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# CURRICULUM WRITING IN MUSIC

*Developing a curriculum for music classes is a challenging pursuit that requires curriculum designers to consider many aspects of education.*

BY COLLEEN CONWAY

**D**uring my first year of teaching in upstate New York in the fall of 1988, I was asked to participate in a K–12 music curriculum project. In my second year of teaching, I changed school districts and was again asked to write curriculum. As a result, providing written documentation of what I did as a music teacher was an important part of my induction into the profession. In the past several years, however, I have come to realize that many music programs do not have a written curriculum. When I ask student teachers to come to their student-teaching seminar with a copy of the district music curriculum, very few are able to do so. Most of them report that their cooperating teacher said that the curriculum is “in his head.” There is a great need for taking the curriculum that is in the head of many music teachers and creating a music curriculum document. There is no one correct way to write a curriculum, and decisions about design depend on the teaching and learning context. Thus, this article is an attempt to provide questions for consideration rather than prescriptions for success.<sup>1</sup>

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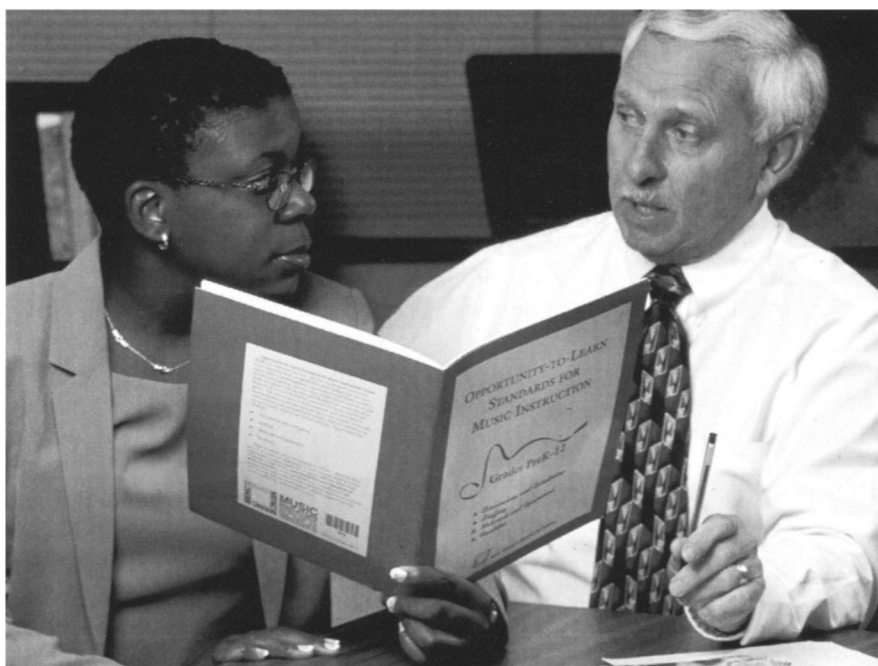


Photo by Mark Regan.

Curriculum development can give music teachers an opportunity to share thoughts and ideas.

In addition to commenting on connecting curriculum to state and national frameworks, this article provides a list of common key words related to curriculum study. These words lead to questions for music teachers to consider as they develop curricula for their courses. The article concludes with a variety of practical curriculum-writing tips that are based on my own experience writing curriculum, as well as on current educational research.

## **What Is a Curriculum?**

Curriculum scholars spend much of their time and energy trying to understand what a curriculum is. Historically, scholars have disagreed regarding a working definition of “curriculum.” In her chapter entitled “Curriculum and Its Study” in the *Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, Lizabeth Wing opens the discussion with the following:

There is no “method” of curriculum discovery, any more than there is a method of exploring the jungle or falling in love. There is just understanding something about jungles, love, and school curricula, and the use of a motley collection of skills, disciplines of thought and ideas to make progress in them. There is no “conceptual system” to guide the decision-making.<sup>2</sup>



*There is no one correct way to write a curriculum, and decisions about design depend on the teaching and learning context.*



