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Designing Compositional Tasks For Elementary Music Classrooms

Beth Ann Miller

Abstract
The goal of this action research project was to discover ways to facilitate student musical learning through developmentally appropriate compositional strategies within the limited context of the researcher’s own general music classes. Several specific questions guided the study which sought to determine whether classroom composition can be implemented with whole classes of very active elementary children, whether composition projects can be structured to fit within a limited time frame of 20-30 minutes once a week, and whether learning through composition can meet the needs of students with widely diverse ability levels. Referencing other research on children’s composition, the researcher discussed her findings and described a few lesson sequences at different grade levels.

“Wow!” exclaimed Mrs. Hall, the second grade teacher, “I didn’t know that second graders could compose music! Now you are readers, writers, illustrators, scientists and composers!” This acknowledgment made me smile just as widely as the students, for it seemed to verify the big change that composition had made in my teaching practice.

There has been a remarkable change in emphasis in the last thirty years from the dominant role of the teacher to the actions, emotion and cognition of the learner. For me, this change in focus from behaviorism to constructivism has sparked whole new avenues of interest and inquiry in my teaching practice in the elementary music classroom. Learning about constructivist theory has initiated a new set of ‘if-then’ suppositions. For example, if, indeed, learners are interactive with their environment rather than passive receptacles of information, then I need to honor their right and ability to make thoughtful musical choices. If learners construct their own knowledge, then my function changes from an authoritarian dispenser of knowledge to a facilitator who empowers children with curricular and musical choices.

If my goal for my students is that they acquire insight into connections and relationships through meaningful learning, then I must engage my students in making music in a deeper way than the old music methods dictum of ‘sing, play, move!’ I must guide my students in their own personal investigation into the nature of music—even into improvisational and compositional experiences. I had rarely tried composition activities in my first twenty-something years of teaching, but when I accepted that student-constructed knowledge is more meaningful and ultimately more memorable than teacher-dictated knowledge, student composition became a mandate. I wanted my students to experience the deep conceptual understanding that Sloboda (1985) claims results from student composition: “The way in which people represent music to themselves determines how well they can remember and perform it. Composition and improvisation require the generation of such
representations, and perception involves the listener constructing them” (p. 3). Still I fretted: how could I achieve that kind of student involvement with whole classes of very active elementary children? Could composition projects be structured to fit within my limited time frame of 20-35 minutes once a week? Could learning through guided composition activities meet the needs of the diverse ability levels found in any public school classroom?

Related Research

Constructivist theory stipulates, logically, that new learning is based upon old learning. Bruner (1996) insists that learning proceeds from the known to the unknown and that new knowledge is built upon prior experience. This belief transfers into education in the form of a spiral curriculum wherein the same basic elements are revisited throughout the students’ years of study in ever-increasing complexity (p. 119). I had been using a spiral curriculum to help students learn about the basic music elements for my entire career, but now how could I integrate a compositional component into my curriculum that would reflect and encourage the natural developmental nature of my students’ acquisition of musical learning?

A number of writers have proposed developmental guidelines that have informed me as I integrate composition into my music curriculum (such as Bruner, 1960, and Wolf and Gardner, 1980). Their work has substantiated my method of focusing on more concrete iconic representations rather than on traditional music notation for the first few years of a student’s music education.

Reading the work of other researchers (Blackburn, 1998; Deturk, 1989; Gromko, 1998; Kratus, 1995; Levi, 1991; Smith, 1994) has also helped to formulate my questions and influence my decisions concerning composition in my classroom. For example, Barrett (1997) provided me with a history of student composition which not only outlined previous work and various opinions, but also assured me I was not alone in thinking that my students need to actively manipulate music elements in order to understand the whole of music. Her history also provided me with new questions important in an educational setting, such as whether or not the composing process should necessarily be judged by the resulting product. While some research (such as Barrett, 1997, 1999; Kratus, 1995; Swanwick and Tillman, 1986) focused on individuals or small groups of children, others like Wiggins (1990; 1992), Kashub (1997), Upitis (1990) and Hamilton (1998) have provided me with models for composing in whole class situations.

Teaching for twenty years among a group of elementary teachers who have been interested in literature-based education has influenced me, also. When they studied Cambourne (1988), Goodman (1986) and other sources, I read along and realized more acutely the close ties between the reading/writing process in language and the reading/writing process in music. As they became convinced that writing was the critical other half of reading, I began to ask myself if I, too, had been leaving out half the process. “Why,” I asked myself, “am I trying to teach my students to read music without also allowing them to experience writing?”

