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MAKING A PLACE FOR MUSIC IN BASIC WRITING

ABSTRACT: Recent communication research indicates that music helps listeners construct the meanings of social, personal, and cultural events. This essay examines the use of music as a springboard for writing and provides an explanation of how basic writing students can use music-writing activities to discover meaningful topics and ideas, to develop specific supporting details, and to understand the connections between purpose and audience.

In sweet music is such art,
Killing care and grief of heart
Fall asleep, or hearing die.

—William Shakespeare

For centuries music has had a tremendous impact on the human spirit. King David used his harp to cure Saul of “evil spirits.” Sirens lured unwary Greek sailors to their doom with sweet melodies. Both the Greek Orpheus and the Scandinavian Odin are said to have been able to move inanimate objects with the beauty of their music.

Recent communication research and theory tell us that music stimulates thinking. Listening to music involves processing in-

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formation, analyzing sounds, and framing perceptions (Lull 141). Cultural theorists suggest that music also has a social context. Music provides security in foreign environments; it also provides topics for social discussion (Lull 149). Listeners also construct the meaning of social, personal, and cultural events through music (Lull 151).

Communication researchers also suggest that music plays a central role in the cultivation of personal and social goals. Simon Frith contends that young people use music to cope with authority figures (quoted in Lull 152). George Lewis's work on the sociology of popular music and culture emphasizes the power of music as a rallying cry, a protest around which we gather to do something about social conditions, or as a badge of identity—a means of showing others (and ourselves) to what group or groups we belong or aspire to belong as members (199).

Like the written medium, music enables people to mark their membership in—and make comments on—a shared world. Social relationships govern the ongoing dialogue between composer and audience in both writing and music. To help students better understand the important links between composition and music and to engage students through the use of this familiar genre, I integrated music and writing activities in my basic writing course this past Spring. My purpose was to provide basic writing students with an opportunity to explore important links between the composing process in music and the composing process in writing. Using a variety of musical selections as springboards for writing, I asked students to listen carefully, to analyze the various selections for meaningful topics and ideas, and to develop supports for paragraphs and essays. I hoped that students would discover that the creation of a piece of music and a piece of writing embody many of the same processes: keeping an audience in mind, using a variety of strategies to persuade and stimulate the audience, and finding ways to engage the audience. My goal was to use music to stimulate thinking, provide topics for discussion, lessen inhibitions in the unfamiliar college setting, and enhance the construction of meaning in writing.

Eleven students enrolled in my basic writing course, which is a noncredit prerequisite for Freshman Composition. (Students are placed in basic writing based on their scores on the required writing placement examination for first-year students or as a result of having failed the course before.) The class met two days a week for two hours each day. Of the eleven students

enrolled in the class, three were African American and eight were white. There were seven men and four women in the class. Their ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-five (except for two thirty-five-year-old students who were coming back to school after working full-time).

During the first week of the ten-week term, we discussed the historic and universal role that music has played in human communication and the powerful impact that popular music (in its various forms) plays in the lives of young people. Students were asked to explain the social and cultural meanings of their favorite music and to consider the ways in which musical selections might be used as springboards for the writing of paragraphs and essays. Students were asked to bring in instrumental tapes which we used as part of the context for each day's in-class writing. In addition, each student was required to bring to class a favorite musical selection on tape for use in a ten-minute oral presentation. I suggested that the musical selections contain lyrics. Students were expected to introduce their piece of music, play their tape for three minutes during the presentation, and use the remaining seven minutes for class discussion. Each presenter would be expected to lead a class discussion and to answer questions regarding the musical selection he or she had played for the class.

To prepare students for this assignment, I presented the following questions for consideration:

- What kind of music is being played?
- Who is the artist?
- How many artists are performing?
- What is the role of each performer?
- What is the basic message of the selection?
- Which lyrics communicate this message?
- How does the music communicate or reinforce this message?
- What audience do you think the composer of this piece had in mind when he or she or they composed it?

To help students understand how to respond to these questions, we practiced answering them together. I played a variety of my own musical selections, and we discussed the significance of each piece by answering each of the questions above.

Students also learned how to introduce a piece of music by giving the name of the musical selection, the composer's name(s), the name of the artist(s), and summary information regarding

the tape such as the release date of the tape and the way the music has been received by various audiences. Through simulation exercises, students learned how to lead a group discussion and how to ask and answer questions about a musical selection.

While students in the audience listened to their classmates' tapes and oral presentations, they were asked to take notes in response to the following questions:

- What was the main idea, theme or basic message of the musical selection?
- What supporting ideas did the speaker give regarding the significance of the tape?
- How would you rate the presentation in terms of musical selection, delivery of presentation and organization of presentation ("excellent," "good," "fair," or "poor")?
- What suggestions do you have for helping the speaker improve his or her presentation?

