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Collaboration within the Arts:

A Project Involving a Band Literature Course and Studio Arts

In the course studying band literature, students learn to analyze scores, determine qualities for selection, and translate their understanding into instructional strategies. They develop an understanding of various genres, find relevant relationships to enhance performance, and learn to identify expressive possibilities inherent in the compositions. As students study scores, they learn to transfer their newly established understandings into instructional plans.¹ These plans, or teaching units, expose the elements within the composition to enhance understanding of and responsiveness to a musical piece.

Preparing students to select, study, and teach band literature is a challenge that can be enhanced through collaboration with other arts. “The study of the music is informed by the other disciplines and, in turn, the study of the other discipline is enhanced through association with music.”² Through collaboration, creative strategies to teach music concepts can be developed.

In an attempt to encourage future teachers to consider musical elements that contribute to understanding of a musical composition, a project was designed to collaborate between studio artists and the band literature class to discover connections and commonalities between instrumental music literature and visual arts. The intended outcome was a teaching unit to be used with a high school or middle school band. Each unit focused on the conceptual connections between these two art forms using studio artists as a resource.

The Process

During the first year of this three year collaboration, there were 37 music students involved

in collaboration with 7 studio artists. The second collaboration involved 9 music students and 16 studio artists. Each collaborative experience occurred during the final half of the semester. The third year we matched 9 music students with 9 studio artists.

The project began with the band literature students selecting a band piece from their text, Teaching Music through Performance in Band³. This text was used due to the fact that the recordings were available as were scores from the university band library. A list of the pieces selected by the music education students from this text was provided to the studio artists, along with a brief description and recording so they could identify which piece might fit best with their expertise.

The band literature class members were instructed to study the score in detail and explore the compositional elements of: melodic shape; harmonic color; compositional form; rhythmic content; expressive contour; historical background and cultural relevance. The studio artists were instructed to listen to the recording, consider the expressive representation and identify similar representations in art. Although art pieces from the same historical period may represent similar expressive elements, it was made clear that other elements beyond context and historical period should be considered.

The initial meeting of the music students and artists included a descriptive analysis of the piece presented to the studio artist and the artists' representation of visual art shared with the instrumental students. Together they explored connections of compositional elements, historical relevance, conceptual connections, and expressive similarities that eventually led to instructional possibilities.

All groups met several times to explore connections between the arts. The information shared was included in the teaching units. Each unit developed included a full analysis of the

composition, instructional strategies for a music teacher that incorporated visual art to enhance understanding of the compositional and expressive elements, strategies to assess student understanding, and a packet of printable materials for students. The teaching units were presented to both the band literature class and shared with the studio artists to discuss the appropriateness and usefulness of the developed strategies.

What were the students' reactions?

The music students were asked to reflect upon the experience of collaboration and connection with visual art. The first impression for most students was described as “excitement” about the collaboration with artists to create a teaching unit. About a quarter of the students’ were overwhelmingly enthused. “I was excited to collaborate with an art student. I thought it was a good way to tie music to the other arts.”

The others were concerned about collaborating outside of their comfort zone of the music discipline. Connections with visual art appeared to be unexplored territory for most. A discomfort was exhibited by a majority of students as the project began: “I don’t know enough about art to have an educated view of how it fits into music.” In an attempt to provide some guidance, students were provided with examples of how broad Fine Arts concepts are applied across various arts. These examples offered direction for the music students but anxiety in communicating among the arts remained: “I like the idea but I’m not sure how to communicate with an artist.” The aspect of communication was an issue that initially challenged all groups.

Although all groups fulfilled the responsibility with commendable quality, improvement in communication between those involved with cross-disciplinary collaboration deserves further study. It would have been advantageous to stage the first meeting with the availability of both professors to assist discussion. The process during the third application of this collaborative

effort included this change. As a result, communication was no longer an issue. When confusion occurred, examples of how visual arts parallel music arts conceptually, expressively and historically were provided. Group projects are challenging within a discipline, but pursuing collaboration across disciplines requires guided, pre-designated meeting times to facilitate collaboration.

When we grouped the music students as a team in the first collaboration, nearly all the students were concerned about working in a group. Many students were worried about others fulfilling their responsibility: “I tend to enjoy working on my own rather than in groups” or “I don’t like being held back by other students or having to do their work for them.” The students’ aversion for working in groups ranged from “The only negative impression was the group aspect” to “I greatly dislike working in groups.” There were no students who appeared enthusiastic toward group work, even when the workload could be divided.

A small percentage of the music students were not sure of the project’s usefulness for learning to teach: “I was a little unsure of this project. None of us had ever done anything like this before and I never thought about how art relates to music.” Most of the concern was founded on their lack of prior experience in conceptualizing music with connections outside of its field. There appeared to be a need for more exposure in class to the conceptual connections: “I’ve never hear of anyone teaching music using visual art”. The music students could not recall any prior experience with cross-disciplinary connections among the arts.

The first connections made were based upon historical period or context. When conceptual connections such as blocks of sound compared to blocks of color or comparing the ternary form with the visual flow of content in a painting were offered as possibilities, the conceptual nature of these comparisons appeared enlightening to the music students as though not previously

considered. As instructional research shows, cross-disciplinary connections may remain an overlooked element in schooling.

After the completion of the units, a shift of acceptance toward cross-disciplinary collaboration, group work, and understanding Fine Arts connections was observed during the class presentations. Many students who were initially skeptical were advocating integration of cross-disciplinary concepts into their future teaching: “Art can help students understand feeling behind music.” Fifty of the fifty-four music education students saw great value in such collaboration and stated that they would use the strategy as a teacher: “The artwork would make an excellent visual aid when teaching music”, “It allows a level of creativity that is difficult to achieve without those kinds of connections.”

