Music brings people together: An interdisciplinary approach to middle school collaborative composition

Introduction

Effective educators are attentive to student voice (Borup & Stevens, 2017), design and facilitate interdisciplinary learning experiences providing “space for students to participate and express their voices” (Kim & Searle, 2017, p. 142). Positive relationships between teachers and their adolescent students improve motivation, increase student engagement, and promote learning (Borup, 2016; Gifford, 2017). The arts are uniquely situated to afford platforms for interdisciplinary learning experiences, and to provide avenues through which student-teacher relationships can be created and strengthened. Advancements made in digital technology have transformed the ways in which music is experienced by students (Kratus, 2007; Reyher, 2014, Riley, 2016). Development of standards-based curricula which reflects this transformation and complements students’ real-life experiences can connect students with music in emotionally fulfilling ways through educationally valid activities (Kratus, 2017).

Initiatives supported by “government and educational organizations” (Stansberry, 2017, p. 16) emphasize the value of technology integration and the comprehensive need for fluency with digital technologies (Ruthmann & Mantie, 2017). Music education has traditionally followed the apprentice-student method, in which music specialists model and provide instruction within their area of specialty (Ruthmann & Mantie, 2017). In middle school level courses this typically takes place in a large ensemble performance classroom or a general music classroom. Music educators tasked with the integration of digital technology into established
classroom practice may not be afforded the time or professional development opportunities needed for the effective curation of resources and development of impactful activities (Ruthmann & Mantie, 2017). Additionally, with budget cutbacks necessitating the elimination of some middle school arts-specific programs, regular classroom teachers seek opportunity to integrate arts activities into their courses. The purpose of this paper is to share a standards-based interdisciplinary project through which technology integration facilitated collaborative, authentic, student-artist experiences that are appropriate for any middle school classroom and are assessed according to appropriate national standards.

Unit Summary

To celebrate and explore the unit theme “Music Brings People Together”, music students collaborated to plan and conduct visits with faculty and staff in the school community to explore the question, “How do you see music bringing people together?” Students created soundtrack-backed video recordings of given responses and worked in teams to edit the video responses into one longer-length segment. The team members collaborated to make creative choices on editing, soundtracks, and transitions. Once the videos were complete, students reflected individually on the collaborative creative experience. Videos were published on the class social media page.

Standards addressed during the lesson included those designated by the National Association for Music Educators (NAfME) as appropriate for middle school music technology students, those designated by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) as appropriate for the role of creative communicator, and collaborative goals suggested in the P21 Framework.

Meaningful Learning

Student interest and eager participation can be increased with enticing lessons which incorporate popular interactive media (Reyer, 2014). This lesson was a “field-based model”
(Stansberry, 2017, p. 16) which mimicked students’ current individualized experience of music and media (Kratus, 2007). Students selected the soundtrack they deemed appropriate for the video and its designated audience, made interpretive artistic decisions, and shaped the final product to match their vision. The project was situated in an authentic context and involved multiple roles and perspectives. The lesson activities facilitated collaborative construction of knowledge, and incorporated student reflection. Authentic assessment took place throughout the unit, as students completed and documented activities aligned with the NAfME standards crafted to empower student engagement and voice through authentic artist processes.

The authentic context represented in this lesson was that of a pep rally. The unit began with the suggestion of the following scenario: during the pep rally, the middle school student government wishes to show a video representing school culture and sharing the insights of school faculty and staff. The problem statement includes specifics regarding content, length, and deadline, and was described in a way that presentation by a middle school student government representative could be considered both realistic and feasible. Students worked with their teams to explore and select roles: project manager, technology expert, resource manager, and creative director (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Description of Roles
**Figure 1:** Description of student roles within teams.

The descriptions of the roles were specific, and reflected actual, realistic positions. A detailed plan for implementation of the project was provided for each team, with the project manager directed to take ownership over the team’s progress. Teams completed deliverables as they progressed through the project, offering opportunities for instructors to guide pacing, provide formative assessment, and facilitate differentiation.

The music classroom can frequently elicit unique opportunities for respect and rapport among students and teachers who are accustomed to collaborative learning (Nielson, 2014). Meaningful learning is strengthened in this atmosphere as students are actively engaged, the teacher displays flexibility and responsiveness, and several avenues for feedback demonstration are available. Effective teachers employ a variety of practices in their classrooms, and the productivity of the carefully controlled chaos is best evidenced through the presentation of student produced creative work (Nielson, 2014; Stansberry, 2017).

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<th><strong>Roles</strong></th>
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<td><strong>Project Manager:</strong> guides and documents planning, partners with Instructional Coach to maintain pacing, facilitates communication and collaboration among team member, liaisons with Instructional Coach (teacher) regarding team needs and performance, reflects on personal and team performance.</td>
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<td><strong>Technology Expert:</strong> collaborates with resource manager to explore digital resources available for team use, manages digital resources, develops fluency with chosen resources, collaborates with team in creation of technology artifact, reflects on personal and team performance.</td>
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<td><strong>Resource Manager:</strong> collaborates with technology expert to explore digital resources for team use, explores non-digital resources of potential team value, serves as content expert (understands project details, ensures project compliance with assignment rubric, submits required project documentation), liaisons with Instructional Coach for project clarification as necessary and to obtain non-digital resources, reflects on personal and team performance.</td>
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<td><strong>Creative Director:</strong> develops fluency with project linked standards, articulates team’s creative processes and decisions made as grounded by project linked standards, works with team to determine necessary creative project alterations, works with team to determine when the finished product is ready to publish, makes final determination regarding project’s readiness for publication, reflects on personal and team performance.</td>
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Throughout this unit, students’ professional courtesy and organization were scaffolded (see Figure 2) through the completion of digital project planning guides specific to logistics, interview schedules, and implementation of requests for permission to interview subjects and share their images.

