A Music Library for your Classroom

By Darienne Oaks

Have you found yourself or students singing the “ABC’ song to make sure of the order of the alphabet? Studies conducted over the past 20 years in the fields of education, neuroscience, biology and psychology reveal the power of music and singing on the body and the brain and its particular effect on learning. Dr. Roy Paget writes: "Recent research has proven that music affects the body. It appears to massage organs, entrain biorhythms alter hormone levels, reduce stress and increase learning. Music carries with it more than just feelings; it can be a powerful vehicle for information. Music acts as a premium signal carrier whose rhythms, patterns, contrasts and varying tonalities encode new information. The use of music as a partner can be a powerful way to carry a large volume of content. In fact, music can do 60% of the teaching work in about 5% of the time!" Music is a wonderful way to enhance learning, a simple means of helping you and your students get moving during the day and an elegant classroom management tool as well. Building a music library in your classroom is a solid investment in your students’ learning and an accessible way to help create an optimal learning environment. Like any personal library, your classroom library will be built on your tastes and your student’s tastes. There are some key considerations to make before you start collecting the music you want to include: tempo, or beats per minute, purpose, genre and compatibility of lyrics.

Tempo is the speed or pacing of the music, and is usually determined by the number of beats per minute (BPM) in the music. You can easily discover the number of beats per minute for any piece of music using the analogue display on your computer, a stop watch, a watch with a second hand or using a wall mounted clock if it has a second hand. Let the music play and find the basic pulse of beat of the music in your body. Sometimes it is helpful to tap your foot or hand to the music as you let the basic beat come into your body. Once you are comfortable that you have found the basic beat in the music, look at the clock and determine when you want to start marking off ten seconds. As the ten seconds pass on the clock, count the beats you hear in the music. Stop counting at the end of the ten seconds
and then multiply the number of beats you counted by six, as there are six ten second intervals in a one full minute. For example, if you counted 12 beats in ten seconds and multiply 12 by 6, the number of beats per minute (BPM) is 72. The number of beats per minute have different effects on our bodies and brains and therefore the optimal learning conditions you orchestrate.

For concentrated learning, the number of recommended beats range from 50-80 beats per minute (BPM), and classical music is highly recommended by many experts in the fields of music, education and neuroscience, if the music is played softly enough in the background so that normal conversation can still be heard. Some of the classical composers whose music falls usually at 60 bpm are as follows:

Slow Baroque Music:

Vivaldi Largo from ‘Winter’: The Four Seasons

Largo from Concerto in D Major for Guitar and Strings

Largo from Concerto in C Major for Mandolin, Strings and Harpsichord

Telemann Largo from Double Fantasia in G Major for Harpsichord

Bach, J.S Largo from Harpsichord in F Minor

Air for the G String

Largo from Harpsichord in C Major
Corellie Largo from Concerto No.10 in F Major from Twelve Concerti Grossi

Concerti Grossi, op.6 No.2, 8, 5 & 9

Albinoni Adagio in G for Strings

Brahms Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D Major

Pachelbel Canon Suite in D

Also, the music of composers Beethoven, Chopin, Grieg, Handel, Haydn and Mozart are well known to support concentrated learning. You may also find that using classical music changes the feel of your classroom by helping to maintain a quiet, orderly atmosphere, without your having to say anything more to the students. Classical compositions are orderly, mathematical in their precision, and predictable in the patterns, progressions and rhythmic formats. I often have found that, although not the favorite of every student, while they are playing the room has a very calm and orderly feeling, with more attention to task on the part of the students. If you choose to consistently use particular music in the background for a particular subject or task, and it is a skill or concept you will be testing for mastery, be sure to play the same music softly in the background as the students are taking their tests. Many studies support the impact the same piece of music has on learning and assessing that learning.

