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# Planning for Understanding: A Reconceptualized View of the Music Curriculum

By Janet R. Barrett

**M**usic teachers, like their colleagues in other fields, are living through a paradoxical time in schools. Currents of change in education and society seem to pull teachers in contradictory directions. Nowhere is this flux more apparent than in curriculum.<sup>1</sup> While teachers are called upon to differentiate teaching approaches to meet the diverse needs of students, they are also asked to standardize expectations and provide highly structured content for these very same students. School reform initiatives call for multiple means of documenting student learning, but, at the same time, the reliance on grades and test scores as the primary indicators of progress seems more restrictive than ever. At a time when resources are reappropriated for subjects most susceptible to rigid accountability measures, other subjects—the arts too often among them—struggle to maintain funding.

It seems odd to ask music teachers to rethink their approach to the curriculum when these forces demand their already overburdened attention. In a real and immediate sense, however, times of conflict and challenge often prompt us to reconsider

*A more open-ended approach to curriculum may be a way to foster true musical understanding among today's students.*

*special focus*  
Reconceptualizing Curriculum

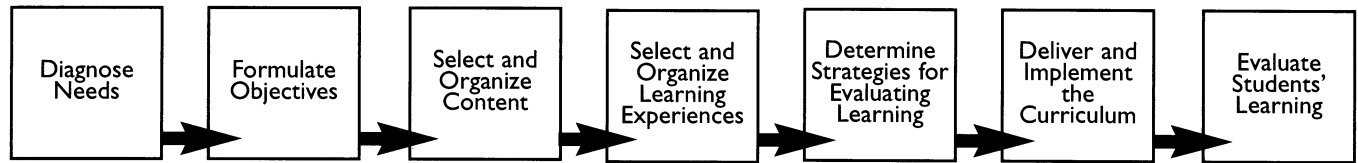


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*Janet R. Barrett is associate professor of music education at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL. She can be reached at [j-barrett3@northwestern.edu](mailto:j-barrett3@northwestern.edu).*

The traditional approaches to curriculum may not be the best way to engage today's students in music.

## Figure 1. A Positivist Approach to Curriculum Planning



Note: This diagram is based on Hilda Taba's steps in curriculum planning, which also reflected the Tyler Rationale that influenced education from 1949 onwards. Although the model is decades old, contemporary variations of this scientific approach to curriculum planning are still quite prevalent.

regular habits and reassess familiar patterns of organizing the curriculum. Times of widespread change call for creativity and vision as we examine essential questions about teaching and learning and think differently about the curriculum's capability to answer them. The works listed in the Suggested Reading sidebar provide just a sample of some of the current thinking on the subject.

Educational historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban describe some of our familiar traditions and practices as the *grammar of schooling*.<sup>2</sup> Though we use grammar every day and underlying linguistic rules govern our communication, we rarely stop to examine how these rules influence the form, shape, and purpose of our conversations. Like language, music teaching and learning are governed by a grammar that includes such traditional practices as periodic public performances, festivals, and competitions; required elementary general music; and elective middle and high school ensembles.

Even teachers' specialization by discipline and subject is a persistent pattern, framed by traditional categories and labels.

You can test this notion of grammar for yourself by imagining what you consider the quintessential roles and responsibilities of a band director, choral director, orchestra director, or general music teacher. The generalizations you cite will likely be examples of our taken-for-granted assumptions. Many of these assumptions about music teachers' work can, and perhaps should, be reexamined and illuminated through a postmodern lens.<sup>3</sup> For example, we might think differently if we considered students' musical experience as the organizing center of curriculum work.

### Traditional Curriculum

This focus on student experience contrasts with traditional models of curriculum planning in which teachers and curriculum designers expend much effort in getting the framework

right before instruction starts. Considerable attention is paid to the decisions teachers make *prior* to students' engagement with the curriculum.

Consider, for example, a common diagram of curriculum planning (figure 1). Like a series of actions in a chain reaction, the diagram in figure 1 conveys that curriculum planning is a rational, orderly, and sequential process that culminates in student learning. Students participate in a curriculum that teachers deliver and demonstrate that they have "got it." The assumption is that if we get the front end of the chain right, the rest will follow. If we articulate and describe goals and intentions, organize the materials, and plan a sequence of instruction, the desired outcomes will occur as we implement the curriculum package.