Figure 2

Scaffolding

1) Share with students which faculty and staff have agreed to participate in the project. Allow students time to draft their interview requests. Collect “Request for Interview” forms; accept, or return to students to revise and resubmit. Send student interview requests to associated teachers.

Figure 2: Scaffolding of student courtesy and organization.

Resource managers and technology experts experienced similar scaffolding opportunities specific to securing, responsibly using, and returning necessary resources. The creative director was guided by the “Creative Communicator” role as described in ISTE standard 2b, reflected upon and articulated the team’s creative process, and shared responsibility for determination of the project’s readiness for publication. Each student reflected throughout and following the project on personal and team performance.

Technology Integration

Digital technology supports portability, accessibility, and students’ individual creative efforts (Kratus, 2007). Middle school students may use social-communications technology but demonstrate less competency with other elements of digital technology (Kratus, 2007; Stansberry, 2017). Digital literacy includes the use of mobile devices to connect, communicate, and create (Riley, 2016). Teachers’ informed decisions regarding classroom integration of digital technology resources will empower students to maximize advanced technology in learning processes (Riley, 2016; Stansberry, 2017). Intentional instructional design partnering a
variety of digital resources with “appropriate pedagogies” (Stansberry, 2017, p. 16) can improve student learning experiences (See Figure 3). The digital technologies included in this unit facilitated expressive communication without requiring formal music understanding and supported innovative learning accessible to all students (Riley, 2016), allowing educators to provide benefit for students without a traditional music background as well as those not actively participating in established school music programs (Criswell, 2011).

Figure 3

Mobile Technology
The surge in available digital resources for music making has democratized the process of making music (Ruthmann & Mantie, 2017). The availability of simple and free virtual digital audio workstations such as Incredibox.com, What You See Is What You Hear (WYSIWYH) platforms and the multitude of on-board loops contained with many mobile video apps provide opportunity for collaborative creation, digital manipulation, and publication of students’ work (Ruthmann & Mantie, 2017). Students throughout this project were actively and collaboratively making aesthetic decisions independent of direct teacher authority, discovering the benefit of revision, and growing acquainted with their own musical identities (Ruthmann & Mantie, 2017).
The digital technology practices were integrated into the creative experience, and pedagogical integrity was preserved as fluency with the resources was developed as a means through which to communicate rather than being considered the primary lesson objective (Clark, 1994). Much as those in urban cities gave voice to their feelings through the use of microphones and turntables in hip-hop (Ruthmann & Mantie, 2017), during this lesson middle school students used digital technology to place music into a social context to help make meaning and tell a story (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Problem Statement

**The Problem:**
The student government at your school wishes to celebrate the fine arts department at an upcoming pep rally. Your team has been asked to create a video explaining how people in your school community thing “Music Brings People Together”. The video will be shown on a large screen at the pep rally, and the audio will be run through the high quality gymnasium in house sound system. The student government has asked that you feature faculty and staff in your video, and that the video be around three minutes long. You will be given class time to collect responses and edit your video. The pep rally is in two weeks.

Figure 4: Problem statement based in authentic social context.

**Standards-based assessments**

What do we want students to know, understand, and do? The [NAfME National Standards](https://www.nafme.org) provide structure for the assessment of creative work, and the [ISTE-S standards](https://www.iste.org) provide structure for the assessment of digital technology practice. The lesson described is grounded in standards associated with the artistic process of creating as defined by [NAfME](https://www.nafme.org) for middle school music technology and general music classes. Rubrics can be informed by the associated enduring understandings, and reflection facilitated through the essential questions.

**Instructional Design**
What do we want students to know, understand, and do? Teachers are evaluated in part based on the presence and achievement of clear educational outcomes (Reyher, 2014) which articulate what students will be learning and how educators will recognize student mastery. The NAfME and ISTE-S standards state clear, achievable, measurable goals. Carefully designed instruction will produce measurable outcomes. Formative assessment provided throughout this project guides students’ continued progress which can be measured according to staged deliverables (see Figure 5) and associated rubrics.

**Figure 5**

**Formative Assessment**

6) Guide students in the creation of a logistical plan for the interview process. Require them to be specific about which team member will be responsible for the recording device(s) as they travel between interviews, which team member will be responsible for camera and audio collection during the interviews, which team member will ask the questions during the interview, and which team member will determine when the interview is complete. You (or the students) may decide to for team members to rotate through responsibilities, or for the responsibilities to remain the same for all of the interviews. Collect completed “Interview Logistics Form” submissions; accept, or return for revision and resubmission.

**Figure 5:** Formative assessment guided by staged deliverables

The final artifact, for which summative assessment is provided, was carefully designed and selected to showcase intentional instruction and assessment decisions on the part of the teacher (Nielson, 2014). Measurable growth, meaningful documentation (including that of accommodations for special needs students), intentionally chosen teaching strategies and assessments crafted to demonstrate students’ artistic understanding not only communicated student progress but also provided opportunity for teachers to showcase personal organizational skills and classroom management (Nielsen, 2014).

**Conclusion**
Middle school educators are uniquely able to provide meaningful, collaborative, creative learning opportunities for their students. Intentional integration of digital technologies can facilitate interdisciplinary activities through the empowerment of activities achievable by a wide range of students reflective of authentic artist experiences. Carefully designed standards-based instruction such as the unit described in this paper produces measurable outcomes and creative artifacts, engages and motivates students, and can strengthen the middle school teacher-student relationship.
References


Gifford, W. M., I., II. (2017). Online high school student achievement on state-issued standardized tests; A case study (Order No. 10616919).