Wing goes on to provide information regarding curriculum as a field of study within education. She continues with an overview of curriculum-related research in music education. She suggests that we need to examine curricula at the local level:

The profession [music education] knows itself largely from the standpoints of stated values and scientifically conducted quantitative inquiry into some of its curriculum efforts. Not much is known with any certainty about the past or what is really happening in music classrooms today—for example, What and how are teachers teaching? What and how are students learning? What are the primary influences on decisions related to who is taught what and how? What are the long-term outcomes of curricular experiences in music? These are questions central to curriculum.<sup>3</sup>

It is my intention to provide teachers with some guidelines for beginning to consider the questions posed by Wing. Because there really is no single correct plan for writing a curriculum, this article can only introduce issues and questions that individual music educators must apply to their own situations.

*The Written Document.* Although this article focuses on the creation of a written product, the curriculum writer must remember that a document that does not address what is taught and what is learned will not be useful for teachers and students. A music curriculum should include the following:

- music department or music program philosophy—one or two paragraphs
- overall program goals and beliefs—list of beliefs about music and about teaching
- list of developmental skills or benchmarks (format will vary)
- required resources—teaching spaces, staffing needs, equipment, and budget
- sample teaching strategies—lesson plans
- sample assessment strategies—checklists, rating scales, and rubrics
- suggested curricular resources—series books, method books, and ensemble literature.

Although many districts require specific formats for a written curriculum, if a music curriculum has the sections recommended here, it can most likely be formatted to meet district requirements.

*What Is Taught?* One of the issues that must always be considered when writing curriculum is how to assure that it will be implemented by music teachers. Although this is challenging, if curriculum writing is tied closely to teacher in-service education, there is a better chance that teachers will implement the ideas suggested in the document. Also, if teachers are part of the development process, there will be healthy discussion regarding teaching, which will affect what is included in the document. There will be a disconnect between the written document and what is taught if teachers are not part of the curriculum development process and if they are not given ade-

quate time and in-service education for trying new ideas suggested by the curriculum.

*What Is Learned?* Most teachers have had the experience of thinking that they taught something very well only to realize during the next lesson that the students did not learn what was taught. In order for a curriculum document to be useful, ideas for assessing student learning must be included. To explore this important aspect of curriculum, see the Resources for Connecting Curriculum and Assessment sidebar.



*If curriculum writing is tied closely to teacher in-service education, there is a better chance that teachers will implement the ideas suggested in the document.*



## **Curriculum Design Issues in Music**

One of the greatest difficulties for many teachers writing a music curriculum is deciding where to start. The types of curriculum listed in this section represent a variety of starting places. There is no magic formula for combining elements from each of these designs. Decisions regarding what type and how much of each type of curriculum to use must be made within a specific context. I provide a brief description of each type and a few questions for curriculum writers to consider.

*Determining the Grade Level.* When discussing the writing of music curricula, one of the first issues to consider is what grade level to start with. Will you begin with elementary general music

## Resources for Connecting Curriculum and Assessment

- Cope, Carolyn O. "Steps toward Effective Assessment," *Music Educators Journal* 83, no. 1 (1996): 39–42.
- Farrell, Susan R. *Tools for Powerful Student Evaluation*. Milwaukee, WI: Meredith Music Press, 1997.
- Herman, Joan L., Pamela R. Aschbacher, and Lynn Winters. *A Practical Guide to Alternative Assessment*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1992.
- Lehman, Paul R. "Grading Practices in Music." *Music Educators Journal* 84, no. 5 (1998): 37–40.
- Music Educators Journal* 86, no. 2 (1999): 19–40. Special Issue on Assessment.
- MENC Committee on Performance Standards. *Performance Standards for Music*. Reston, VA: MENC, 1996.
- Nutter, Kelly. "Managing Assessment." *Teaching Music* 7, no. 1 (1999): 26–31, 59.
- Robinson, Mitchell. "Alternative Assessment Techniques for Teachers." *Music Educators Journal* 81, no. 5 (1995): 28–34.
- Winner, Ellen, Lyle Davidson, and Larry Scripp. *Arts PROPEL: A Handbook for Music*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Project Zero and Educational Testing Service, 1995.
- Wolfe, Dennie Palmer, and Nancy Pistone. *Taking Full Measure: Rethinking Assessment through the Arts*. New York: The College Board, 1991.

