


Curriculum Integration in the General Music Classroom

General Music Today
2015, Vol. 29(1) 12–18
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Music Education 2015
DOI: 10.1177/1048371315572878
gmt.sagepub.com


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Abstract

Arts integration is a topic that has been researched and discussed by music educators and general educators alike. Some feel this is a worthwhile endeavor in both the arts classroom and the general classroom, while others feel that we should be spending what little time we have in the music classroom focusing on music goals. This article will focus on integrating music and other disciplines in a way that treats each discipline with integrity. I will offer practical ideas for integrating music across the curriculum.

Keywords

connections, curriculum integration, elementary general music, interdisciplinary

“Hey—we learned about fractions in math class!” shouts a third grader during a rhythm lesson in music class. I’m sure we’ve all witnessed our students have these “light bulb moments” when they make a connection between different subject areas. The excitement over this realization is enough to help us realize what a powerful teaching moment this can be. As in this scenario, sometimes students come to these realizations on their own, while other times the connections can be teacher-led. When children make these connections on their own, it is a perfect opportunity for us to build on their discovery. We can also open the door to additional natural connections between music and other subject areas that can lead to opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching. How can we guide our students toward these connections between music and other disciplines? To begin to realize that life is not compartmentalized into separate and distinct subjects?

These are not new questions. Music educators have been discussing this for decades. Some have questioned whether curriculum integration will be a threat to music as a central part of the curriculum (Barry, 1996; Wiggins, 1996). While Barry (1996) felt that integrating the arts into the core curriculum would allow educators to advocate for the importance of the arts, Wiggins (1996) argued that this would place the arts in a subservient position, being used as a tool to teach other subjects. Others have offered suggestions for ways to integrate in ways that are respectful to music as well as other subject areas (Barrett, 2001; Berke, 2000; Bresler, 1995). Each of these authors suggested ways to integrate that are meaningful and respectful for all disciplines. Authors from visual arts and general education literature have also explored ways to

integrate across the curriculum with integrity for all disciplines (Brown, 2007; Marshall, 2005). Recent articles have offered various examples and ideas for integrating music with other subject areas in ways that address standards and objective for each discipline (Bohannon & McDowell, 2010; May, 2012; Overland, 2013).

Early on in my 10 years of teaching general music, I began to develop ideas and opinions about curriculum integration as related to my classroom. Coming from pre-service experiences in both the elementary general music classroom and the general education classroom, I imagined the exciting integrative experiences I could develop for my young students. I sought connections with general classroom teachers, hoping to develop projects for our students in which they could make connections between music and other subject areas. Soon, I discovered that this endeavor might be more challenging than I initially imagined. In this article, I will reflect on what successful curriculum integration can be in relation to the general music classroom. Additionally, I will address some of the challenges related to this approach, explore some reasons why curricular integration is important in the music classroom, and offer some practical suggestions for practicing music educators.

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Styles of Arts Integration

The Four Styles of Arts Integration (Bresler, 1995)

- Subservient Approach—music in a supporting role
- Affective Style—music used to effect mood
- Social Integration Style—music used for social functions
- Coequal/Cognitive Style—integration through synthesis, analysis, and evaluation

Many young teachers search for ways to encourage their students to make connections between the various subjects they are studying. Unfortunately, this integration often seems to occur at the expense of the music curriculum. It can be a one-way relationship between the classroom teachers and the music specialist. In my experience, teachers expected that I would take time from my classes to teach a song about state capitols or brushing your teeth. I struggled with this because I had my own goals and standards to achieve with very limited time and resources. I didn't want to teach "Fifty Nifty United States" just because the fifth graders were learning about the states! I quickly began to realize that none of these experiences are truly curriculum integration. Music should be studied for its own sake, not for utilitarian purposes (Bresler, 1995). Bresler called this style "The Subservient Approach." In this approach, music is used to help students learn about another subject area.

