

Music Exploratory: A Student-Directed, Teacher-Guided Learning Initiative at Lynnfield High School

By Tom Westmoreland, Director of Instrumental Music, Lynnfield High School

I was lying on the table in acupuncture one day (seriously . . . I know) contemplating the students in my general music classes. At the time, I was teaching a guitar class and a piano class (with students at various levels), a music theory class, and a music appreciation class. For my first few years of teaching, I had struggled to develop curriculum for these courses that engaged students but still met the standards. Often I had kids who were interested in music, but not in the traditional “band/orchestra/chorus” sense. I found that there were very few resources for general music geared towards adolescents.

At the time, most of the music appreciation books I could find were dry, college-level texts that focused on music history. There were either adult method books for my piano students or those geared towards little kids—you know, the ones that have cute pictures of bunnies and pieces entitled “Hop, Skip, Jump.” Convincing my guitar students to read standard notation and play anything other than a current three-chord rock hit was like pulling teeth. On top of all this, scheduling was frustrating, as is it for many of us. I had kids who wanted to take theory but couldn’t because the course was

offered one semester during one period. There were students who were put into Music Appreciation because they needed credits to graduate, not because of an interest in music. This happened again and again: students who wanted to take my classes often had scheduling conflicts and those who had no interest ended up participating in a class that did not meet their musical needs.

I contemplated all of this, looking like a porcupine, and suddenly it occurred to me—the solution was simple: offer everything during the same period, and give students the choice to pursue a variety of musical electives. Students would then have four opportunities per semester to take this “general music” class, and this would solve many of the scheduling issues. But the questions remained: how does a curriculum work that has this level of individualization? Conceivably I could have 10 students in my class doing 10 different things. In an already busy schedule, when do I develop daily individual lesson plans for each of my students? How does the classroom management work in this “free-for-all”?

This was how Music Exploratory was born. It works like this: Students choose which course track they want to follow and then are given a course pack with their daily assignments for the entire semester. Included are several categories of assignments, including theory work (using a computerized tutorial and written worksheets), “music appreciation” studies (such as investigating instruments from different parts of the world, or blogging about music they hear on Pandora Radio), and performance music. We use Weebly for Education (www.weebly.com), a site that enables me to provide each student with his or her own webpage where they blog about listening examples, receive feedback, and watch

video of their own performances. I listen to students perform scales and method book pieces on a daily basis, allowing students to move through these materials at an individualized pace. The other assignments are “standardized,” so all students who are following a certain course track are doing the same theory and appreciation assignment on the same day. There is an Instrumental Performance track, which covers all students who are learning to play instruments, and then separate tracks for Music Technology, Music Theory, and Music Appreciation. In addition, there are different levels, which allow students to take the course multiple times and continue their development. A series of written quizzes, formal performance assessments, self and peer evaluations, and reflections are completed throughout the semester. As a final exam, students are required to participate in a recital and present to their parents and each other a performance or an original composition. For many students, this is their first time on stage and is a very exciting culminating event.

And it really works! Once students get accustomed to the routine they motivate themselves. Some, of course, are more resistant than others, but the majority of them are glad to follow class procedures in order to have the independence they enjoy. Music Exploratory is a “student-directed, teacher-guided” course where I provide instruction, both by developing curriculum and giving daily feedback, but students have a great deal of ownership in their pursuits. Students engage in discovery-based learning because development of instrumental technique is an individual pursuit that requires persistence and intrinsic motivation. Allowing students the freedom to pursue their own interests requires trust on the part of the instructor, but the rewards of this relationship are truly worth the “leap of faith.”

Just like any other group of students, each class is different. I have had classes with 12 students and others with 5, who require the same amount of guidance. There have been classes where collaboration is the norm and others where students hardly speak to one another. This past semester one class had four instrumental students who formed an in-class band and did two performances of popular music that they arranged for saxophone, guitar, piano, and drums. This past year our school had an exchange student from Spain who had studied piano her entire life, so she spent the semester learning jazz standards and "Clair de Lune" by Debussy. I had one student who struggled academically and socially, but spent his time in my class writing poetry, rapping, and composing (and was really good at it). Despite all this variety, I am confident that each student is learning notation and music theory concepts, listening to and describing a variety of musical styles, analyzing what they hear in recordings and live performances, composing and notating original musical thoughts, and thinking about the cultural significance of music and the arts.

Although it might seem difficult to manage with students going in so many different directions, I have had three student teachers who have been able to successfully take over Music Exploratory within three days. Developing personal relationships with each of my students is highly rewarding, but I'm most proud when I see them helping one another. Even the least motivated students will ask their friend to listen to their latest mix or give each other feedback on an upcoming playing quiz. It takes a lot of organization, planning, and willingness to make a course like this work, but I think it was one of the best decisions I have ever made about my teaching.

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Music Exploratory also serves as a great venue for the development of 21st century skills. Students use technology to explore musical styles, complete research, create their own compositions, and interact with one another. Accommodations for students with special needs are automatic because of the individualized pace of the coursework. As iPods, DVR, and the Internet allow us to constantly create a personalized experience, individualization of this magnitude is a natural fit for today's learners. And despite all of the focus on "individualized learning" in Music Exploratory, there is a strong sense of community that develops. Students support one another while giving honest and sensitive feedback during playing quizzes. More advanced students help novices with theory assignments or show them the correct fingering for a scale. Through this level of individual responsibility, there is some unclassifiable development of warmth and shared interest that I could have never anticipated, when I first thought of the idea while lying on that acupuncture table. I am grateful to my administration for allowing me to run with this idea and to my students

who constantly amaze me with their willingness to be responsible young people and who bring energy and creativity to their music.

Sometimes in education "tried and true" works, but I believe that we, as musicians, have a unique sensibility for innovation and creativity. If we seize this opportunity to create outstanding, transformative experiences for our students, we can continue to be relevant in today's social and educational climate. Fostering creativity, allowing space for personal expression, developing intrinsic motivation, and creating independent learners are values for educators across all disciplines and members of our society at large. For me, developing Music Exploratory has been my way of embodying these values into my curriculum, literally one student at a time. •

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