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## Enhancing Instruction Through Cross-disciplinary Instruction

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## **Enhancing Instruction Through Cross-disciplinary Instruction**

When we select literature to study and perform in band, there are often opportunities neglected that can enhance our students' understanding of the music. One of these opportunities involves collaboration with other disciplines. "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. These relationships infuse the performance, description, and creation of music with meaningful associations to art, literature, history, cultural studies, and other complementary disciplines."<sup>1</sup> As we design teaching plans, consideration should be given to relationships that can enhance our students' understanding of a musical piece. A cross-disciplinary approach focuses on concepts common between disciplines within the study of each discipline to increase student understanding and relevance.<sup>2</sup> This instructional approach can bridge understandings based around the musical works selected for your band.

With the many demands on rehearsal time and requirements of high performance quality, why should we consider cross-disciplinary units? In addition to the 8th teaching standard presented by the M.E.N.C.<sup>3</sup>, the purpose lies in student learning. Curriculum, as typically applied, segments knowledge and understanding into separate disciplines. Although knowledge relevant to each discipline is disseminated, "deep understanding often depends upon the intersections and interaction of the disciplines."<sup>4</sup>

Making connections between disciplines came into public education "as part of the progressive educational movements of the early twentieth century."<sup>5</sup> This curricular concept used commonalities between two or more disciplines "to examine a central

theme, issue, problem, topic, or experience”.<sup>6</sup> But integration is more than simply interweaving subject matter. It includes finding the “curricular elements that might be taught more effectively in relation to each other than separately”.<sup>7</sup>

### **How can the cross-disciplinary approach be applied through band literature?**

My band studied the piece titled “Hymn of St. Francis” by Daniel Bukvich. It was programmed for the high school band to provide the students with the experience of playing a contemporary piece with aleatoric passages. The composition is written in eight short variations based on a neo-Gregorian theme. To enhance student understanding of music concepts in this piece, a collaboration was developed between the band and visual arts classes. The visual arts department considered collaboration an opportunity to enhance their students’ artistic creativity.

The first step in the collaboration was to identify interactive relationships between the two disciplines.<sup>8</sup> When considering integration through cross-disciplinary instruction, it is important to identify legitimate connections that focus on common learning processes so each discipline can maintain its own integrity. One common factor between the two disciplines was the creative representation of the programmatic concept. Each movement of the Hymn of St. Francis represented a different animal group. The titles of the movements are: A Murmuration of Starlings, A Scuttle of Crabs, A Squabble of Seagulls, A Smack of Jellyfish, A Drumming of Grouse and a Gatling of Woodpeckers, A Buzzing of Bees, A Rhumba of Rattlesnakes, and A Flight of Swallows.

In the band class, students engaged in performing, creating, and listening activities to formulate musical understanding, recognize compositional elements within the piece, and develop skills in music performance. In the visual arts classes, students engaged in

seeing, analyzing, and creating art in order to formulate artistic understanding and to develop skills in art literacy.<sup>9</sup> Both departments included listening activities involving the complete recording of the composition. Only the title of the piece and each variation was shared prior to listening of each movement. Through multiple listening students were guided to consider connections of the titles with the elements of line, rhythm, tone color, repetition, and overall form. Relationships of each musical element in the composition were considered as aural representations that lead to musical meaning. Consideration of visual representations of the same elements using art objects expanded understanding of the composition. The expressive nature of the music inspired the visual art students to articulate, through their chosen medium, an expressive visualization. They created multiple drawings and paintings representing musical moments in the composition. One student explained, “I think that the music helped me to visualize my picture because I was able to tell whether the mood at the moment was going to be silly, happy, or serious. When the picture mixed with the music, it really brought everything together.”