This model sounds very familiar to many of us. We can point with pride to the neatly plotted grids or tables we have designed to chart the scope and sequence of the curriculum, an organized syllabus or handbook, or even an elaborately tabbed and color-coded binder full of standards and objectives arranged by grade level. If we use the common metaphor of curriculum as a journey, these documents resemble the itinerary. They give us a general sense of the major destinations, the time frame in which the journey will occur, and the order in which we will travel from one location to another. Examining the documents can give us a broad answer to the question of what the music curriculum includes and how to organize it.

### Reconceptualized Curriculum

As any traveler knows, an itinerary is not the journey itself. The overall plan for the curriculum is not the same as the curriculum that students

## Suggested Reading

- Harwood, Eve, and Jackie Wiggins. "Composing a Lesson: Examining Our Metaphors." *The Mountain Lake Reader: Conversations on the Study and Practice of Music Teaching* 2 (2001): 32–41.
- Poelman, B. B. "Harvard's Teaching for Understanding." In *Musical Understanding: Perspectives in Theory and Practice*, edited by Betty Hanley and Thomas W. Goolsby, 137–56. Victoria, BC: Canadian Music Educators Association, 2002.
- Pogonowski, Lenore. "The Role of Context in Teaching and Learning Music." In *Dimensions of Musical Learning and Teaching: A Different Kind of Classroom*, edited by Eunice Boardman, 21–37. Reston, VA: MENC, 2002.
- Wiggins, Jackie. *Teaching for Musical Understanding*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2001.
- Wiske, Martha Stone, ed. *Teaching for Understanding: Linking Research with Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.

and teachers experience. A different model emerges from the more phenomenological view of postmodern thought. In this view, the lived experience of students takes center stage. The ways that students make sense of the school experience and relate it to their lives outside of school become the focal point for creating the curriculum (figure 2).

*Times of conflict and challenge often prompt us to reconsider regular habits and reassess familiar patterns of organizing the curriculum.*

In figure 2, students' musical understanding is at the center. Understanding is broadly construed as the various ways that students organize knowledge in order to solve musical problems, create new musical ideas, or derive meaning from music. To facilitate this understanding, teachers draw upon what students already know and their particular dispositions toward learning as they encounter new works, processes, and musical ideas. A curriculum centered on meaning provides time for students and teachers to reflect on music and its value, uses an array of instructional strategies to promote inquiry, features varied settings to promote independence, and offers plentiful avenues for exploring diverse musics in school and community settings. Essential questions for teachers to consider include the following: How can classroom experiences directly engage students' musical thinking? How can the curriculum foster students' abilities and desires to relate to music as a lasting presence in their lives? What is the essence of a musical experience with this sort of power?

A story of practice will most aptly illustrate this shift from delivering a specific curriculum (the traditional, or positivist, mode) to constructing the curriculum (a more postmodern orientation).<sup>4</sup> As you think about this example, however, keep in mind that reconceptualization is in itself a process that reflects newly transformed beliefs and practices. Rather than leading educators to renounce all familiar habits and traditions, innovations often spring from the reconfiguration of familiar elements toward new ends, as you will see in the following example.

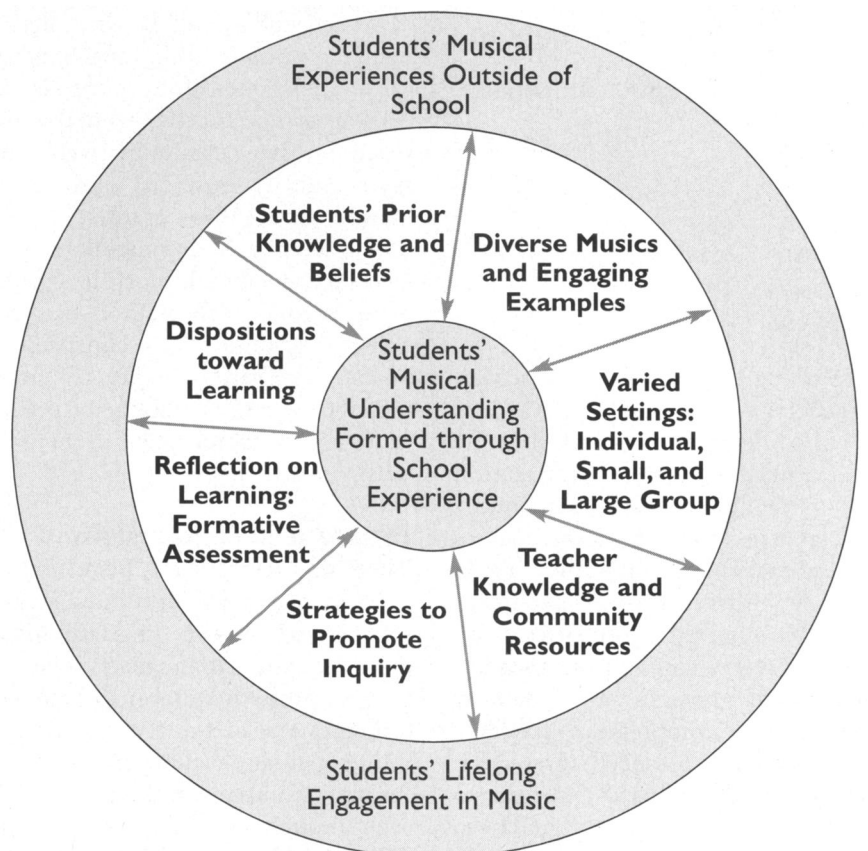
### **An Example of Changing Teaching Practice**

