

The Case for Songwriting in the Curriculum

“Arts are the languages of civilization through which we express our fears, our anxieties, our curiosities, our hungers, our discoveries, our hopes.”
Charles Fowler (1990)

Creativity in Education

The arts have long held a place in education. Plato himself (as cited in Howard, 1992) is quoted as saying, “Art is the only instrument of early education that can penetrate into the recesses of the soul.” Dewey (1934), the leading spokesman for the Progressives, laid the groundwork for arts education, emphasizing the importance of the arts in authentic learning experiences and praising their benefits in providing integrated, complex opportunities for student learning.

As the American educational system moved away from the experiential approach of the Progressivists and toward standardized measurement of educational objectives, a group of educators headed by Bloom (1956) brought attention to the different levels of thinking required by educational tasks. They arranged thinking skills into a sequence, beginning with the lower levels of factual recall, moving to the higher levels of thinking involved in breaking down material through analysis to synthesizing elements in the creation of a new whole, and making judgments about value. The arts, utilizing creative processes, are ideal vehicles for developing higher-level thinking skills. Ching (1995), the Artistic Director of Opera Memphis, applies this concept to songwriting in the classroom:

Song writing gives us a great way to synthesize our knowledge and experience. Synthesis is one of the key parts of creativity, and this creativity, once found, can be applied to songs, music and beyond, to society and life itself. (p. 7)

Research on creativity by Torrance (1967) over several decades has shown that different children learn best when given opportunities to learn in ways suited to their motivation and abilities. He believes that creative behavior is a “powerful motivator for learning” (1965, p. 14). Not only does creativity provide a stimulus for learning, it also helps to deepen the learning experience, as explained by Hubbard (1996), who speaks of “elaborate processing”: “The more connections and different strategies for processing information we can use, the deeper our memory formations and the more wide-ranging our neural networks will be” (p. 94).

An understanding of children’s direct experience in the creation of their own knowledge is the basic concept of the work of Piaget, who stated, “The goal in education is not to increase the amount of knowledge but to create the possibilities for a child to invent and discover” (as cited by Silberman, 1973). This theory laid the groundwork for the constructivist conception of active learners who produce knowledge. The arts are ideal for this process, as explained by Armistead (1996): “The arts engage children, parents and teachers in the creative process” (p. 2) and adds, “It is child and teacher interest-driven,

characterized by action, not skill-driven tasks or exercise” (p. 8). The value of this interest factor should not be underestimated. In a research study exploring creativity in secondary education composition classes through songwriting, Satterwhite (1991) reported startling confirmation of this:

It was as if students had been sleepwalking through school and finally found a reason to wake up and participate. . . . Some of these students had never achieved any level of distinction in school and were now creating poems, songs, song lyrics, short stories, plays and descriptive essays . . . and showed more interest in school in general. (p. 33)

Support for incorporating the arts and creativity in the curriculum is also provided by the multi-dimensional view of “multiple intelligences” presented by Gardner (1993), which includes visual-spatial and musical intelligences among approximately eight intelligences he identifies. Moody (1990) speaks of the impact of Gardner’s theory on arts in education:

The implications of multiple intelligences provide a powerful new argument for strengthening education in and through the arts. In the main, the arts are a celebration of the human spirit. . . and may be equally important in motivating learning on the part of students who do not respond well to traditional learning. (p. xi)

National Support for Arts Education

With the passage of the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act (H.R. 1804)* in 1994, the arts were officially recognized as a core subject, along with the more traditional academic areas of English, mathematics, science, history, civics and government, geography, and foreign languages. This legislation set goals for students to have “demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter” in all the above subjects in preparation for citizenship, employment and life-long learning (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). From 1992 - 1994, The Consortium of National Arts Education Associations worked on the development and publication of voluntary national standards for each of the four arts disciplines (music, visual arts, theatre, and dance) in grades K - 12 (Music Educators National Conference, 1994). The standards address the knowledge, skills, and understanding that all students should acquire in the arts, and serve as a basis for each state in setting their own standards for arts education.

The United States government also supported arts education in Title V, Part D, Subpart 15 of the 2001 sweeping education legislation, “No Child Left Behind.” The on-line desktop reference explaining this section states, “Children learn in different ways. Findings from the NAEP 1997 Arts Report Card indicate that artistic experiences provide visual, kinetic, aural, and spatial learning. College Board data show that students who have participated in sequential arts programs perform significantly better on both the verbal and mathematics sections of the SAT than their nonparticipating peers” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

The reference mentioned above is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a federally-supported national survey which assesses students' progress in core academic subject areas. In 1997, NAEP conducted a national assessment in the arts (music, theatre, and visual arts) at grade 8. According to the executive summary of the NAEP 1997 Arts Report Card, "The central principle underlying the arts framework is that dance, music, theatre and visual arts are crucial components of a complete education. The arts have a unique capacity to integrate intellect, emotions, and physical skills in the creation of meaning." (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998).

Through these landmark documents, the federal government clearly identifies the arts as being valid and valuable elements of a balanced education in our schools.