Throughout the rehearsals, the band students developed an understanding of how the composer used the structural elements to represent the programmatic intention and how these various structural elements interacted in the performance to produce the musical ideas: “I learned how a composer can use different combinations of sounds to create feelings in the mind of a listener”, and “I learned how each little part fits into a song such as how percussion impersonates things like crabs and woodpeckers”. In the words of Bennett Riemer, “The more students understand about the ways in which music works, the greater their capacity for understanding its expressiveness”.<sup>10</sup> The goal was for the students to make intellectual decisions in the rehearsal process and to develop an

understanding relationship with the musical aspects of performance. Visual art was used in class to demonstrate artistic representations of expressive elements involved in the variations. Then the band students were encouraged to apply their understanding of musical elements by creating their own visual representation. In another activity, students experiments with sounds to create short compositions to aurally represent visual art. The students in both music and art engaged in the similar processes as they explored solutions to artistic problems. “Through analysis and comparison, students grow in their capacity to understand the nature of artistic expression.”<sup>11</sup> The students in both band and art classes drew or painted representations of the music and sequenced their creations into a visual presentation timed appropriately to the music. Their art works were projected during the concert while the band performed the piece. Students in both classes reflected upon their experience with the cross-disciplinary unit by expressing their learning and understanding of artistic expression.

This unit was incorporated into both classes over an eight week period. Teachers met weekly to monitor progress across disciplines and brainstorm further connections. Both classes met jointly to share understandings twice during process.

### **What did the students learn?**

Experiencing the curricular goals through authentic experience heightened the students’ awareness of creativity and the expressiveness of the fine arts. The music students expressed enhanced understanding of compositional possibilities: “The most important thing that I learned was the full range of creativity that you can have in all styles of music. Through songs like the Hymn of St. Francis, I learned many ways that sound could be used to help create visuals.” Many students related similar enhancement

of musical comprehension: “I learned that it is alright to use imagination and break the ordinary rules, like the composer did in writing Hymn of St. Francis.” The students became aware of the creative process in the arts beyond performance skills: “I couldn’t believe some of the ways we used our instruments, those were definitely firsts. Like the key clicks and tennis balls that brought this piece alive”, and “I learned how percussion impersonates things such as crabs moving across the sand, the wings of birds flying, and even the sound of woodpeckers”. There seemed to be a new awareness of the possibilities available in the creation of musical expression: “It was exciting to play the Hymn of St. Francis. It made it clear that music does not only consist of winds and percussion, but that we can be instruments too. Every sound can be turned into music.”

Through conceptual connections, cross-disciplinary units guide students to “understand the arts as a vital expression of the human experience.”<sup>12</sup> Many students expressed the enhanced consideration of aesthetic sensitivity with music: “I think the most important thing I learned from the Hymn of St Francis was emotion and feeling. You can’t just play it without really thinking of what it means. Music comes inside of each player. I love the way that music can be felt differently within each player and within each person in the audience.” Through learning more about the intricacies from within the composition, the students were able to make connection with the expressive element: “My favorite part was the emotional experience. It was really cool how a piece could make you feel.”

The visual arts teacher considered this collaboration as “a great opportunity for students to experience the concepts of color, repetition, line and movement from another point of perspective.” She felt that her students approached their art piece with “creativity

guided by the music”. This was expressed by many of the students, in particular from this student who was involved in both the visual art and in the band:

Listening to the music while creating my art pieces constricted me in one way because I felt I had to follow the title’s theme. But then I came to realize that if I was to draw something that represented an aspect of the theme, such as something sharp to portray the tap of a crab claws as it walked, then I would be showing the essence of a crab. So I could get my point across by drawing a sharp rocks or even sharp lines on a piece of paper. This really opened a new door to art for me. It made me think of how I needed to draw to get my point to the audience when they heard that certain part played in the music. It was fun to work on both sides the arts. I had the privilege to draw and play my horn. It was fun knowing that people were listening to me play and gazing at my artwork.”

This experience appeared to impact this student’s ability to reach deeper levels of understanding through the connections exposed through the collaboration. He was able to identify expressive qualities from music to be used as a creative foundation for his art work. The collaboration encouraged students to learn how the interconnectivity of the Arts can influence creativity: “I think the music portraying different animal noises helped me to mentally visualize my thoughts”. Both music and arts share a familiarity through expression. This project enables students to view their art form through the eyes of the other while maintaining the integrity of each discipline. Exploring the context of the musical work exposed expressive features of content and structure deepening the understanding and appreciation for the music and the art.