And as my colleagues began to look for and acknowledge the meaning in their students’ writing before they worried about the editing process, I began to see that my students might be able to express their musical ideas without a complete knowledge of traditional notation. In studying Boardman’s (1997) musical adaptations of Bruner’s theories, I began to see how it might be done through iconic representations of the sound. As Burns (1997) writes:
Music educators must begin to consider invented notation as an avenue for creative expression in music and provide students with more opportunities to create in the music classroom. Based on the findings of Bamberger, children do, in fact, have the ability to invent notations for rhythms and melodies when they are provided with the opportunity to do so. It is our responsibility as music educators to seek out activities for invention and to adapt them for various grade levels of music instruction (my emphasis). In providing invention activities for our students, we begin to recognize the importance of creative activities for all learners and are able to offer them more variety in the music classroom. (p. 14-15)

Invented notation has also been a topic for other researchers (Barrett, 1997; Upitis, 1992) trying to understand how children think as they represent sound in concrete terms.

As a result of studying these and other sources, the goal of this research became to explore ways of facilitating student musical exploration and invention through developmentally appropriate compositional strategies within the context of my general music classes. Although researchers have suggested that student composition follows a definite developmental path, few have proposed specific whole classroom activities that might act as scaffolding for this natural development. Would such progressive and guided compositional activities meet the needs of the wide intellectual and emotional diversity of my students? Could we accomplish the composition tasks in our limited class time?

Setting and Methodology

I teach classes of 20-24 students in kindergarten through grade five in a rural lower-and middle-class community of under 13,000. I travel between two school buildings, teaching in a designated music room in one school and ‘on a cart’ in the other building. Students who are identified with special needs attend music class even if they study reading or math in a special education classroom. Each class receives music instruction only once a week in periods ranging from 20 minutes for kindergarten, to 35 minutes for grades four and five.

As an investigator working in my own classrooms, my methodology might be described as naturalistic action research. Two characteristics of action research consistently found in this research were a recurring cycle of action/reflection and collaboration (receiving feedback from the non-music educators in my two schools). The process of action and reflection meant that I consistently reconciled practice with theory before and after teaching episodes, asking if the lesson plans were based on sound learning theory, then reflecting upon the success of the lesson with my own particular students. The collaboration came from interaction with the classroom teachers as we discussed the successes of particular students, general learning theory, and aspects of the music assignments that were integrated with the general curriculum.

Data were collected in numerous ways. My teacher-researcher observations were entered in a research journal where they were coded and categorized by topic. Students were videotaped both during their composing process and during performances for later analysis. Artifacts collected included copies of student compositions. Member checking, suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to be “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314), included student feedback in the form of written self-critique papers, group critique papers, and project critiques as well as their videotaped verbal critiques. Written and aural feedback was also obtained from general classroom teachers.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that trustworthiness may be approached through prolonged engagement and persistent observation (p. 301). My search for a developmentally appropriate and sequential curriculum of composition experiences

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for my classes has stretched over a number of years, and each lesson or unit has been taught to numerous classes. Therefore, I have had both long-term association with the same students and repeated opportunities to observe the success of the composition activities.

**Findings**

Although this research project is ongoing and reflects my continued professional growth, some conclusions seem permissible. I have learned that it is possible to successfully integrate improvisation and composition into all grades, despite limitations of student ability levels, time on task and class size. It is exciting to realize that composition projects allow all children to work at their own levels in a way that the old whole-group instruction did not. For example, if a particular child is only ready to use invented notation to represent steady beats, he can write his music that way, while his classmate may use traditional quarter notes. All children, regardless of intellectual level, have been able to participate in group composition activities and to discuss and perform their compositions. Those students labeled ‘special education’ who may not have the ability to read well or to write traditional text have often shown themselves to be creative and aurally proficient at the compositional activities. Thus they appear to function more nearly as equals to the academically advanced students. Similarly, those students who are especially advanced or creative can take a composition project further than the rest of the class. For example, in a rhythmic composition project, a gifted student might voluntarily add a melody (see Figure 1). To compensate for the diversity of ability levels, I often group children in pairs or triplets, sometimes seeking insight on good working groups from their classroom teacher. At other times, I find that careful instruction that includes modeling is enough accommodation. I might use one of the least attentive students to help me model the process so that I know he or she is engaged right away.