Change often springs from a potent blend of inspiration and dissatisfaction. Nick White, a high school instrumental music teacher in a large suburban district, had been inspired by a mentor to think broadly about "music for all"—the notion that music could engage more students in more meaningful and imaginative ways.<sup>5</sup> He was also inspired by

his own growing interest in music technology and the capabilities technology afforded for exploring ideas in sound. He sensed that some students in his rather successful band program were profoundly creative but had few opportunities to pursue their ideas within the traditional rehearsal structure. Moreover, he felt students would be far more likely to remain engaged in music outside school if he could only foster their independent musicianship within the classroom to a greater extent. He realized that he enjoyed making musical decisions, but he felt that his students did not have enough opportunities to make their own choices and form their own judgments about the music they were studying.

These factors led White to reconfigure his high school band curriculum. He recast the typical schedule of five rehearsals per week. The band met in the usual rehearsal setting three days a week, but on Tuesdays and Thursdays students rotated among chamber music groups, a technology-assisted composition class,

**Figure 2. A Reconceptualized View of Curriculum**



and individual or small composition groups. White pulled together whatever hardware he could find and started modestly, but with determination. It was a learning process for all as he and his students discovered together what technology enabled them to do.

In the years that White facilitated this arrangement, his role shifted from primary decision maker to curriculum broker, ready to assist students in carrying out their plans for musical projects they wanted to pursue. Students in chamber music groups selected repertoire from lists White provided, critiquing and coaching one another. Over time, the emphasis on technology became less prominent as students used the software to generate and record their musical ideas in new combinations (for example, flute and guitar duets).

*A curriculum centered on meaning provides time for students and teachers to reflect on music and its value.*

Although the Monday, Wednesday, and Friday rehearsals continued as they had before the change, students experienced the music curriculum differently. Rather than responding first and foremost to the teacher as the primary authority, they made more confident musical decisions, invented interesting musical problems to solve, and negotiated solutions with others in their chamber groups and composition partnerships. Patterns of social interaction also changed as students began to look to one another for guidance, help, and constructive criticism. When this project was implemented,

other teachers frequently asked White how he could give up two rehearsals per week without sacrificing his overall goals for performance. White found that the students' increased sense of ownership and musical independence enhanced the large-group rehearsal and that his goals for chamber music and composition complemented the large-group components of the overall instrumental program.

Although this capsule summary makes the project sound tidier than it probably was as it unfolded, this brief description of one teacher's curriculum experience illustrates some of the central ideas of the reconceptualized curriculum. The teacher expanded how he interacted with students, giving up some direct control in order to foster independence. Students learned in more open-ended and collaborative ways mediated by technology and the incorporation of more varied instructional groupings (individual, small group, and whole ensemble). A wider array of musical processes and products were available for critique and assessment of student learning.

This reconfiguration represents in some ways the best of both worlds. The traditional full-ensemble rehearsal existed side by side and in complementary balance with the chamber music and composition curriculum. Although the students who participated in this curriculum were not systematically observed and interviewed once they graduated, we might assume and hope that they have continued their musical engagement beyond high school, because while in school they constructed musical dispositions and understandings that would enable them to perform, create, critique, and respond to music in their lives.

### **Toward a Reconceptualized View of Curriculum Planning**

Many calls for reform build a case for change by juxtaposing traditional practices with innovative perspectives. These dichotomies help us examine and define new ways of thinking about teaching and learning through comparison and contrast, even though they sometimes paint differences with too broad a brush. Through this intellectual exercise, a

postmodern stance toward the curriculum becomes clearer. What guides a teacher through the process of reconceptualizing curricular practices so that understanding and meaning making are central? Prescriptive formulas, checklists, training manuals, or rigid methodologies are certainly inappropriate and incongruent with this paradigm, since they draw from a scientific approach to transmitting discrete bodies of knowledge from teachers to students. Clearly, in a postmodern milieu, we need to articulate how shifts in teachers' conceptions of curriculum planning enable shifts in student understanding.