Bresler (1995) also identified three other styles of integration as related to the arts: affective, social integration, and coequal. The affective style implies the use of music to change the mood or pace of a classroom. Many times, the music specialist might be approached to provide recordings of classical music for use during math class to calm the students and help them focus on their seat work. While I have shared music with teachers on occasion, I never really thought of this as curriculum integration. The social integration style refers to using music to enhance community relations by including it in functions such as PTA meetings, honor events, holidays, and so on. Many administrators and teachers view these events as potential chances for positive community relations. These events can also be a chance to highlight the music curriculum or even to share the interdisciplinary nature of the music classroom. An example of this style can be found at a local elementary school in Boulder, Colorado, that presents a schoolwide program every year for Martin Luther King Jr. Day. It began with singing African American spirituals in music class, and then connections were made with the civil rights movement. The current teacher inherited it from her mentor teacher and has continued the

program. It has become a collaborative effort between all teachers in the school teaching about the history of the civil rights movement, social justice issues, and the music associated with it. The program is presented every year with guest speakers, student narrators, and songs sung by each grade level. As part of the finale, all students and audience members sing "We Shall Overcome." The whole event is powerful for everyone involved due to the curricular connections made by students and the emotional impact on the performers and the community (Timm, 2012). This example also illustrates the coequal, cognitive approach to integration.

Finally, the coequal, cognitive approach to integration is the one advocated by scholarly authors, yet the one Bresler (1995) found to be the least common in her study. This style of integration reaches higher levels of thinking through analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. It also values differing areas of the curriculum equally by addressing standards from each discipline. An example of this type of approach could be seeking out a natural connection between music and another subject area. This could be a related theme or subject, a related concept, or one work inspired by another. One could teach an interdisciplinary unit exploring connections between Gershwin's *Summertime* and *Porgy and Bess*, the folk opera for which the song was written, placing it in the context of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. This type of unit could be taught solely by the music specialist, or in collaboration with a social studies teacher or another fine arts teacher. The students could be studying the life and culture of African Americans during the early part of the 20th century while exploring two major products of this period relating to African American life. The music specialist can explore music elements such as compositional techniques and music style while the social studies teacher would bring a deeper prospective to the context of the music and the opera. Approaching arts integration in such a fashion can ensure integrity for all disciplines across the curriculum.

Barrett, McCoy, and Veblen (1997) called for integrity within the discipline, between or among the disciplines, and beyond the disciplines. Integrity within the discipline refers to upholding standards within our own discipline, while integrity between or among disciplines refers to teachers seeking out natural connections between subjects. Integrity beyond the disciplines refers to reaching beyond a particular subject to the broader goals of education. When curricular integration is approached with integrity, it can lead to a fuller, more comprehensive curriculum, resulting in a deeper understanding of each discipline. "Teaching in this manner can offer students multiple access points through which they can express or analyze material, thus allowing them to construct their own understanding of a subject in a way that uniquely suits their thinking" (Overland, 2013, p. 32).

To achieve curricular integration one must approach it with integrity, in a way that ensures equal emphasis for each discipline being addressed. While the coequal/cognitive approach clearly addresses each subject area equally with integrity, even other approaches can include music with integrity. As music educators, we must act as advocates for ourselves and our content area. When approached by colleagues with suggestions such as singing a song about butterflies, perhaps we can search for a deeper connection with their science unit like the metamorphosis of a musical theme as related to the life cycle of the butterfly. When approached by our principal with a request to perform at a PTA event, perhaps we can use this opportunity to showcase our recent unit connecting music and visual art.

Why Integrate?

As adult members of society, different forms of knowledge are not compartmentalized into separate sections. Real-life problems require a synthesis of knowledge to achieve a solution. Why should our educational system be so divided? While we need teachers teaching in a subject area that is their specialty, music learning does not need to stop when the students leave the music room.