I have been surprised to discover that children have enough recall to continue a compositional project from week to week, if necessary. In fact, the individual nature of composition seems to enhance their recall because they are more fully engaged in such projects.

Proof of their retention of musical concepts is evident when music vocabulary and core knowledge transfers to subsequent projects or discussion. Consider Brian’s story:

In December Brian’s kindergarten class experienced long and short sounds in a variety of ways: singing, moving, playing and reading long and short lines as iconic notation. They used their fingers and voices to trace a chart showing long and short Christmas decorations. Finally, they composed their own long-short composition using long and short decorations on a Christmas tree (see Figure 2). A month or more later, a different teacher asked Brian’s class to “draw something containing circles”. When Brian drew his picture (shown in Figure 3), she asked what it was supposed to be. “Why, it’s music, of course!” Brian answered, surprised that a teacher wouldn’t know, and promptly performed his composition for her.

That kind of student retention and transfer is ultimately the most convincing proof of the credibility of the curriculum.
Figure 1
First grade long-short composition

Figure 2
Kindergarten long-short composition

Figure 3
Brian's composition
I have learned to fashion my units into mini-lessons that can be completed in a series of short class periods, only giving the students small assignments until the whole project is complete. For example, when the fifth graders were studying tone color, I asked them to add sounds (instrumental, vocal, and found sounds) to enhance poems. After they had chosen their instruments, I added a component on form in which I asked them to add an introduction, interlude, coda, or some repetition to the original poem. Then, in a third class period, I asked them to add dynamics and tempo features. This technique provides the students with a less hurried atmosphere, hopefully avoiding the tendency to rush through the composing process that Kratus (1995) suggests is a pitfall of the short class periods in public schools.

Composing with a full class is often a noisy endeavor, but I have learned that most children can concentrate through the confusion. Those who seem to have the most trouble in that situation are children who are very disposed to an aural learning style. Interestingly, these are often students who have tested into the learning resource room as poor readers or inattentive students. I have learned to facilitate those students by allowing them to work in the hall right outside my door or to find a nook in the room, such as a little separated place under a table or behind a bookcase.

One important facet of my research is the conviction that my spiral curriculum must reflect the developmental nature of children’s cognition. I have found that existing research can help me fashion my curriculum, but, as one might expect, my own careful observation of my students is still the best guide. The wonderful thing about using composition is that I am able to assess what they know so much better than I could before. It was easy to fool myself into thinking that the entire class understood a musical concept when, actually, only a few students were doing all the answering. Now, each child is not only personally engaged in the music, but is personally accountable for showing what he knows.

To illustrate the developmental nature of the composition component taking shape in my curriculum, I shall continue by describing three sample lesson designs.

**First Grade**

The first graders had categorized various classroom instruments according to timbre by placing them on mats showing iconic representations of ringing, booming, shaking and tapping sounds. There had been time for discussion about various ways to play certain instruments and about how to produce changes in volume. Then the instruments were set aside while they heard *Listen to the Rain* (Martin & Archambault, 1988), a picture book describing the progression of a thunderstorm from the first soft sprinkles to the thunderous climax to the last drips from the trees.

Working as a class, the children composed an accompaniment for the book using the instruments already categorized and at hand. As they made suggestions, I drew icons (such as raindrops or jagged lightning) on a large poster showing a long crescendo and diminuendo sign. While their first performance included the words of the book, their second performance consisted of music only. So, the text and pictures of the book functioned as the scaffolding for their composition as they worked, but were not a necessary part of their final creation. Finally, we audiotaped our composition and used it as we danced the story of the rainstorm.

This composition activity was more advanced than a kindergarten improvisation because it required use of iconic in addition to enactive
representations. It was also written instead of strictly improvised, although I did the writing for them. In addition to the considerable expressive value of the music, the lesson illustrated that writing down our work allows us to remember it and share it by playing it again for other audiences in subsequent class meetings.

Through lessons such as this one, I learned that the power of music to unify a group of people even exists at the first grade level. Once a class has completed composing and performing *Listen to the Rain*, their conduct and attitude has permanently improved in music class.