In addition to writing up their presentations and their analyses of classmates' presentations, I provided students with a variety of writing assignments. They were asked to record their feelings and reactions to each musical selection they heard during the course of the term in a daily journal. They also used their journals to develop topics based on their responses to the music they were hearing and on their responses to classmates' presentations. Finally, students used their journal entries to develop longer paragraphs and essays.

As they listened, spoke, and wrote, students learned to look for the main idea and supporting details in musical and written compositions. They also developed a keener awareness of the audience's role in the creation of dialogic meaning and a clearer understanding of organizational structure through listening to the musical selections. Most importantly, they began to use a variety of writing strategies and styles to engage an audience and achieve their purposes.

Midway through the term, I invited a guest musician to play his own music in our class and to share his perspectives on the similarities between the processes of composing music and composing writing. Students asked about how composers manipulate sounds to achieve different meanings and effects. They took notes about the musician's answers; these notes formed the basis of a composition about the connections between the composing process in music and the composing process in writing.

Throughout the term, I asked students to record their thoughts and feelings about the ongoing activities of the course. Their response was overwhelmingly positive. Most commented that they appreciated the opportunity to bring their favorite musical selections to class. They also said that they felt more confident and relaxed as writers because of their success in doing the activities presented in the course.

At the end of the term students were asked to write an essay analyzing their reactions to the music-writing activities. Their essays revealed that I had achieved many of my goals for the course. Students wrote that they were more confident as writers, that the integration of writing and music made the class enjoyable and interesting, and that they were able to see meaningful connections between music and writing. One student commented that “the way in which music was used in this class has helped me conquer my fear of writing.” Some students emphasized that the music-writing helped them develop strategies for generating ideas and helped them modify these ideas to fit their audience’s expectations. Others mentioned that they were able to develop ideas for their in-class papers more quickly because the various musical presentations gave them something interesting to think about. Several students noted that they were able to develop more specific supportive details for their ideas based on the lively discussions that followed the presentations.

Many students indicated that they liked the feeling of community that the music-writing activities inspired and suggested that these kind of activities be integrated in the English 101 and 102 (freshman English) courses. Students wrote that they were somewhat uncomfortable with the structure of the course at first, but “as the course progressed, things came together and the class was fun,” “it was great being able to relax in a class that most of the time caused fear,” and “the music-writing activities were an excellent way of getting everyone interested and involved with the class.”

My reactions were also positive. I felt that the students genuinely enjoyed making presentations on musical selections of their choice. I noted increased confidence on the part of students as they wrote about the various musical selections. Indeed students who wrote only a few lines on the initial writing sample generated pages of text as the term progressed. Further, I was pleased with the increasingly fine quality of student work. A significant number of the portfolios turned in

at midterm and at the end of the term reflected improvement. One student, Lewis, could manage to write barely a paragraph at the beginning of the term; by the end of the term, he was writing two-page essays. At the final conference, Lewis said that he felt afraid and nervous about the class at first, but when he discovered that he could discuss and write about musical topics, he felt more confident and comfortable.

The two major improvements that I observed were in students' organization of paragraphs and essays and the development of substantive ideas in the various drafts they submitted. I was pleased to find that students had made meaningful connections between the musical presentations and their own writing. For example, one student who brought a rap tape to the class on the subject of police brutality wrote several brief essays about strategies for citizens to use to make police officers more accountable for their actions. Later, this student expanded these ideas into an essay about ways in which the police department can strengthen recruitment standards and application procedures.

For many basic writers, composing in written sentences is a process of creating and defining their identities and their voices. Often, these students need to make social and cultural leaps to contend with a different language system, differing ideologies, and differing ways of analyzing and synthesizing information. As Shirley Brice Heath and Leslie Mangiola have pointed out, "In recent years we have become increasingly aware that all students do not bring the same kinds of knowledge, language habits and strategies for learning to school, and that school is an institution that must take responsibility for presenting all students with a range of options for organizing knowledge and using knowledge and using language. . . expansions of language uses in school will bring a student closer to the competencies that will meet the communication needs of work opportunities and lifelong learning" (14).

It is not enough for teachers to lead basic writers to an understanding of paragraphing, organization, punctuation, and outlining. Teachers must use familiar social and cultural genres (such as music) to stimulate writing and to assist students in moving past the margins of self-doubt to positive and authoritative identities in the writing process. As Tom Fox says, basic writing teachers "must understand the cultural forces that shape their students" and "understand how their students are accommodating, resisting or reproducing these forces in the classroom" (81).

The music-writing activities presented here offer no solution to the many difficulties encountered by basic writers. However, music is a familiar social and cultural genre that can draw students out of their silences in basic writing classes. Music is a productive medium through which basic writers are able to enlarge their uses of language and rebuild the world around them.

Works Cited

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