The ideas behind arts integration have experienced a recent surge of interest, especially in light of the recent release of the National Core Arts Standards (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014). The new standards include anchor standards related to “connecting” that call on student to “relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding” (p. 13). The philosophical foundation for the inclusion of this standard states,

Artistically literate citizens know and understand artwork from varied historical periods and cultures, and actively seek and appreciate diverse forms and genres of artwork of enduring quality/significance. They also seek to understand relationships among the arts, and cultivate habits of searching for and identifying patterns, relationships between the arts and other knowledge. (p. 10)

Integrated arts experiences will allow students to make connections and transfer arts experiences to other situations in and out of school.

As a result of the promoting of connections by the current National Standards, many educators are moving toward or searching for a more integrated approach to curriculum. Teachers across various content areas have found that establishing curricular connections creates a more integrated, realistic learning environment (DeMoss & Morris, 2002). These interdisciplinary approaches can and must include the arts, yet many educators struggle finding ways to include the arts. Perhaps this is due to the

fact that some general educators do not feel comfortable with their own skills in the arts.

Reimer (2003) stated that music and the other arts have been “ghettoized” (p. 203) in schools because it is considered to be different from other subject areas. In their study related to preservice teachers integrating music into the classroom, Kim and Choy (2008) found preservice teachers were uncomfortable due to a lack of both content and pedagogical knowledge. Colwell (2008) identified this as a fearful area for preservice elementary teachers. Perhaps part of the reason for this isolation is that many other educators in the schools do not understand our subject area. They are, in some respects, afraid because music is somewhat different from other disciplines.

Colwell (2008) also speculated that collaborating with music colleagues to focus on integration resulted in increased confidence in their own abilities. That is why it is so important for the music specialist to collaborate with the general educators. As the lone music educator in a school, we must be advocates and educators not only to the students but also to our colleagues and administrators. There are many ways in which music can relate to other subject areas. It is our job to make our colleagues aware of these similarities and opportunities for integration. Many general educators realize that curriculum integration can be effective, but many do not know how to effectively integrate with the arts. This requires the music specialist to be proactive in reaching out to colleagues. Interdisciplinary thematic units can take place in the general classroom or the arts classroom, or both simultaneously. They will be the most effective if the teachers work together.

According to Wiggins (2001), “Integrated teaching gives students more opportunities to make connections that lead to deeper understanding” (p. 44). When teachers and students begin to search for and discover natural connections between disciplines, then motivation begins to increase (Veblen & Elliott, 2000). DeMoss and Morris (2002) found that arts integration experiences led to more intrinsic and independent learning, fostered learning for understanding as opposed to recall, transformed “learning barriers” into “challenges” to be solved, and inspired students to explore learning opportunities outside of class. When these connections between the disciplines are addressed with integrity, students will begin to develop a more comprehensive understanding of varying disciplines across the curriculum. A successful arts program should not be separated from the rest of the school. Seeking out natural connections with other disciplines across the school curriculum will continue to help strengthen music’s place within the school framework. An integrated approach to music education will result in a more comprehensive understanding of music as well as other disciplines.

Why Not Integrate?

There exist various arguments against the integration of music across the curriculum. As with many initiatives in education, time and resources are the primary challenges. Teachers in all subject areas lack the time and resources to address the required standards and goals that are expected of our students. When faced with the prospect of integrating with another discipline, many teachers feel overwhelmed by the prospect. Many would also wonder who they could collaborate with. The music teacher's schedule often does not include common planning time with teachers in other disciplines, or it may be inconsistent and filled with other daily tasks.

While time and resources are issues that plague all teachers, I argue that integration is worth our time. By encouraging our students to discover natural connection between music and other disciplines, we are deepening their understanding and connections with music as an art form. They will come to realize that music is not isolated within the walls of the music room. These connections will allow them to synthesize and problem solve in ways that are relevant to disciplines across the curriculum and life beyond school.