or high school music? Ideally, a curriculum is provided for music courses from kindergarten through high school. I believe that it is easiest to write a curriculum in chronological order. However, where there is no elementary music program, it may be best to begin writing curriculum for courses that are already being taught. On the other hand, writing a curriculum may provide the information needed to start new music classes. If the curriculum is begun at the upper grade levels, music teachers who work with younger students, or a consultant who has experience in K–12 curriculum writing, should be involved.

*Objectives-Based Curriculum.* Most teachers are familiar with an objectives-based curriculum model.<sup>4</sup> This is a four-phase process that involves (1) developing objectives, (2) sequencing those objectives (often referred to as "scope and sequence"), (3) designing

activities to meet the objectives (lesson plans), and (4) designing evaluation tools to assure that learning takes place (tests). Although this model has been pervasive in curriculum theory, many scholars have criticized this design, suggesting that it is too linear and that real teaching does not occur in such a clear-cut line. Good teachers often mix up the phases of this design. For example, meaningful assessment of student learning does not always occur at the end of a linear process; it can occur throughout teaching and learning. Good teachers do not follow a restrictive sequence; rather, they adjust their teaching to the needs of a specific context. Real classrooms are multidimensional, and forcing curriculum into a linear model is a compromise. However, in many school districts, the guidelines for writing curriculum will require an objectives-based model. Music curriculum writers who use this

design should be sure to have a healthy combination of designs to ensure that the curriculum is meaningful to teachers.

*Literature-Based Curriculum.* Some music educators have suggested that the music literature chosen for a class or an ensemble is the curriculum.<sup>5</sup> In general curriculum theory, some scholars recommend a curriculum based on the project method,<sup>6</sup> which could be compared to designing instruction around particular musical literature. This type of curriculum works very well for performance-based courses. However, some of the curriculum should be focused on the other designs as well.

*Skills-Based Curriculum.* A "skills base" refers to what students will do musically. These skills should not be confused with what they might be expected to know about music ("knowledge base"). Skills include musical behaviors—singing, moving, or playing on instruments—and musical concepts such as tonality and meter. Skills-based objectives do not include attitudes or preferences about music, but rather the students' abilities to sing, move, or play within a specific musical context. Assessment tools must be designed to measure musical skills, as well as knowledge.

*Knowledge-Based Curriculum.* Many music curricula focus heavily on the knowledge base (musical terms, knowledge of music theory and history, etc.). Although this is an important part of music class, the music curriculum writer should be careful to balance knowledge with skills.

*Grade-Age-Related Curriculum.* One important decision that the curriculum writer must make is how to sequence the curriculum designs discussed above. Will you suggest certain objectives or benchmarks for each grade level? Do students bring such a variety of different experiences to the classroom that the sequence of instruction should be skills-based instead of grade- or age-related? What suggestions can you make in your curriculum document to help teachers deal with individual differences among students in their classes?

This list of design issues is by no means exhaustive. Other issues may

include attitudes and preferences in music and aesthetic sensitivity; however, this list may get the curriculum writer thinking about the many important conceptual issues that enter into the curriculum-writing process. I recommend choosing a type of design, thinking about the curriculum that is “in your head,” and formulating some ideas. Then, begin to include ideas from the other design areas, and you will be on your way to a music curriculum document.

### Connecting to National Standards and State Frameworks

Many music teachers in Michigan are being asked to develop curricula that will align with the Michigan state frameworks document, which is based on the National Standards for Music Education.<sup>7</sup> But it is important to understand that the Standards themselves are not a curriculum. A middle school principal recently told me that she evaluated the band director in her building in the same way that she evaluates all the teachers in the building. She said, “I watch her teach and then compare what I saw to the curriculum to verify that instruction is appropriate.” My response was, “Great, so you have an instrumental music curriculum?” The principal paused for a considerable amount of time and then said, “Well, we do not have a curriculum document for music, but she follows the state frameworks.” I wanted to ask this principal if she could name one of the state frameworks for music, but decided against it. The point is, some people assume that state guidelines and the National Standards are in themselves a curriculum. They are not.

