

# Music Technology and the Non-Traditional Music Classroom

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This article is about possibilities. The possibilities which exist with music technology, and how to best use these tools for music learning in a non-traditional music classroom setting. When I was first hired into my position as a grade 6 to 8 music teacher in a middle school in Brampton, Ontario, my administrators expressed that they would like to start a music technology program because the traditional program was not reaching all of our students. When I met the students, I believed they were not at all interested in reading notation and performing music in the same way I was educated. I also believed that a non-traditional music program might be the best fit for my students.

Nothing in my music education could have prepared me for this position. As I researched and connected with music educators from various boards, I came to the realization that all of us became music educators because we were successful in the traditional Western art music training. With this in mind, I began my journey of crafting a music technology program that would be accessible to all students, while remaining authentic to what I believed was good music education at the time. So, I developed a plan. The year was divided into two halves: exploration and theory, and creation. In the first half of the year, students explored different applications available to them (e.g., Apple's *Garageband*, Novation's *Launchpad*, Ableton's *Learning Music website*, NYU Music Experience Design Lab's *Groove Pizza*) while learning the fundamentals of music

such as duration, pitch, dynamics, timbre, and texture. In the second half of the year, students applied their knowledge and engaged in mini-projects where they were asked to create sounds/music for different topics including emotes from the video game Fortnite, and emotions from Pixar's movie *Bao*.

By incorporating technology into the music program, all of my students were able to access and connect to music in ways that were not previously possible through the traditional concert band program. Music technology has the power to bridge multiple gaps at various levels: the personal (musician-educator gap), the institutional (can-not gap), and the global (cultural gaps). I will discuss these concepts in the sections that follow.

### **Personal Level: the Musician-Educator Gap**

At the beginning of the school year, I had a lot of great ideas and resources for the classroom, but I struggled to streamline my music program because I had limited time with my students. In order to successfully build my program, I knew I needed to develop a plan that would lead to positive learning results. Attempting to clarify and articulate my vision for music education was not an easy task. The Ontario Arts Curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p.3) gave me a starting point for an answer by stating that “[p]articipation in the arts contributes in important ways to students’ lives and learning – it involves intense engagement, development of motivation and confidence, and the use of creative and dynamic ways of thinking and knowing.” Supporting that sentiment,

Kratus (2007) stated that “[music education] must also connect people to music in ways that are both personally fulfilling and educationally valid.” (p.46)

As I thought about these two ideas, my own musical identity began to unravel. On the one hand, my favourite parts of being a musician are making music with other people, and connecting to a community. On the other hand, I was trained to learn and teach music as an academic subject (i.e., learning to read and play Western art music), but I found that this doesn’t work for every student. As Kratus (2007) points out, “The nature of music in the world and the nature of music in school are, then, quite different things.” (p.45)

For the purposes of creating a community and participating in active music-making with other people, traditional theory lessons in notation serves little purpose. Even though learning Western musical notation opens up the doors to the music of great Western art music composers such as Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, this learning is less essential in the middle school music classroom. Allowing students to make music together, without a lot of background in a traditional music program, using technology by triggering sounds and loops, is one way to bridge the gap between music in school and music they hear everywhere else.

Reflecting on my own musical journey, I too was never good enough for the traditional music program. I was never a great pianist, hornist, or vocalist. I had experiences in many areas of music-making, but none in an area that was ‘good enough’ to Western music standards. I came to strongly believe that the feeling of not being ‘good enough’

has absolutely no place in middle school music education, and that music technology can help us close the can-cannot (ability) gap.

### **Institutional Level: the Can-Cannot (Ability) Gap**

The notion that music is for the talented is so ingrained in our culture that most of my students and colleagues at my school tell me that music is simply not for them. When asked to elaborate, most people said that they were not good at music in school. The conversation slowly turned from “I’m not musical” to understanding that music is more than getting a good grade in music class, learning to read the five-line staff, or mastering an instrument. At the end of our conversations, we came to a mutual understanding that all of them enjoyed some aspect of music (e.g., listening to music, making beats) and that perhaps they were not as hopeless in music as they once thought. What was clear to me was the fact that the status of our current middle school music program didn’t serve all of our students.