There are also ways to integrate that do not have to be too time-consuming. It can be wise to begin with natural connections, with which we are already familiar. Beginning with our own varied experiences can also encourage our students to draw on their own personal experiences to enhance their music experiences. Collaboration can also begin with informal conversations with colleagues. A music teacher might simply use another specialist as a resource, or this may lead to a more formal collaboration between classes.

As described in my own early experiences with arts integration, many educators have been “turned off” by the subservient approach to integration. Many music teachers can recall experiences where they have been asked to teach a song to help kids learn about something nonmusical. Such an experience can make one feel our class is less important than another. While these requests are unlikely to disappear, I believe that we can approach these situations with integrity and find ways to meet our own music goals, as well as highlight natural connections between music and other disciplines.

There are also those who fear that arts integration could be seen as a replacement for a music specialist (President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 2011). While this could be a danger, especially within the current climate of budget cuts and standardized testing requirements, arts integration can be approached in a way that values music in its own right. As music specialists, we must be active collaborators and advocates for our curriculum and standards. We must establish our place within the school curricular framework. A distinction can

be made between education *in* the arts (teaching in music, art, drama, dance, etc.) and education *through* the arts (using the arts to enhance or illustrate other subject Bamford, 2009). Each can be an integral part of a whole school curriculum, but one cannot be a substitute for the other (Overland, 2013).

Where to Begin

Begin on a Personal Level

Three Ideas for an Integrated Approach in a General Music Classroom

- Begin on a personal level
- Seek natural connections
- Reach out to other specialists

Begin with a work that you know on a personal level. This could be a piece of music, a book, a visual artwork, or other media such as a video or movie. As you begin to explore the work, natural connections to other works, subject areas, or concepts may appear. Barrett et al. (1997) use the analogy of a sparkling gem.

The arts, too, are gems with many facets. Their facets provide manifold ways for us to peer into works of art so that understanding can be reflected back to us. Indeed, the multifaceted nature of art forms is what makes our experience of them so rich—it is what makes them “sparkle” for us. It is from an exploration of these facets that revelations about relationships between or among the arts may emerge. (p. 77)

Barrett et al. (1997) suggest a series of questions that can serve as a starting point in the process of exploring connections and the discovery of relationships between concepts and subjects. Some of these questions include who, what, when, where, and why, as well as questions about means of expression and form. Answering these questions about a particular work may reveal a number of natural connections and allow our students to understand a work on a more personal level. Natural connections between works may be shared concepts between different disciplines such as the expressive elements of color and line in music and art. The music teacher and the art teacher might discuss expression through color from a different perspective. Students may listen to music and respond through colors. Have students explain their choices using music terms.

Berke (2000) suggests starting small. As with any new initiative, starting small, with a topic you know personally, can be a good way to gain confidence with integration. Don't begin with a schoolwide project. Start with a short unit in your own classroom related to a topic that is of personal interest or reach out to a colleague who is willing to collaborate.

Seek Logical Connections

Topics for Integrations

- Multiple works inspired by one another
- Multiple works related by subject matter
- Cultural context of a work
- Natural connections with personal experiences

There also may be direct connections between multiple works such as music that has been inspired by paintings or a piece of literature. In an essay highlighting the connections between music and art, Barrett (2006) suggests seeking out works that are related by inspiration or through historical evidence. One example of this could be Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, which reflects a walk through an art gallery. One also might discover natural connections between subject matters. Jasper John's Flag paintings depict variations on the American flag (Rosenthal, n.d.). Connections could be drawn to Charles Ives's *Variations on America*. There are also a variety of picture books for children that are based on musical works. *Carnival of the Animals* (Turner & Williams, 1998) is a picture book including a music recording that can be used as a resource to teach Camille Saint-Saens' musical suite. These works can lead to a variety of connections between the music and the sounds and movements of animals used in the suite. This can provide opportunities for active listening experiences for young children such as the high-low sounds of the braying donkeys and the leaping movements of the kangaroos.

