeserra, 15)

Self-Empowerment through Group Exploration

Self-empowerment is one of the most exciting facets of education. I have always been interested in how teachers motivate their students to achieve their best and realize their true potential. Wolk (2001) writes,

Allowing students one hour of classroom time in every school day to explore their interests complements the curriculum and creates life long learners.... Student ownership of learning has personal connections with who they are because it comes from within. Students are driven by their interests, life experiences curiosity and opinions. (p. 56)

The less structured environment of the songwriting class gave the students freedom to move to quiet place, or to a surrounding more conducive to their writing. For some, this meant going outside and sitting under a tree. The student reflections repeatedly mentioned how they enjoyed the freedom and felt that the surroundings gave them a chance to be more creative. During the collaboration stage of the activity, students could discuss freely issues and topics of their own interests. The outcome, were powerfully rich lyrics. This next piece speaks about AIDS, Africa, and the importance of taking responsibility for poverty around the world.

Africa is home, for many starving people,
Sick of being neglected from all of the world,
Wasting away in a hot shanty town,
Dying and forgotten, left out to dry,
Stop thinking 'bout ourselves
This about the world
Fighting for our lives
Unite as One. (Ryan Low, 14)

For many of the students, the songwriting exercise gave them an opportunity to express and share ideas in a medium that they were more comfortable with—writing. While many students found the music-making portion of the assignment interesting, for some, music is an area in which they struggle. Having an opportunity to share ideas and pool their strengths

with other classmates, meant for some, not having to be in the "limelight" but at the same time, being a valuable contributor to the final product. One student wrote:

Today I learned to value every member of the groups own opinions, as a little info from each person went into the final presentation...we were able to coordinate the music and the lyrics together in a short period of time.... Initially I thought this would be an impossible feat. (Billy Hatch, 15)

Conclusion

The mandate of the Arts ASCENT program was to encourage teamwork, discussion and music-making. This was achieved by giving the students the freedom to work together in an environment that they had created themselves. I found that the collaborative environment was comfortable and non-threatening; and because of this, they felt comfortable singing and sharing their final pieces with each other.

While watching the final presentations, I was interested in what they had written and what they had learned. I was amazed to see students who initially were nervous or skeptical about performing get up in front of their peers and shared their music freely. They were eager to participate, and the initial anxiety of performing had diminished significantly. Esther Kim, 15 wrote:

When I presented my song, I was quiet proud of myself. I sang by myself in front of the whole class...today I realized that I could be a musician in the future!

Their reflections shared that writing and performing music for their peers was challenging yet enjoyable. Comments like the following confirm the notion that self-empowerment, personal and musical growth are possible through collaborative classroom activities.

Today I feel that my confidence has been boosted through dancing and singing in front of people...today helped me to overcome my fear of being shy when it comes to presentations like this. (Monica Kirigin, 14)

The implications for educators who wish to establish programs like ASCENT in their own schools are challenging, yet not impossible. Altering the current method of music teaching, learning and assessment practices, as well as funding and scheduling, could make starting a program such as this difficult. However, if a fundamental shift in educational practice is supported by the administration, implementing new creative initiatives in the curriculum are feasible.

In closing, I encourage all of you (if you have not already) to embark on a creative lesson such as this. The outcome will inspire you and encourage you to continue to teach music. If what David Elliott and many others say is true, our job is to find ways to connect our students music with other styles of music, and finally, to foster their love of music. This collaborative exercise has served as a great starting point to get the students listening, talking, and singing. Ultimately, my goal is fulfill Emma's wish—to create an opportunity to have this type of collaborative unit in each grade band at Appleby College. Doing so will give Emma and all students in our community a chance "to participate in this again."

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