Knowing that middle school may be many students’ last formal exposure school music learning, I think that middle school music teachers have an important role to play. Through proper programming, whether it is traditional concert band music arranged for our ensembles or creative projects such as creating soundscapes, students will hopefully leave the formal music education system with exposure to and an understanding of a variety of music, (ie. not simply Western art music). In my program, I emphasize the importance of being able to talk about music with their friends, using words such as fast or slow, loud or soft, long or short, and low or high. Using programs

such as *Garageband* and *Launchpad* allows students to manipulate the musical elements of any sound, to create a deeper understanding of tempo, dynamics, duration and rhythm, and pitch.

One of the major benefits I see in incorporating technology in the music program is that students who normally would not be able to read or write in standard notation now have a way into the world of music. I believe that music technology is, simply put, assistive technology for music, similar to what Kurzweil or Google Read and Write are for language learning. Using technology in our music classrooms allows us to level the playing field, so that 'musically-inclined' students are no longer the only ones who are able to read music and play the right notes at the right time. By allowing students to manipulate sounds, all students are able to experience music in a different way, perhaps one that is more natural than learning to read Western notation alone offers. As explained by Piaget, "children [are] active, intelligent, creative constructors of their own knowledge structure" (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006, p.170) Giving students the opportunity to be creative through the manipulation of sounds is a great way to engage all learners of all academic abilities.

In this past school year, I had the pleasure of working with every class in the school, including classes with special learning needs. One general observation I have made is that the students who are not academically inclined tend to be the most creative in my class. As a result of music technology, I have seen different groups of students from every grade and academic level come into the music room at lunchtime to make music

together. Sometimes, it is the traditional band or piano/guitar small ensembles. Other times, students are jamming using ipads in addition to traditional instruments. I am not sure what this means for music education, but I do know that music technology has the power to close the can-not ability gap, so that “everyone, including me, leaves the classroom with beaming smiles...feeling a little more energy and confidence for facing real life situations outside the classroom” (Friesen, 2009, p.259)

### **Global Level: Embracing Diversity**

I believe that the ultimate goal of middle school music is to give students exposure to all types of music and all ways of music-making. I believe that in a traditional Western music program, many voices are lost in our attempt to teach music literacy using the five-line staff notation. Reflecting on my own classroom, I know that I am often teaching students who come from many different places, whether these are differences in culture, religion, or ethnicity.

Incorporating technology in our middle school music programs opens up a common language to understanding different types of music, and gives us an introduction to a variety of cultures. By experiencing music organically, either through purposeful listening (teacher-led) or manipulating sounds as part of an inquiry-based project (student-directed), students are better able to understand different cultures and hopefully develop empathy for their classmates and beyond. As Brooklyn from Winnipeg's Most put it, “it's like... changing the way people think... and hitting people's hearts” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2012).

Without technology, Winnipeg's Most (Canadian hip hop group) would not have been able to create and share their music. Through music technology, we can give a voice to students who may not otherwise have a voice in our music programs. This generation has all types of music at their fingertips, and through composing, arranging, and manipulating different sounds, students can receive a more well-rounded exposure to music from every community. It is important to recognize that no music educator is an expert in all types of music, so as Melissa, a former student, said in her interview, "you should just put a disclaimer on it and say 'I'm not teaching this the *right way*, but I'm teaching you so I can expose you to it" (Countryman, 2009, p.33) One great way to minimize risking tokenism or trivialism of cultures is to draw knowledge from the specific community you are teaching about. For example, it is much better to bring in elders or performers from different groups to talk about their music and what it means to them as a culture, rather than simply playing a world music piece.

Music technology has opened up pathways for us to bridge the inherent gaps within a diverse country like Canada. The role of the music teacher has slowly shifted from the keeper of Western art music to the facilitator of musical knowledge as a way to understanding the world we live in. This has given me the courage to engage in tougher conversations such as addressing social justice issues through music. I believe that music education and social justice are one and the same, and incorporating music technology is one way to narrow the personal, institutional, and global gaps within our society – and within music class.

## Reference List

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## Appendix: Links to Music Technology Resources

Garageband (Apple) App: <https://www.apple.com/ca/ios/garageband/>

Groove Pizza (NYU Music Experience Design Lab) website:

<https://apps.musedlab.org/groovepizza/?source=pub&museid=SkX05KLNQ&show-grid=true&multi-lock=&brainpop=false&midimap=>

Launchpad (Novation) App:

<https://itunes.apple.com/ca/app/novation-launchpad/id584362474?mt=8>

Learning Music (Ableton) website: <https://learningmusic.ableton.com/>