### **Other cross-disciplinary ideas**

A similar cross-disciplinary unit used with my band in a former year was on the piece “Colours” by Roger Cichy. This piece was a six-movement piece, each written to aurally represent six hues. The instrumental music and art departments on a basic level explored the formation of the hues in the mixing of basic colors. On a more complex level they investigated the psychological affect of color. The art specialist guided the exploration of color value and hue in painting while the band explored the same representation in sound through the use of visual art pieces and representative literature. During the band’s rehearsals of the piece, the selections of literature along with large art prints representing various colors and hues were used to help the music students grasp the concept of representing feelings elicited by color through music and visual art. The language arts department assisted by providing literature examples that stereotypically portrayed expressive meaning through color. They also guided students in the band and in their own classes through a creative writing assignment associated with the titles of each movement of the piece. Abstract paintings created by the students from the art and band classes expressing their conception of meaning. These representations of feeling were presented in a multimedia display with the band’s performance. “Connections to other disciplines can be strong and valid, intensifying subsequent encounters with the work. This quest for integrity can also apply to the quality of the students’ experience. An interdisciplinary approach to music education aligns students’ natural tendencies to want to make sense of their experience and to integrate what they know into a working model, or ‘big picture’ of the world”.<sup>13</sup>



In developing a cross-disciplinary activity, it is essential know and understand the underlying concepts basic to each discipline in the process of finding instructional connections. “Pairing a musical work with a work in another art form that shares common features or attributes expands students’ abilities to find complementary relationships among the arts.”<sup>14</sup> For a holiday concert, our high school band performed an arrangement of Claude Debussy’s “Reverie”. The interactive connection appeared to be human feeling. “Because all disciplines or fields of knowledge represent facets of human understanding and because humans not only think but also feel, it is possible to establish connections among the various disciplines and the affective aspects of the human condition.”<sup>15</sup> The language arts department studied how poets can evoke emotional response in a reader while the band considered how arrangement of pitches in a piece and tone quality can evoke emotional response in a listener. The students in both the band and poetry class explored the meaning of the word ‘Reverie’ and listened to Debussy’s representation of this meaning through the composition. The poetry teacher led students in both disciplines through the process of writing expressive poetry culminating in a poem that was recited at the concert as the band performed the piece in the background. The band explored the compositional elements of impressionistic music and the affect on emotive human response. “Human emotion ... can be used to establish legitimate ties among curricular areas. Capacity of affective response has its roots in the understanding of the concepts that comprise each discipline.”<sup>16</sup> The poem written by the students was about winter and the falling snowflakes. (see figure 1) The poem recited with the band’s performance was a moving experience for the audience, performers, and the poetry class.

Another cross-disciplinary unit involved the history class, literature class and the instrumental music class in the study of ancient Greece through the piece 'Epinicion' by John Paulson. Students from the band were offered credit in their history classes to independently explore the ancient Greek tradition of Epinicion. The students presented historical information and drawings that were later presented to the band in rehearsal to better understand the meaning behind the piece and the reasoning for the aleatoric form of the piece. "Knowledge is learned more quickly and remembered longer when constructed in a meaningful context in which connections among ideas are made. If this theory is correct about how learners view the curriculum...then a curriculum approach that takes these things into account should produce greater learning in students than do those approaches that ignore these factors."<sup>17</sup> The performance of this aleatoric piece demonstrated informed judgment by the students which only could have been accomplished through the interdisciplinary connections. All of the band students were required to write an essay relating the musical performance of Epinicion to the historical background information. In addition to history and music credit, the essays were accepted as extra credit as a literature or creative writing assignment for language arts.

### **Conclusions**

Using cross-disciplinary units provide an enhanced opportunity to engage students with the value of band literature. This instructional approach encourages intellectual curiosity emphasizing many dimensions of the musical work—structural, contextual, and expressive. "It can also strengthen professional bonds between music educators and teachers of other disciplines."<sup>18</sup> If band literature is selected that is rich in quality, structure, historical and aesthetic value, the conceptual connections across disciplines can

be found which will sustain the integrity of individual disciplines while enhancing each other's curriculum. Patterning of elements (pitch, duration, loudness, and timbre) can be one type of connection between literature and music: words, sentences, and paragraphs as compared to musical motifs, phrases, and themes. Performance concepts apply to any form of the Fine Arts: inflection and nuance, expression and artistry. Aesthetic concepts form a strong connection between the Fine Arts: anticipation and resolution, symmetry, tension-relaxation, convergence and unity, climax, and variety. We must seek opportunities to make connections that lead to deeper understanding so our students become problem solvers and critical thinkers understanding of how composers represent the human experience.

