

Developing a Classroom Pedagogy for Thoughtful, Informal Music Making

Rachel Brashier

Our students engage in making music informally all the time, whether we choose to pull it into our classrooms or not. It is easy to think of informal, popular music making as an aside or as something outside of the music curriculum. Some may even look at it as something that hinders our formal teaching of music. Given that the majority of active musical interactions all of us, including our students, will have in our lives is with popular music making in an informal manner, we should consider how informal music making can be something we use to teach active music making. How can we use informal music making to help our students better identify and engage with different elements of music? How can these ideas be implemented pedagogically?



Lucy Green (2001, 2008) identified the processes commonly used by popular musicians and out-of-school music learners, a process she calls informal musiking. Green further asked how these activities could be translated into a pedagogy that places production and development of musical knowledge in the hands of the students themselves. Green (2001) codified several tenets of her informal musiking pedagogy wherein, as Ruth Wright (2016, p. 213) describes it, “Learners choose the music they learn themselves and it is music in which the learners are thoroughly encultured; [music] is learned by listening and copying recordings, rather than from notation; learning takes place in friendship groups; skills and knowledge are acquired according to individual need and often through peer teaching; and the musical areas of performing, composing, improvising, and listening are integrated with the emphasis on creativity.”

This seems an admirable pursuit, but this skill set was initially quite outside my comfort zone as a classically trained musician. Over time, I learned by trial-and-error and from my students how successful this approach could be as I tried several different ways of using informal and active music making pedagogically in my own classroom, and how much it fostered life-long learning for both me and my students. Since most educators tend to use things once we see them work with our own students, I would like to share one of my own pedagogical adaptations of Green’s principles for informal music making using a project I have consistently found successful in my own classroom. The first time I tried this lesson, the pacing felt very different than my typical lessons, but the energy from the students and the rapid improvement in skills I have witnessed as a result of teaching such lessons have convinced me that being patient and following the students through this project is key.

This project takes at least ten to twelve class periods of 30-45 minutes. Time is provided for students to work; I check in with students at intervals to see if I can be a resource. I first divide the students up into groups or ‘bands’ comprised of four to six students and ask them to name their groups. Next, I ask each group to select a popular tune, well-known jingle, or song from a movie that everyone likes as a group using their devices to access online resources. The group will then select the part of the song that they would like to ‘cover.’ I usually try to guide them towards the chorus or one verse and a chorus to ensure their project is not too long and the project is attainable. I provide some suggestions only if they get stuck as a group. After making their selection, the students are asked to listen to the segment they are going to cover three times as a group with no chatting or interruptions whatsoever.

After this intensive listening session, I provide access to a variety of instruments. Ideally, students have access to ukuleles, some barred classroom instruments, some drums, and I even encourage those who play in band or orchestra to bring their instrument to class for the duration of this project. The students work as independently as possible ideally. This means if they need to tune their ukulele, for example, they need to look up a tuning video online. After selecting instruments for their project, they are allowed to listen to the song as many times as they need to to start learning the music. They can listen or watch a video as many times as they need to, stopping and starting as they wish. They also are welcome to explore tabs, chords, and alternative notation

that others have placed online. The only true restriction is they are not allowed to download the traditional notation for the song.

I encourage them to cover the song using their instruments and voices in an unexpected manner that still allows listeners to identify the song they are covering. Students have several class periods to work on this, and then they use their devices to create music videos of their final creations. These videos are shared on a day in class. We watch each group's video, and students from other groups are encouraged to offer constructive feedback about what we noticed, what we valued, and what we wondered while watching the videos.

While this is not an activity that I grade based on the final product, I do confer briefly and individually with each student as the work is ongoing. This conference usually occurs right before we watch the music videos. Each student is asked what grade they gave themselves for effort and contribution to provide some one-on-one feedback. To increase students' awareness of what skills they have engaged with while doing this project, we have a group discussion after we watch the videos. As a class, I ask them different prompting questions such as: What did you learn as a student? What surprised you? What did you learn by yourself in some ways? Did you listen and copy in ways different from your normal ensemble experiences? Did you feel like we encouraged friendship group bonds? Did you feel your individual skill set was matched where it started, and encouraged to increase? Did you experience the musical areas of performing, composing, improvising, listening, and creativity?

While this was a project outside my comfort zone at first, it is now the one project my students ask for and want to repeat. Years after they leave my class, students bring up this project and remember things I have long forgotten. I think this is because students not only know they are learning, but they find it to be fun. The music learning process is very likely going to stick with them for a lifetime because of their experiences through it. This is why this project is so important to me. It is not the act of covering a popular song, or working in groups, or even learning how to use musical elements that have made this informal music-making activity such a key part of my approach to teaching music, particularly general music at a middle and secondary level. Rather, it is how this project seems to instill a life-long love of music learning and make students musically independent thinkers – the very core of what made me want to become a music teacher in the first place – which motivates me to return to it time and time again. I hope you find this project something worth trying with your students, and that it proves valuable in your own classroom as you adapt it to suit your own students' interests and your own teaching style.

Biography

Rachel Brashier is the Director of Music Education at the University of Wisconsin -Stevens Point. Originally from Illinois, she earned her Bachelors in Music Performance and Education at Eastern Illinois University and then taught K-12 music (general, vocal, and instrumental) full time in the Chicago area for over 12 years. She also holds Masters degrees in Musicology from Southern Illinois University Carbondale and in Ethnomusicology from the Eastman School of Music, and completed her PhD in Music Education at the Eastman School of Music. She served as a Visiting Professor of Music Education at Westminster Choir College in Princeton, NJ, and as an Assistant Professor of Music Education at Rowan University in Glassboro, NJ. She is currently doing research in the areas of music teacher identity development, informal music learning, and embodied musicking in communities of praxis. Dr. Brashier is interested in curriculum development, and has recently taught music methods courses as well as courses focused on social justice and critical pedagogy courses in music education.

Dr. Brashier is also a contralto and trained Greek Orthodox chanter who performs regularly. She is scheduled to present at the Narrative Inquiry in Music Conference 6 in Boston this May, and has presented at Narrative Inquiry in Music Conferences, the Society for Music Teacher Education Symposium, Mountain Lake Conferences, MayDay, the International Symposium on the Sociology of Music Education, the Society for Ethnomusicology Niagara Conference, the Feminist Theory in Music Conference, and the New York and New Jersey School Music Associations. She is regularly a clinician for school choirs of all ages, and has also conducted clinics for the Mid-Eastern Federation of Greek Orthodox Church Musicians and at the PEAK festival in Upstate NY. Dr. Brashier holds the T. Temple Tuttle Prize (Society for Ethnomusicology). In addition to her dissertation *Identity Politics and Politics of Identity: A Semiotic Approach to the Negotiation and Contestation of Music Teacher Identity among Early Career Music Teachers* (2019), has been published in *ACT* (2016) and *Ethnomusicology Review* (2014).