Even the four students who remained skeptical said that they would consider using other arts if a particular musical composition directly matched the programmatic content of a piece: “I would consider art connections only if it logically fits with artwork.”

There were no students firmly against cross-disciplinary integration, although some were skeptical of application in a music classroom: “I am distracted from the musical focus by trying to find connections with art. My concern is that my students focus may be taken away from the music.” This was a realistic concern if learning is not directly related back to understanding the musical composition. Although in collaborative efforts students are informed about the other discipline, the connections should be made using the art object to better understand elements in the musical composition that could remain hidden without the collaboration. Each connection must not be contrived or forced,⁴ but embrace authentic commonalities that maintain the integrity of each discipline.⁵ In class discussions, a consensus was formed that the purpose of using art pieces is to enhance student understanding of the music and that they must be presented

this way.

What did we learn from collaboration?

At the conclusion of this project, both music students and visual artists considered band literature, visual art, and teaching in the Fine Arts more broadly than they did at the beginning of the project. For instrumental music education students, the project addressed the 8th national standard for music⁶ that encourages exploration of music's relationships with the other arts. Some enhanced their concept of music education: "Relating the expressive aspects of visual arts through instruction of band literature can enhance aesthetic understanding of music. Not only will our students get aural representations of expression but an alternative representation through art." The experience of the collaboration appeared to be an important aspect of the project: "The artist showed me new ways to think about music."

All but two music students expressed enlightenment from their discussions with the studio artists. These two students received the information from the artist too late to be useful. On their own they found resources from internet sites around which to base instructional strategies for the teaching unit. After discussing this situation with the artists, some of the problems originated with the music students either being unprepared for their meeting with the artists or simply organizing a meeting too late to achieve the desired results. This informs future collaborations to formally organize the first meeting between the groups to alleviate the initial procrastination and to provide additional guidance for both groups of collaborators. Facilitating communication between the music students and the studio artists had already shown to enhance the process. The third collaboration successfully included such a meeting demonstrating how it enhances the entire experience as well as the final product.

Student reflections following the project supported continued use in future band literature

classes. Their suggestions to improve the process included providing a firm foundation of conceptual connections between the Arts to augment understanding by both groups of collaborators. Examples of teaching strategies that expose common concepts improved initial understanding at the onset of the third collaboration. A concern that presenting examples in advance of the project would limit creativity appeared to be unwarranted. Although some units used similar strategies as provided during classroom demonstration, most unit offered unique instructional strategies that clearly exemplified conceptual connections between the arts while maintaining the integrity of individual disciplines.

Web-based communication tools such as discussion boards, virtual classrooms, chat rooms, and email had been encouraged to facilitate communication between collaborators. These were provided and encouraged for the second and third collaborations but not effectively used beyond email. The efficiency of electronic communication was evident but required clear instruction and expectation. Future collaboration should include detailed description of the communication tools and monitored requirement of use.

The collaborative experience encouraged the studio artists to look at the visual art from another perspective: “I certainly am now thinking an entirely new way as to how music could be presented and how art could be received.” The studio artists held initial apprehensions similar to those of the music education students. Most knew nothing about band music and were not associated with public schooling. Some did not understand the purpose of the project until the units were presented at the end of the projects.

Other than the meetings, they were not involved with the creation of the teaching units. Many were surprised how the music students expanded upon the information presented: “Although I was skeptical, I am impressed on how the units ended up.” It was not until they saw

the final products that the impact of the collaboration became evident: “I learned how mental images of art and music can be very different, and how we can learn from each other.” One of the studio artists expressed that they would have liked to be more involved throughout the process. Their enfranchisement in the project could have been enhanced: “If we had more time and the students would have met with me more, it could have been more interesting.” It will be essential in future collaborations to describe purpose of the teaching unit in more detail, organize more meeting times, and respond to concerns as they arise.

Topical and historical comparison appeared to be the initial focus of the studio artists, but expanded conceptually during the collaboration meetings: “My first instinct was to match paintings that depicted the titles. But on further reflection that would be too obvious. In the end I feel as though I picked very palpable paintings that visually conveyed the mood and expression of each musical section.” Collaboration between music and art exposed strong conceptual connections enhancing educational possibilities and understandings. An additional discovery was the possibility of sharing understandings of art concepts beyond the studio and gallery to area schools, in particular with music classes.

The teaching units developed through collaboration demonstrated conceptual understanding of connections between music and visual art. Both disciplines were informed through these connections. Guidance was required early in the process to provide a foundational understanding for students to make the educational connections. To enhance future collaborative efforts, studio artists need to be presented with a more comprehensive background of the composition provided in advance of the initial meetings with the music students. The biggest challenge remained communication between students and artists. In a project as this, communication must be arranged and monitored to assist the collaborative process. A reflective discussion to educational

value of collaboration is crucial upon the conclusion to the project. Involvement of the studio artists in class presentations of the units would also be a favorable enhancement.

Collaboration between the arts encourages a broader view of each unique art form than when studied independently.⁷ Each discipline can look at a musical composition from different angles to learn the process of artistic expression. “Students grow in their capacity to understand the nature of artistic expression and the tools necessary to generating artistic expression in each discipline.”⁸ Experiences through collaboration can impact on student learning enabling them to “reach deeper levels of understanding through connections to other disciplines.”⁹ Student developed teaching units can be seen at: <http://www-personal.ksu.edu/~fburrack/teachingunits.htm>

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