Music in Education

The National Standards for Arts Education, a document collaboratively formulated and approved by the major professional organizations for dance education, music education, theatre education and visual arts education, provides the following rationale for music in the elementary curriculum (with similar statements for middle and secondary schools):

Performing, creating and responding to music are the fundamental music processes in which humans engage. Students, particularly in grades K-4, learn by doing. Singing, playing instruments, moving to music, and creating music enable them to acquire musical skills and knowledge that can be developed in no other way. . . . Further, to participate fully in a diverse, global society, students must understand their own historical and cultural heritage and those of others within their communities and beyond. Because music is a basic expression of human culture, every student should have access to a balanced, comprehensive, and sequential program of study in music. (Music Educators National Conference, 1994)

Students receiving the opportunity to accomplish all of the National Standards would be well-educated musically, indeed. However, the poor availability of trained staff makes this unlikely for many students. According to research by the National Commission on Music Education in 1991, "At the elementary level, 55% of all school districts in the nation are either unserved by a music specialist or served only part time." In some states, teacher education programs certify general elementary teachers to teach music to their classes based on taking merely one or two music courses.

According to the National Standards, a balanced music education program addresses both technical performance skills, such as those used in playing an instrument, and creative skills, as required to meet the standards of improvising, composing and arranging music. (See the section, "Songwriting and the National Standards for Arts Education.) In an educational environment in which arts program may be less than fully-funded, where music instructional time may be minimal (sometimes one-half hour a week, if that) and staff are stretched thin (or music is not their specialization), the creative aspects of music instruction are the ones most likely to be neglected. In the music section of the National Assessment of Educational Progress mentioned earlier, students demonstrated limited abilities in creating, with only 24% of students scoring "adequate" or

above on a simple task involving creating a rhythmic embellishment. Yet creative activities are the very ones that provide experiences in “finding and directing personal creativity” and “exercising the diverse skills of problem-solving” (National Commission on Music Education, 1991).

Each state has adopted or is developing a set of standards for different areas of the curriculum, establishing specific goals for students to achieve. Closely correlated with the national standards, these state standards set up specific grade-level standards for music instruction, and include among them ones focusing on creativity. For example, Virginia’s Music Standards of Learning (Virginia Board of Education, 2000) group the objectives into the categories of “perform,” “create,” “investigate,” and “connect.” Specific standards include ones such as “Create new verses to songs” and “Create music to enhance songs, stories, and poems” (second grade) and “Compose melodies, rhythms, and harmonies” (grades 6-8). (See the section “Songwriting and the Music Standards of Learning” for additional relevant standards.)

Having justified music education in general, and, more specifically, creative music learning experiences, let us now examine how songwriting can help reach the established goals for a well-rounded, enriched music education program.

The Role of Songwriting in the Classroom

It is within the context of high educational standards and tight budgetary realities that songwriting finds its place in the curriculum. Ching, Artistic Director at Opera Memphis explains:

Of all the art forms in the world, songs are some of the most pervasive. Perhaps because of their very success, their very ordinariness, they are among the least studied, especially in a traditional music curriculum. However, with students, songs are the basis for most of their everyday musical experience. The premise to the teaching of songwriting is that it is a universally available form of self-expression. (1995, p. 2)

In a search for a music curriculum that would interest fifth- and sixth-students, researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay attest to the universality of song: “Song is an ancient system of communication that has played a significant role in shaping civilization from the dawn of time. . . .Song conveys the feelings, values, joys, and fears that play a part in all our lives” (Bryan, 1980, p. 129).

The close association between lyric-writing and language arts instruction provides another curricular tie-in for songwriting activities. Innovative teachers at all levels have found songwriting a useful tool, from aiding the development of emergent reading and writing in a first-grade class (Smith, 2000) to studying elements of creative writing such as symbolism, allegory, and figurative language in secondary composition classes (Gantz, 1998 and Satterwhite, 1991). In a doctoral dissertation on the songwriting process in elementary classrooms, Stephenson (2001) found many connections between songwriting

and creative writing, including rhyme and meter; character, setting and theme; metaphor and imagery; and mechanics skills such as phonics blends and compound words. Songwriting allows students to apply those skills in authentic experiences of self-expression. Stephenson quotes an education director who explains, "One of the real values of teaching songwriting is that it gives the students the opportunity to use all those language and writing skills to say something that is uniquely theirs. It is difficult to create those kinds of experiences in schools" (p. 125).

Songwriting may also be used to accompany units of study, as described by Campbell et al. (1996): "When an entire class sings curriculum songs, not only is subject matter learned and creativity released, but the affective atmosphere of the class also improves" (p. 150). The effect of songwriting experiences on the motivation and attitude of students is an important factor to note. Miles (1993), a school counselor, reports that the use of songwriting can promote communication, trust and acceptance for students, especially those reluctant to disclose their feelings. Songwriting can provide these benefits to all students, including special populations. Special educator Monogan, who with his students wrote a collection of songs entitled "Special Music by Special Kids," reports, "The kids have experienced a boost in self-esteem and a feeling of accomplishment all too rare in their lives" (1989, p. 20).

Similar observations are made by Edgerton (1990), who states, "Creative group songwriting seems to be especially effective in developing group cohesiveness, increasing self-esteem, and providing an outlet for self-expression. . . . Students show great pride in their group when hearing the finished product" (p. 19). Bryan (1980) sums these observations up when he says, "Songmaking is truly a student-centered learning experience."

The following sections of this curriculum guide will present practical information for use in teaching songwriting within the school curriculum.