Music in the Time of Coronavirus

Mariana Mathewson

Northwestern University

June 2, 2020

**Rationale**

 As educators, we are entering uncharted waters in the time of social distancing, online learning platforms, and no clear path forward into the future. We can, however, be prepared to teach music in a new and barrier-breaking way during these uncertain times. This curricular design is intended for use in secondary music ensembles. It is by using principles of universal design for learning that give students many different options for exploring and learning how to make music.

 There have been a few recent papers that have looked at the effects of COVID-19 on higher education and have offered ideas on how to adjust pedagogy. While extensive literature on the effects of remote-learning on K-12 education does not exist yet, important considerations can be made about teaching in this new format based on the suggestions of those adapting instruction in colleges and universities. The shift towards asynchronous learning, modular structure, and overall accessibility help students succeed in their endeavors to learn in this new remote platform (Daniel, 2020). In a study conducted in select Spanish universities, students actually performed better on computerized tests this year than they did on those same tests in previous years (Gonzales et al., 2020). The authors of this study cite “self-regulated learning (SLR)” as being the measure for success in the time of remote learning. The authors also discuss the importance of self-evaluation and the rates of success in e-learning environments. Echoing these suggestions, a case study from the University of Peking (Bao, 2020) described students’ high-level active learning outside of class as being a factor that helped students succeed. The author of this case study also points to the value of balancing online learning (in person, synchronous) with offline self-learning (asynchronous and perhaps modular). She mentions the pacing of online learning in relation to students’ strained concentration, saying, “…it is essential to adjust the teaching speed (Bao, 2020).” All of these elements are useful in crafting a curriculum that can be implemented during the pandemic.

 The structure of my proposed curricular model is open-ended, allowing for students’ own personal interests to guide learning. The creation of modules will help to facilitate self-regulated learning, and encourage students to work at their own pace within the confines of regular and reasonable deadlines. The use of scaffolding in the creation of these modules is cited in Al Mamun, Lawrie and Wright’s paper about online learning (Al Mamun, Lawrie & Wright, 2019). Even though students will have the ability to choose which unit they would like to focus on, every student will be held accountable for their work and will be assessed throughout the learning process as well as at the end of the unit.

 I also wanted to promote accessibility and equity. This issue was salient before the pandemic, but has been magnified now that most or all instruction has to be online. For students who have no internet access, who have a disability that hinders their ability to use technology for learning, whose parents are unavailable to help them with schoolwork on a regular basis—these are all obstacles to accessing education. Even though some communications companies are promising internet access, many students from low-income families do not own computers at home (Morgan, 2020). One of the standards released by the International Society for Technology in Education in 2017 states that educators should “…design authentic, learner-driven activities and environments that accommodate learner variability (ISTE, 2017).” While this organization promotes the use of technology, it is important to understand the population of students that are being served. There may be cases where non-online learning will have to be accommodated.

 One of the most important themes that recurs in the literature surrounding education in during the pandemic is the emotional side effects. Students are being affected across all socio-economic backgrounds in different ways, but still nonetheless affected. I believe that it is the responsibility of an educator to be accommodating for their students during this truly anxiety-producing time in the history of the world. Further, I think that providing students with the opportunity to accept their feelings as valid, and not be ashamed or afraid of them, is of paramount importance. I believe that making space for students to be as expressive as they choose to be in their creative projects is a healthy way to cope with some of the complex emotions that they are feeling. We as educators must also brace for the aftermath of this pandemic when we do return to school again in the future.

 The proposed curricular design will feature a songwriting unit as one of the options for student learning. Songwriting’s basic elements are rooted in melody, harmony and form, with rhythm binding those elements together. It lends itself well to flexible instrumentation, integration of other disciplines (such as language arts and social studies), and can be used to explore social-emotional aspects of learning (Hughes & Keith, 2019). Songwriting can foster relational thinking (Barrett & Veblen, 2018) and students working through this unit will be invited to make connections within music, across music, towards other subjects outside the arts and eventually transcend the boundaries of disciplines. Songwriting can be an individual pursuit, or it can be a collaborative effort. It also acts as a first step for many musicians into the realm of composing more complex pieces. Since traditional music ensembles have an uncertain future, especially in school settings, songwriting provides a creative outlet for students who enjoy performing but can do so safely. It could also foster a sense of community and facilitate family musicking within the home, since more children are spending time with their immediate family members. This addition of3 music in the home brings a sense of purpose and joy to students who are struggling with the unexpected emotional burdens of this pandemic and social unrest across the country.

 We have seen in the past few weeks that there are two opposing attitudes driving the response to the pandemic: those who are fearful and who fight the new restrictions imposed on reality, and those who are adapting and moving forward by accepting reality and trying to stay flexible. As educators, I believe we must adopt the latter mindset. Schools will never be quite the same as they were before, but students need reassurance and a way forward right now. My hope for this curriculum is to promote meaningful musicking. By reinforcing basic musical concepts, promoting social emotional learning, and engaging as many students as possible, we can use this time of uncertainty and unrest as a time to examine feelings and expression in new and exciting ways.

References

Bao, W. (2020). COVID‐19 and online teaching in higher education: A case study of Peking University. *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies,* *2*(2), 113-115.

Barrett, J.R. & Veblen, K.K. (2012). Meaningful Connections in a Comprehensive Approach to the Music Curriculum. In McPherson, G. & Welch, G. (Eds.), *The Oxford Hadbook of Muisc Education, Vol. 1.* Doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199730810.013.0022

Daniel, S. (2020). Education and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Prospects,* 1-6.

Gonzalez, T., De la Rubia, M., Hincz, K., Comas-Lopez, M., Subirats, L., Fort, S., & Sacha, G. (2020). Influence of COVID-19 confinement in students performance in higher education.

Hughes, D., & Keith, S. (2019). Aspirations, considerations and processes: Songwriting in and for music education. *Journal of Popular Music Education,* *3*(1), 87-103.

Mamun, M., Lawrie, G., & Wright, T. (2020). Instructional design of scaffolded online learning modules for self-directed and inquiry-based learning environments. *Computers & Education,* *144*, Computers & Education, January 2020, Vol.144.

Morgan, H. (2020). Best Practices for Implementing Remote Learning during a Pandemic. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas,* *93*(3), 134-140.