

The Practice of Assessment in Music Education

The Practice of Assessment in Music Education: Frameworks, Models, and Designs

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Assessing Assessment: Examining Habits of Work and Learning and Mastery

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Strategy Paper

Abstract

More often than not, instrumental music programs focus on assessing either content or character. Content refers to the mastery of musical skills, and character refers to the student's contribution within the classroom community and the personal growth of the student. These domains are rarely combined into a coherent assessment strategy that displays a more comprehensive and clearly defined portrait of student growth and achievement. What would an instrumental music program look like if it assessed both content and character in a manner that was transparent to all stakeholders? At the Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School (WHEELS) in the urban New York City community of Washington Heights, a model designed to honor the union of content and character in a cohesive strategy has been implemented. The implementation of this strategy has yielded both promises and challenges. This presentation will illustrate the promises and challenges that arose from the implementation of this strategy, along with implications for further research.

Introduction

Far too often, instrumental music programs focus on assessing either content or character (Wendell, 2007). Content refers to the mastery of musical skills, and character refers to the student's contribution within the classroom community and the personal growth of the student. These domains are rarely combined into a coherent assessment strategy that displays a more comprehensive and clearly defined portrait of student growth and achievement. Few could argue that assessment that is devoid of either domain will result in deep insight into the growth and progress of the student within the classroom community. In doing so, one arguably neglects a valuable tool in assessment

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(Abeles, Klotman & Hoffer, 1995). However, because of the difficulty in assessing these areas, music educators have not developed ways to measure both content and character in a manner that is systematic and clear to all stakeholders—teacher, student, administrators, faculty, and parents (Abeles et al., 1995; Hickey, 1997).

What would an instrumental music program look like if it assessed both content and character in a manner that was transparent to all stakeholders? At the Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School (WHEELS) in the urban New York City community of Washington Heights, a model that attempts to honor the union of content and character in a cohesive strategy has been implemented. The implementation of this strategy has yielded both promises and challenges. This presentation will illustrate the promises and challenges that arose from the implementation of this strategy, along with implications for further research.

Background

Expeditionary Learning builds on the educational insights of Kurt Hahn, the founder of Outward Bound. Expeditionary Learning (EL) schools evolved from an Outward Bound urban education initiative that began in 1992 (Cousins, 2000). EL schools use, as their framework, five core practices and benchmarks. These core practices—learning expeditions, active pedagogy, school culture and character, leadership and school improvement, and structures—work together to promote a learning environment that fosters high student achievement through active learning, character growth, and teamwork.

Assessment is an integral component of the EL philosophy. Both process and product are factored into assessment strategies in the EL classroom. Products, the result of in-depth investigations, are a critical component of the assessment process. “Products are motivational, drive a need to know, and propel students to apply skills” (Expeditionary Learning Core Practice Bookmarks, 2003, p. 12) in order to understand content and concepts. EL refers to character objectives as Habits of Work and Learning (HOWL). In the model that WHEELS has adapted to fit within the requirements of the New York City Department of Education, which requires a single assessment grade per subject, content and character HOWL grades are combined at a 60/40 ratio respectively. This is important to note because the traditional EL model offers separate assessments in content and character.

WHEELS has grown from 180 to nearly 360 students since the school opened in September 2006. It was at this time that the entire faculty at WHEELS engaged in a discussion involving the idea of assessment. Founded on the research of Ken O’Connor (2000), WHEELS has adopted a school wide assessment policy that includes not only the mastery of content objectives, but also includes the HOWL grade. The HOWL grade represents what music teachers have used informally for years. To formalize this practice we, as the music department, designed rubrics and assessment guides to better assess student achievement. Using the EL benchmarks as a means for combating this problem, we found these benchmarks to be very helpful in codifying student expectations and its relationship to assessment.

Some may argue that this codification of expectations is too regimented and is not consistent with the philosophy of a democratic and constructivist classroom. However, in a democratic and constructivist classroom it is essential to establish expectations in order for students to flourish in

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a safe environment (Dewey, 1938). Working within the community in a creative way is part of the challenge to both the students and the teacher (Bruner, 1996). Content is negotiable and flexible to meet the desires and needs of the student in a community-based environment (Dewey, 1938); however, the expectations of student participation are somewhat less fluid. This will provide a sense of structure, ultimately facilitating the augmentation of the community learning experience.

Implications

Implementing this assessment strategy poses both promises and challenges. Promises include awareness on the part of the student in regard to academic progress, the habits of work and learning that lead to an understanding of the process and a more refined product, increased communication between the teacher and student (Duckworth, 1996) and through the reflective actions of students throughout the exploratory process of learning (Brookfield, 1987). This strategy allows the teacher to refine their practice by carefully examining, in detail, both the product and process that occurs in their classroom, as well as the amount of objectivity and subjectivity that is being used to assess student performance.

In addition to the promises of implementing such a strategy, challenges arose as well. This strategy is time consuming and requires careful planning. Furthermore, if the implemented structures are ill conceived, both the teacher and the students can experience frustration and fail to meet the stated objectives. As a result, the desired outcome utilizing multiple components to assess student growth and progress will become unfounded. It is clear that further research is needed to investigate fully the promises and challenges posed by assessment strategy.

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