Swanwick and Tillman (1986) suggest that students at this age may use overt musical gestures that reflect their immediate feeling. They write: “In instrumental pieces [personal expression] is mostly evident through the exploitation of changes of speed and dynamic level, climaxes being created by getting faster and louder” (p. 332). So it was with our *Listen to the Rain* composition. One might ask if giving the children the opportunity to compose and perform such a piece which so satisfactorily lends itself to blatant and romantic gestures (such as the accelerando and crescendo of the approaching rainstorm) serves to fulfill a musical need for this particular age group.

**Second Grade**

Henry Cowell’s *The Banshee* (in Beethoven, 1995, grade 2) provided the second graders with a delightfully spooky listening experience and the opportunity to try playing the *inside* of the piano as Cowell had done. The children practiced following the listening map of the piece, which is consistent with suppositions (Bruner, 1960; Boardman, 1997) that children of this age learn through enactment. The second graders studied the key or legend that described Cowell’s various techniques while we talked about the way the icons matched and represented the sounds. I modeled their assignment with a student before they began working through my written directions:

1. Each partner choose only one of the four instruments at your station. (In allowing them to choose one instrument from four possibilities, they gain the personal freedom to be creative, but experience the natural constraints placed upon any composer when choosing timbre and structure.)

2. Draw a picture of the sound of that instrument in your key box like we see on Mr. Cowell’s piece.

3. Improvise your piece with your partner, then write it down.

4. Add a title and the composers’ names.

5. Practice for your performance.

Both Wolf and Gardner (1980) and Swanwick and Tillman (1986) describe the first stage of musical development as characterized by a neurological visceral delight with the sounds themselves followed soon by a desire to master the instrument. In my classes, where there is a wide range of abilities and past experiences, I have seen a number of children for whom the immediate concern, even as 7-year-old second graders, is the sheer sound. Those children shake the maracas or beat the drum as loudly and fast as they can while the other students begin working to organize the sounds. As I have come to understand that these few are needing to work at that
sensory stage of development, I am more patient while they explore the tone color and more tactful in guiding them into a more structured activity. Bruner reminds us that any developmental stage theory must take into consideration the past experiences of the learner.

I worry that, because of my modeling and explicit written directions, I impose parameters that stifle student creativity. However, both Gardner and Swanwick identify these 7-year-olds as imitators who represent sound best through enactive representations. So, although this activity requires higher order thinking skills and the same kind of decision making required by ‘real’ composers (how to begin and end, what timbres to use, how to vary the texture, etc.), I should not be surprised if they imitate my example in a strict pedantic way. After all, I did not add any tempo or dynamic changes myself, for fear of confusing the original directions. However, I follow the initial lesson with a mini-lesson on dynamic and tempo considerations after their compositions are finished and allow another work session to edit those expressive components into their piece.

This second grade compositional technique develops out of the first grade experience, since they now have to write down their ideas with iconic representations of their own devising. While The Banshee provided a model, it did not offer the scaffolding that Listen to the Rain supplied. This activity also required creation and performance by partners instead of a whole group effort. The students begin to see, through this lesson, that they can use an icon to stand for a sound and to consider themselves ‘real’ composers. (See Figure 4 for an example of student work.)

Figure 4
Second grade student composition based on Banshee model
Teacher responses note that this example of music composition supports higher order thinking goals common to the entire curriculum:

This year the second grade composition came right when I was teaching map reading. The map key and composition key worked hand-in-hand. They helped reinforce each other and the idea that symbols stand for something else. The children loved that I could ‘read’ their music ‘writing’ and play their pieces. We played (and replayed) their pieces over several days before sending them home. It was great to have them see some connections between social studies map reading skills, music composition, and reading. (second grade teacher’s written response, 2002)

Fifth Grade

Through experience in elementary chorus experience, recorder lessons in fourth grade and the fifth grade band program, fifth graders have had more experiences with various styles and compositional techniques than in previous years. Those few students who have been taking private piano lessons are becoming more advanced in their studies, also. Therefore, in the general music classroom I begin to see much more diversity in skill levels and understanding of conventional music making among the students as the young musicians begin to surpass those students who are not taking outside music lessons. Now, as we compose, I notice some children trying techniques they’ve played on their instrument or experienced in chorus.

