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Assessing Music Learning

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Philosophy of Assessment

If you were to ask many public school music teachers today about their philosophy of assessment, an eye roll or scoff would likely precede the response. Some teachers might even get heated and defensive over the topic of assessment. The current climate of public schools, which places such a premium on quantifiable data derived from formal assessment, has helped create this negative attitude toward assessment in many music teachers. It is my belief, however, that music teachers have a responsibility to overcome the negative atmosphere that surrounds assessment in order to better serve their students. When used appropriately and authentically, assessment serves as a tool for teachers to guide their work to better suit the talents and needs of their students. Implementing assessments in a variety of styles and settings can only improve student learning in the music classroom.

Students in music should gain the musical knowledge that allows them to interact with the culture of music that surrounds them, and assessments in the music classroom should lead students toward this goal. Once teachers create learning goals for their students, assessments should be used “to obtain evidence of musical growth and progress” toward those goals (Brophy, 2000, p.3). Teachers should constantly be striving to develop musical knowledge in their students, so creating assessments that provide evidence of that development should alleviate some of the mania surround assessment. If teachers hope to obtain evidence of the growth of their students, however, it is essential that assessments are authentic. In order to demonstrate that students have grown, the assessment must “[simulate] the conditions under which the learning has taken place” (Brophy, 2000, p. 14). If one of the goals of a choral curriculum is to develop musicianship through singing, then that goal should be assessed by asking students to sing. A written exam on singing would remove students from the environment in which they learned how to sing, and would thus be inauthentic. Similarly, grading students based largely on participation in the music classroom is inauthentic. Assessing student behavior does not provide evidence that students’ have developed their musical knowledge and their ability to apply that knowledge to their musical culture. Unfortunately, many music teachers rely heavily on participation, behavior, and attendance to assess students. These criteria devalue the learning goals set forth by music teachers, and should be replaced by authentic assessments that demonstrate evidence of the students’ knowledge, rather than their attitude. Authenticity is key in creating assessments that accurately and honestly provide the evidence of learning that teachers should seek.

Once teachers have obtained data regarding their students’ progress in their musical development, they should use that data to better meet the needs of their students. As Brophy outlines in his chapter on the purpose of assessing (2000), assessments should be used “to guide instruction and choice of teaching strategies” (p.3). Assessments provide evidence of both student and teacher performance. If a large number of students or a particular population performs poorly on an assessment, the teacher should use that data to guide a more differentiated and inclusive approach to the material. Music teachers are known for their ability to informally assess an entire group of students and quickly create solutions to the problems they hear. Group assessments, however, do not allow the teacher to check in with each student’s individual progress toward the goals of the music class. Taking the time to create individual formative assessments allows the teacher to create plans for instruction that meet individual students where they need the most help. This approach to formative assessment will ultimately save time and frustration for both student and teacher.

Similarly, teachers should plan for accommodations and differentiated approaches to assessment when they know in advance of individual student needs. Teachers who have a strong knowledge of their students’ diverse strengths, weaknesses, and needs should plan assessments that integrate accommodations. As with any assessment, assessments for students with special needs in music should be based directly on the learning goals for that student. If a student is mainstreamed into the music class from a self-contained setting, the learning goals will likely have to be adapted to meet the student’s abilities. In this case, alternative assessments that authentically assess those goals without patronizing the student must be created. When teachers re-examine instructional techniques and assessments so that they can better reach students with special needs, the overall instruction for all students in the class improves. Creating a curriculum that honors multiple learning styles by including a diversity of assessment styles, such as performances, portfolios, exams, and other assessments, benefits all students in the classroom.

Creating assessments that develop students’ musical knowledge so that they may better interact with their musical culture further benefits teachers in the realm of advocacy. Although it is unfortunate that music teachers have to advocate for the importance of their programs, authentic assessments in music can “help validate the music program with parents and students” (Brophy, 2000, p.3). Assessments that are connected to national and state standards can serve as evidence to parents and administrators that real, important learning is taking place in the music classroom. The specific skills outlined in national and state standards for music can provide students with the musical knowledge they need in order to better interact with the musical culture that surrounds them. Assessing in formal and informal settings helps students reach grade-level specific learning goals, and helps students to feel like they have made progress in their musicianship. Demonstrating the results from assessments based on standards can only help student learning, as long as the assessment does not become an inauthentic task created solely to appease administrators. This perceived need to placate administrators with assessments is playing into the current chaos surrounding Student Growth Objectives (SGOs). If teachers pause to consider that SGOs are truly designed to demonstrate evidence that their students are making progress toward specific goals, much of the SGO mania might subside. SGOs can be used to create the validation that parents and administrators require of a music program, while simultaneously authentically assessing students along their development as musicians.

Authentic assessments are a crucial part of a music curriculum that helps students develop the musicianship that will allow them to better understand and participate in the diverse musical cultures that surround them. By including a variety of styles and settings for these assessments, students with a variety of learning styles and challenges will be able to demonstrate their progress towards the goals of the music class. A mixture of formal, informal, formative, and summative assessments will provide evidence of student growth in the music classroom. Rather than shying away from assessment, music teachers should embrace assessment so that they and their students may work together toward a more fulfilling education in music.