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## Figure 1

**Reverie**

*(a poem written by the advanced placement English and Band classes, 1991)*

Gentle rolling thru the  
 echoes of my mind  
 there is a vision.

Snowflakes falling delicately to the ground.....  
 A countryside frosted early snow.....  
 Ice-glazed pine needles glisten on branches white  
 Cattle roam-dusted in white.

Silence....  
 I stand  
 suspended  
 in time.

An ice rink filled with squeals of anticipation...  
 laughter....  
 knowing smiles  
 reddened cheeks.....  
 a swirling of brightly colored scarves – earmuffs-  
 lovers holding mittened hands – clinging softly on wobbly feet  
 a togetherness of the season.

Sleigh bells tinkle faintly down steep hills  
 snowball fighters and carolers make joyful voices in unison.

Inside---warmth radiates.....  
 a fireplace merrily crackles.....  
 stockings consecutively hung.....  
 candles glow above the mantle  
 traditional evergreen decked in Cross-colored lights  
 corseted in silver tinsel garland.....  
 while mistletoe beckons.....

Aromas waft thru the air.....  
 Grandmas golden turkey and freshly baked bread.....  
 Mammams Swedish T-ring  
 popcorn popping – candy canes –  
 steaming chocolate – apple cider with cinnamon--eggnog.

Feelings of coziness  
 envelopes all needs  
 filling each nook and cranny.....  
 Grandparents with pastel colored eyes visualize reminiscently.....

Families reaching out simultaneously...  
 feeling the bonds that tie.

And there is peace.

A peace the seems to echo.

Picture #1

A student drawing from the movement “A Buzzing of Bees”

Picture #2

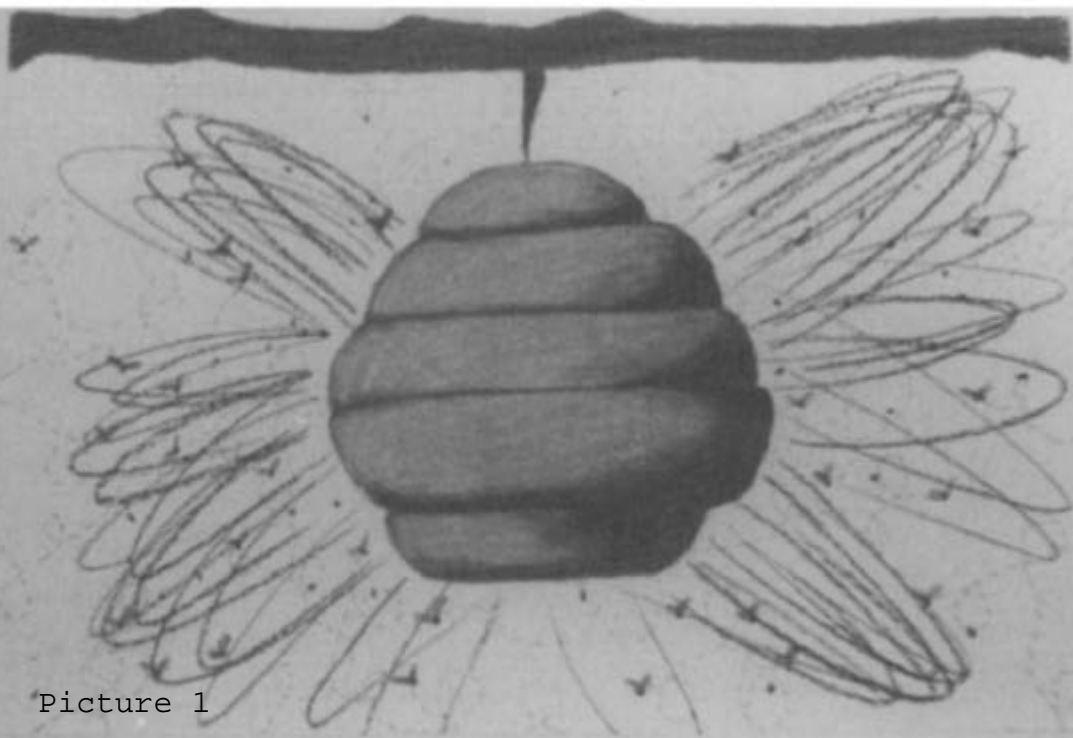
A student drawing from the movement “A Murmuration of Starlings”

