



# ADOPTING A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO THE MUSIC CURRICULUM

BY CARLOS R. ABRIL

**M**usic education is a vital part of the school curriculum that promotes intellectual, physical, and emotional growth in students. When the curriculum is designed holistically, educators are primed to stimulate creativity and nurture thoughtful expression, as well as build meaningful connections. Conversely, a music curriculum can be overly specialized, emphasizing one facet of music learning such that others are inadvertently neglected. In so doing, it might not reflect the multilayered and multifaceted nature of music-making and learning. This imbalance can create a perceived disconnect between music in school and music practices outside school.

A holistic approach to curriculum design centers around the core concept of *connections* (Miller, et al., 2019). Music learning is not isolated from any one domain of music knowledge nor from the people who are learning it and the people who created it (Abril & Gault, 2022). The curriculum is designed to build connections across various domains of music, such as performance, theory, composition, improvisation, and musicology. It should also encourage interdisciplinary connections when they are meaningful or necessary to the music experience. Moreover, the curriculum emphasizes the integration of music in people's lives, music's societal impact, and broader global and environmental contexts. To understand the principles of holistic music education, we should explore three areas of connection: disciplinary connections, interdisciplinary connections, and integrated connections.

## DISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS


Traditionally, courses in music may be separated into specific music domains such as performance (e.g., choir, guitar), history/appreciation, or music theory. A holistic music curriculum is a slightly different way of envisioning and designing courses to

break down artificial barriers and embrace the interplay between various dimensions of music, including performing, creating, connecting and relating, and responding and analyzing.

How might we design our music courses for greater disciplinary connections? Let's take a guitar course as an example. Traditionally a Guitar 101 curriculum might be guided by a method book that develops students' skills in reading music and playing simple melodies and chords, which might lead to two performances of some solo and some ensemble music. A holistic approach to this same course might develop these performance skills alongside creative skills, such as songwriting. Students would develop guitar skills not in isolation but in connection with creating original music of interest to them.

In an advanced band class, at some point in the curriculum, students might break into small groups to collaboratively analyze a piece of music they are performing. The charge could be to dissect a section of the score and mark the crucial and less significant musical lines. This can foster a deeper understanding of the composition's intricacies and make students more sensitive to the ways the parts connect to the whole. These are not radical shifts, but they are ways that a music course might be more interconnected with diverse forms of musical understanding.

Some familiar approaches to teaching music seek to build connections among various modes of music-making (Abril & Gault, 2016). For example, the Orff approach seeks to develop students' imaginations and creativity through experiences that bring together singing, composing, playing, improvising, moving, speaking, and dramatizing (Beegle & Bond, 2016). Popular music pedagogies, as well, seek to engage students in experiences of listening, arranging, developing skills, and performing (Smith & Gramm, 2022). These are merely two of many approaches that



## A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO CURRICULUM DESIGN CENTERS AROUND THE CORE CONCEPT OF CONNECTIONS

### DISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS

Design courses so they break down artificial barriers and embrace the interplay between various dimensions of music, including performing, creating, connecting and relating, and responding and analyzing.

### INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS

Recognize that music is a dynamic form of human expression with the potential to intersect with art, literature, history, religion, politics, and social movements.

### INTEGRATED CONNECTIONS

Create space for personal reflections, prompting students to consider how music connects to their emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual sensibilities.

embrace curricula that build connections across music domains.

*But disciplinary connections alone are not holistic.*

### INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS

Holistic music education extends beyond the boundaries of music disciplines and seeks to connect music with other subject areas. Music is a dynamic form of human expression with the potential to intersect with art, literature, history, religion, politics, and social movements. Interdisciplinary connections in music education help students gain a broader view of music in its relation to other domains of knowledge.

Music is created, used, and arranged by people in particular times and places. This knowledge is not extraneous to the music or to music learning. In fact, understanding the historical, cultural, and social contexts of music can enrich students' comprehension of musical pieces and guide them in making thoughtful musical decisions. It might shape their interpretations of a melody or inspire them to go down a particular path for a composition project. This type of research could inspire assistance from a history teacher or a collaboration between teachers.