Some students also are beginning to realize the power of music to augment the expressive notions found in poetry. When we compose melodies for student-chosen poetry, a few students are able to talk about how they purposely chose a certain melody, rhythm or tone color to describe the words or feelings of their poem. This seems to indicate not only a willingness to speculate in their musical choices, but an awareness of the descriptive power of the music. For example, fifth grade Josh explained that he wrote “Chipmunks” (see Figure 5) with the quick, steady quarter notes because “that is the way that chipmunks sound” and that he used the repeated pattern in the first line to match the repeated words.

Discussion and Implications

Although naturalistic action research is necessarily contextual and personalized, my professional situation has so much in common with many elementary general music teachers that I believe my experiences may be helpful to others in similar positions. Be that as it may, I have proved that my methods are at least transferable to new classes of my own students from one academic year to the next. In addition, long-term and continuing interactions with my student-subjects from kindergarten to fifth grade, as well as occasional comparative testing, seem to indicate that they are learning at least as much about music as other students in comparable elementary situations.

Composition actually allows the students to work at their own level of understanding more than other more traditional music class activities. As Deturk (1989) writes, “Creative musical thinking most often involves the unique, personal manipulation of the materials of music as currently understood by the creative thinker” (p. 27). The development of musical understanding may be slow, especially if instruction is limited to 20-30 minutes a week, but if one follows progress from kindergarten to fifth grade, results may be more fully appreciated.
Deturk (1989, p. 30) lists three points that elementary music teachers might remember when designing a curriculum to encourage musical learning through composition:

1. “The creative thinker must understand the elements of music.” This means that we must teach for understanding of the basic elements: rhythm, melody, harmony, timbre, form and expressive qualities. Other activities and experiences besides composition serve to enhance composition by informing students about such things as style, convention, and vocabulary. Those activities or lessons need to be varied and comprehensive both in content and in presentation methods in order to complement the learning styles of all students. Lessons must be created which are sequential and spiral and which heed the developmental stages of the learners.

2. “The creative thinker must have high-quality resources available for comparison.” If class sessions are limited to only once or twice a week, choice of repertoire becomes crucial; we must choose the best music. When the fourth graders compose variations on the note ‘A’ to play on their recorders with Glière’s *Russian Sailor’s Dance*, I know that they are participating in fine music in the same fulfilling way that orchestral members do.

3. “The creative thinker must wish to, and know how to, carry out the process of production.” This means that students must be motivated with the choice of materials, music, and words. Teachers should prove they value the compositional
process by devoting time, resources, encouragement and nonrestrictive models to their creative efforts. Activities should be sequenced both over the long term and within each lesson to provide the secure footing of small incremental steps so that all students can succeed. For example, the following sequential progression allowed my first graders to fall in love with Haydn’s *Surprise Symphony* and to compose solo pieces:

a. Telling them the story of Haydn’s *Surprise Symphony* (second movement, main theme), supported by large posters of an artist’s rendition of the scene, provided motivation to hear the music.

b. As one child pointed, I unrolled a large scroll depicting the rhythm and melody of the piece with long and short lines. They applied a sticker showing an exclamation point on the line where the orchestra played the loud note. Then several children were chosen to try following along on the map as the music played.

c. Children touched their own smaller versions of the large listening map and added a ‘!’ sticker, also.

d. “Take your music home to show your family,” I suggested. “Can you sing it to show them how it goes?” The children sang the melody as a class, using the map as they read the music.

e. The children danced the music to ‘show how it goes.’

f. The children played the rhythm of the music with rhythm sticks providing me with a good opportunity to assess individual accuracy.

g. The children improvised their own long and short patterns using 1:1 and 2:1 strips of paper and clapped them, then glued their final edit onto the paper for posterity. Finally, they performed their own compositions for the class. (as shown in Figure 1.)

Only by experiencing the piece many times through various modes (auditory, visual, kinesthetic and tactile) and various representations (enactive and iconic) were the children familiar enough with the music to be successful in dancing and playing along. Only by practicing the listening map over and over were they familiar enough with the act of representation to compose their own long-short pieces.

Studying the work of various researchers has expanded my understanding of the proposed developmental stages of musical learning. Combining their work with my own research has proved to me that it is possible, despite the restrictions of my situation, to construct a curriculum which incorporates improvisational and compositional tasks that are developmental, spiral and individualized in nature.

**References**


About the Author

Beth Ann Miller holds an Ed.D. from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She teaches K-5 elementary music for Maine School Administrative District No. 1, Presque Isle, Maine, and has written for several professional books and journals.