Picture #3

A student drawing from the movement “A Smack of Jellyfish”

Picture #4

A student drawing from the movement “A Drumming of Grouse and a Gatling of Woodpeckers”



Picture 1

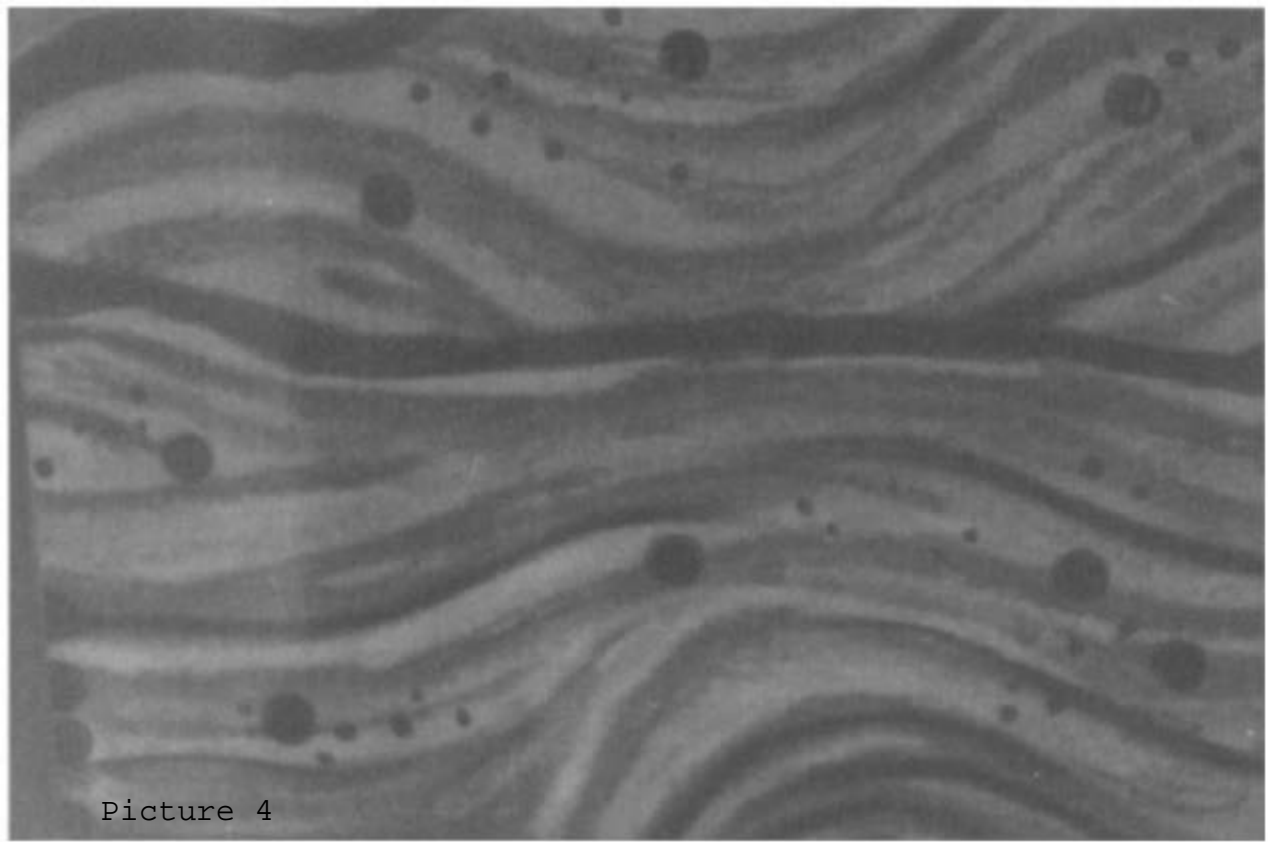




Picture 2



Picture 3



Picture 4