Returning to the example in an advanced band course, we could charge students with researching and writing program notes for a concert or introducing a piece before its performance. This approach starts to con-

nect music to a broader world outside the classroom, one connected to its sociocultural and historical contexts, enriching the learning experience for all.

Interdisciplinary connections in music education also encourage students to take on roles beyond that of performers or composers. Using the example of the guitar/songwriting course, students may need to assume the role of the poet/songwriter and access their knowledge of the literary arts for the lyric-writing portion of the course. A teacher might engage students in discussing the difference between poetry and song lyrics or support them in choosing a poem as source material for an original song. The blurring of disciplinary lines was witnessed in 2016 when Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. This marked the first time a musician won this award as a songwriter/musician.

*Adopting a holistic approach requires going one step further.*

### INTEGRATED CONNECTIONS

Through a holistic approach to the music curriculum, we recognize the importance of making integrated connections between the personal, social, and environmental aspects of learning. We seek to connect learning to students' lives, making education more relevant and motivating. When students can personally relate to and make integrated connections to the music they are studying, they are more likely to be engaged and find long-

term meaning in their learning.

A holistic curriculum creates space for personal reflections, prompting students to consider how music connects to their emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual sensibilities. In a popular music course, we can facilitate that connection by giving students the freedom to select a song they are assigned to cover in their small group bands. In a mariachi ensemble class, we might ask for a brief journal reflection about the personal meaning students derive from a piece of music they played, a recent concert they performed, or a musical challenge they overcame. In an elementary classroom, we can ask students to improvise on two pitches using their voices and lyrics to express something about their musical selves.

Students come from diverse backgrounds and communities, each with its own musical traditions and practices, values, and expectations. Teachers play a vital role in getting to know their students as individuals and understanding the ways their culture shapes how they see and understand the world.

Teachers should build on students' strengths and experiences, validating and affirming their cultural backgrounds. For example, rather than viewing English-language learners as deficient, teachers could instead demonstrate how they value the fact that a student speaks their native language, while also learning English. When teachers value their students, peers may be more likely to value each other. Creating a supportive and collaborative social environment in the classroom fosters a sense of belonging and encourages students to participate in the music program and take creative risks in their musical endeavors.

Integrated connections bring together the personal and the social, and music educators can facilitate interactions between students and their communities. This can include organizing performances in local venues, collaborating with community organizations, or even engaging in outreach activities, such as students performing and sharing their musical stories with older adults in a community center. These connections bridge the gap between classroom music experiences and the broader community. They can also help students recognize the impact music can have on building social bonds or enriching people's lives.

Integrated connections also consider the relationship between the music experience and the environment.

Traditionally, music has celebrated the beauty and wonders of nature, often featuring compositions that reflect the natural world. In recent decades, composers and performers have sought to go further by bringing attention to environmental concerns through music. For example, Pulitzer Prize-winning composer John Luther Adams has used his music as a vehicle to promote ecological understanding and to deepen listeners' awareness of the human connection to the earth. Making an environmental connection requires more than learning and playing a piece like Adams's *Become Ocean*. It requires ventures into understanding the meaning and purpose of the piece, as well as sharing that information with an audience before the performance. Music can serve as a powerful tool to raise awareness of environmental issues, connect individuals with nature, and inspire action.

Music classrooms offer unique opportunities for students to connect with the natural environment. Elementary general music students could recycle natural materials to create unique instruments or sample sounds from their communities as material for original compositions. Teachers can explore the potential of outdoor music classrooms or music within community gardens. Music can serve as an emotional catalyst for raising environmental awareness, inspiring action, and fostering a deeper connection to the natural world.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

A holistic music curriculum is one that supports the development of the whole student, within the background of the world outside the classroom. It involves providing opportunities to build connections within the discipline of music—with various moments that step outside these disciplinary boundaries when needed. By adopting some of these principles, music educators can create meaningful and impactful learning experiences that resonate with students and prepare them for a diverse and interconnected world. ■



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