If you are looking to use music as a background for artistic expression or creative writing you might want to try using music with 60-90 bpm, which are considered the number of beats per minute that help foster inspiration. You may choose instrumental music from any of the genres to which you and your students respond well: folk, jazz, rock, new age, world, ethnic, etc.
Often I turn to the students, having taught them how to count the number of bpm, and ask them to bring in their favorite instrumental music. In this way, we are building a library together. If you are facile with ipods and itunes and uploading and downloading music, students can email their selections to you and you can build a play list that every student can then access at home or at school. However, if you are more comfortable using cds, many students now have the capability to burn a single cd at home and bring it into school. This as an educational “classroom use” only cd, one that does not violate copyright laws.

Schedules are hectic for us as teachers and for students and their families. If your purpose is to use music to help create a relaxing atmosphere, and or conduct some stress reducing activities in your classroom it is still useful to use a 60-90 bpm piece of music. However, for this purpose classical, new age, space music or recordings of the the natural world such as waterfalls, rivers, oceans, winds, etc will prove very helpful. Studies have documented the “physiological changes in sensory, musculoskeletal and neurological systems of the body” (Dr. Mary Elaine Kiener- National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute), and using music to literally relax the body and brain works well. Let the music do the work for you, and you will discover the delightful change in your classroom environment for that period of time.

The range of 100-140 bpm invites the body to get up and get moving. This number of beats per minute is considered to be in the motivational category. Music at this tempo is terrific for taking a seat break with your students. Your choice of music genre will depend on the type of break you need to take with your students. If it is a stretching break you may want to use something soothing and relaxing at the 60-90 bpm range. However, if is it a fast moving aerobic break you may want to use something from folk, jazz, rock and roll or ethnic. Music with strong, quick rhythmic pulses are bound to get the blood, body and mind moving differently than when everyone was seated. Music at the 120-140 bpm will help oxygenate everyone and throw open the windows to learning. Instrumental oldies from the 50’s and 60’s work well in this category of bpm, as do upbeat songs from that decade or contemporary up beat songs. If you do choose to
use songs with lyrics, you must preview them before, as contemporary lyrics can often be inappropriate in public schools.

There are, though, many songs with lyrics, especially folk tunes and some rock and roll, that tell compelling stories or present beautiful poems or recount history in our culture and other cultures. Teachers often use music as a way into studying a particular moment in history. One way to integrate your curriculum is to use these songs in a particular unit of study. For instance, recordings exist of the songs written about the Boston Massacre and the revolutionary war in America. Students enjoy learning to sing along with the recordings, and by learning the lyrics they learn some of the nuances of the time period and what was important to the people who heard the songs and sang the songs so many years ago. The lyrics help unlock the history in a meaningful way. A natural extension that holds clear meaning and connection for them is to contrast the folk songs from history to the music they enjoy today. The differences in tempo, instrumentation, rhythm, word choices, and intended audience are very distinct, and have always generated rich discussion in the classroom. Music can be a great tool with which to explore any culture or time period or to help cement learning.

Another direct and simple method for using music to enhance learning is to use contemporary songs, or familiar songs like nursery rhymes and create rewrites with your students or on your own. Rewrites are great fodder for helping students with skills or helping to get factual information into their long term memory. For instance a familiar song "Skip to My Lou" can be rewritten to reinforce the understandings of prepositions. The chorus is the same:

"Skip, skip, skip to my Lou

Skip, skip, skip to my Lou

Skip, skip, skip to my Lou

Skip to my Lou my darling"

The verses change. For example:

"I can put my hands over my head
I can put my hands over my head

I can put my hands over my head

Skip to my Lou my darling."

I also know that every time I go to spell “Mississippi” I always sing the song I learned from the Disney Mousketeer, Annette Funicello, and I spell it correctly every time. That has been a great lifelong tool for this insecure speller. There are many websites that can help you create or discover songs for skills. Please visit www.songsforteaching.com as an example of one of many available websites.

Using the number of bpm, and being clear on genres, purpose and what effect you want the music to have on your students will enable you to carefully build a music library that will serve you well over a number of years. With today’s technologies, creating, sorting and maintaining a music library for your classroom is straightforward. It will take some time to download or upload what you want, yet it is well worth that upfront investment of your time. Not only will the music be an effective tool within your classroom management tool kit, it will also help establish optimal learning conditions in the body and brain, for the body and brain are one system, and working with our body system is a good starting point.

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