*How can the curriculum foster students' abilities and desires to relate to music as a lasting presence in their lives?*

Postmodern approaches to planning strive to be open-ended and responsive rather than closed and predictive. Instead of predetermining and sequencing all of the elements of the curriculum before students set foot in the classroom, teachers create general frameworks that will evolve and take different shapes as students reveal what they know and what they have yet to understand. This shift suggests that curriculum planning occurs in cycles throughout the educational experience as the teacher responsively modifies and adjusts the curriculum to support and extend students' thinking in new directions. Unexpected turns of thought give rise to further avenues of exploration.

For example, in a curriculum for a required sixth-grade general music course, a teacher might plot out the

broad scope of a “worlds of music” curriculum, articulating the breadth of cultural traditions and practices that might be explored, given access to resources, people, and materials. The path of exploration through those cultural traditions might be determined based upon the interests and prior knowledge of the students and the musical events occurring in the community during the course.

*Postmodern approaches to planning strive to be open-ended and responsive rather than closed and predictive.*

The relevance of content takes on particular importance in bridging the world of the classroom and the world outside school. Students’ experience and the teacher’s knowledge become avenues for connecting the curriculum to personal and collective meaning. Attending to the purpose for studying a particular tradition amplifies this relevance, as does choosing depth over breadth and understanding over coverage. A postmodern music curriculum also strives for valid connections as students relate musical ideas and examples to disciplines outside music. In this general music setting, for instance, the curriculum might include studying history, cultural practices and beliefs, and other art forms to enrich and deepen understanding of the music and the people who engage in it.

Instructional strategies provide occasions for students to perform, create, critique, describe, and respond. Inquiry-based strategies are particularly rich, since they develop students’ abilities to name and frame their own problems. For the proposed sixth-

grade general music course, students might conduct oral history projects in which they interview and observe community musicians who represent diverse musical styles. They might collaborate with one another in small groups, work individually, or contribute to large-group presentations of their findings. The panoramic ways that students work in music and on their own understanding give teachers many forms of evidence for assessing learning. An important constructivist technique is inviting students to derive criteria by which their work will be judged.

The process of examining longstanding beliefs and practices—the patterns and rules that form the underlying grammar of our classroom work—is challenging, frequently unsettling, and unrelenting. Yet the exhilaration of observing students’ unfolding confidence, competence, and creativity makes loosening the reins of predictability and control worthwhile. Curriculum planning in this reconceptualized mode calls upon teachers to be astute observers of students. Through problem seeking and solving and through greater understanding, students’ questions become insights about the role of the music

in their lives and lead to deeper interpretations of music they study and perform.

## Notes

1. For more on these paradoxes, see Andy Hargreaves, *Changing Teachers, Changing Times: Teachers’ Work and Culture in the Postmodern Age* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994).

2. David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

3. For more on postmodernism, see Betty Hanley and Janet Montgomery’s introduction to this special focus issue, “Challenges to Music Education: Curriculum Reconceptualized,” *Music Educators Journal* 91, no. 4 (2005): 17–20.

4. For an illustration of the differences between the traditional, positivist curriculum and the more postmodern reconceptualized curriculum, see Hanley and Montgomery, “Challenges to Music Education,” 18, figure 1.

5. This case is drawn from Gerald B. Olson, Janet R. Barrett, Anthony Baresi, Nancy Rasmussen, and Janet Jensen, *Looking in on Music Teaching* (New York: McGraw-Hill/Primis, 2000), and an April 2004 interview with Nick White, who gave permission for his curriculum project to be described. ■

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## MENC Resources

The following MENC publications offer more information on new approaches to music education, learning, and curriculum. For more information, visit [www.menc.org](http://www.menc.org) or call 1-800-336-3768.

- Boardman, Eunice, ed. *Dimensions of Musical Thinking*. Reston, VA: MENC, 1989. Item #1081.
- Boardman, Eunice, ed. *Dimensions of Musical Learning and Teaching: A Different Kind of Classroom*. Reston, VA: MENC, 2002. Item #1082.
- Madsen, Clifford, ed. *Vision 2020: The Housewright Symposium on the Future of Music Education*. Reston, VA: MENC, 2000. Available at <http://www.menc.org/publication/vision2020>
- Reimer, Bennett, ed. *Performing with Understanding: The Challenge of the National Standards for Music Education*. Reston, VA: MENC, 2000. Item #1672.