Seeking logical connections also encourage the teacher to place music within the context of the culture or background from which it came. Holmes and VanAlstine (2014) felt that a collaborative approach across the curriculum would "enable students to understand the music as well as its context in space and time and culture" (p. 49). Such as in the example of *Porgy and Bess*, a richer experience is achieved by studying the background and setting of the opera. Students will develop a deeper relationship with a musical work if provided opportunities to explore how and why it was created.

Teachers should also encourage students to make their own connections between music and personal experiences or prior knowledge. This could be a direct, formal connection between music and another subject area such as fractions in math class as related to rhythm in music, or sound waves and vibration as studied in science class. This could also be a more casual connection to their own experiences with music. They may recognize a song from home or other outside experiences. Though informal, these are valuable connections that allow them to realize that music is a significant part of everyday life.

Reach Out to Other Specialists

Arts integration will be extremely effective when various specialists are able to collaborate on interdisciplinary projects. May (2012) also highlighted the importance of involving other teachers in your curriculum. She recommended seeking out opportunities to collaborate with colleagues to create rich experiences for students. As the music specialists in our buildings, we also must be proactive in beginning to integrate and collaborate. General classroom teachers may be unsure of how to integrate with the arts. We may have to take the lead until others feel more informed and more comfortable. This can begin with casual conversations with other teachers perhaps while they are dropping off or picking up their class from music, at lunch, or in the teacher workroom. Begin by letting them know what you're working on in music class or by asking them what they're working on or when they might study a particular concept or theme. Some teachers may even have a list of unit themes they will address throughout the year. As specialists, we should also encourage our students to share what they've learned in our class with other teachers and their families.

These casual conversations can lead to a more formal collaborative project as you discover connections between our own standards and other disciplines. An example from my own teaching experience involved a collaborative project between me as the general music teacher, the visual art teacher, and the eighth-grade language arts teacher. The students were reading a book in Language Arts. They did a character study from the book by creating claymation scenes in art class about their chosen character and creating music videos with an original soundtrack in music class. As a result, students developed a deeper understanding of their chosen character, learned about the process of creating a claymation video, and learned about using music to express meaning as well as the process of creating a soundtrack to match a scene.

Collaboration may also involve reaching out to other experts for help. The first place to start could be other teachers within your building. Sometimes the music and art teachers have similar schedules and shared students, being "specials" teachers. As there are so many naturally occurring connections between music and art, perhaps you can collaborate on a project. Or maybe you have an idea for a connection related to science but don't feel knowledgeable enough about the science concepts to teach them. Reach out to a science teacher in your building. Even if you don't formally collaborate on a project, you will have a better understanding of when and how a concept is taught and some of the essential vocabulary that the students may know.

Another way to reach out to an expert for help would be to seek outside help. Maybe you can collaborate with

local artists or performers, or they can make a guest appearance in your classroom. Students love to hear from someone else besides their teachers! An outside expert could also share his or her own cultural experiences. It is essential to approach music from varying cultures with integrity. Banks and Banks (2010) caution teachers to not overgeneralize about other cultures but emphasize the variability of culture within social groups as well as change over time. They recommend drawing on the experiences and cultural practices of the students and teachers within a school community (p. 44). Perhaps while learning about Mexican music you can collaborate with someone from the Mexican culture. This expert could even be a parent or student from within the community.

Final Thoughts

While the idea of integrating the music curriculum with other disciplines across the curriculum may seem daunting and time-consuming, making these connections as teachers and students can be rewarding and motivating. As a young teacher, I discovered some of the inherent challenges of making interdisciplinary connections, but as I progressed, I realized how powerful these connections can be. Interdisciplinary connections can be natural and flow from experiences already occurring in the music classroom. As music specialists, we must be proactive by seeking out connections with integrity and advocating for music as a central part of the school curriculum. An interdisciplinary approach to music education helps our students come to a deeper, more personal understanding of music and other disciplines across the curriculum.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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