When aligning a curriculum to state and national standards, the curriculum writer should write the local curriculum first. Then, the writer can go back through the document and highlight where the local document meets the larger criteria. When the music curriculum is written to “match” the other guidelines, teachers may not be able to deliver what is suggested. This is usually due to time constraints and lack of teacher expertise or comfort in some of the content areas. If it is discovered through the writing process that music

### Ability Grouping

- Bellanca, James, and Elizabeth Swartz, eds. *The Challenge of Detracking: A Collection*. Palatine, IL: Skylight Publishing, 1993.
- Conway, Colleen M. “Grouping and Tracking in Instrumental Music.” *Dialogue in Instrumental Music* 22, no. 2 (1998): 91.
- Gordon, Edwin E., Richard F. Grunow, and Christopher Azzarra. *Jump Right In: The Instrumental Series Teacher’s Guide*. 2nd ed. Chicago: GIA Publications, 2000.
- Oakes, Jeannie. *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985.

### Interdisciplinary Curriculum

- McCoy, Claire W. “The Excitement of Collaboration.” *Music Educators Journal* 87, no. 1 (2000): 37–44.
- Barrett, Janet R., Claire W. McCoy, and Kari K. Veblen. *Sound Ways of Knowing: Music in the Interdisciplinary Curriculum*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1997.
- Jacobs, Heidi Hayes. *Interdisciplinary Curriculum: Design and Implementation*. Reston, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1989.

### Readiness

- Gordon, Edwin E., Richard F. Grunow, and Christopher Azzarra. *Jump Right In: The Instrumental Series Teacher’s Guide*. 2nd ed. Chicago: GIA Publications, 2000.

teachers have not been addressing many of the content areas of the standards, then professional development must occur before teachers can be expected to align to the new criteria.

### Key Words

The curriculum words and definitions below were drawn from Jon Wiles’s *Curriculum Essentials: A Resource for Educators*, which discusses numerous concepts related to curriculum development.<sup>8</sup> This list touches on just a few. To learn more about these concepts, see the Resources on Curriculum Concepts sidebar.

*Ability grouping* is defined as “organizing students into homogeneous groups according to intellectual ability for instruction.”<sup>9</sup> If we transfer this concept to music and consider grouping by musical ability, we find that this practice is quite common. Although

there seems to be no research on the effects of ability grouping in music classes, research in general education suggests that ability grouping is not helpful to strong or weak students in most academic areas.<sup>10</sup> Edwin E. Gordon, Richard F. Grunow, and Christopher Azzarra have suggested that students learn best in instrumental music when they are in heterogeneous groups that mix both abilities and instruments.<sup>11</sup> Should we consider this when designing our music curricula?

*Accountability* refers to “outcome orientation or return on investment. In the classroom, holding teachers responsible for student learning.”<sup>12</sup> One only need consult the daily paper for more information on this issue. How do we demonstrate individual student learning in music classes—particularly in large ensembles? How do we help our communities understand that account-

## General Discussion

- Apple, Michael W. *Cultural Politics and Education*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1996.
- Bruner, Jerome. *The Process of Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977.
- Connelly, F. Michael, and D. Jean Clandinin. *Teachers as Curriculum Planners*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1988.
- Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1916.
- Dewey, John. *Experience and Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1938.
- Doll, William E. *A Post-Modern Perspective on Curriculum*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1993.
- Eisner, Elliot. *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs*. 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1994.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1970.
- Jackson, Philip, ed. *Handbook of Research on Curriculum*. New York: Macmillan, 1992.
- Kleibard, Herbert. *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893–1958*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987.
- Slattery, Patrick. *Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era*. New York: Garland Publishers, 1995.
- Tyler, Ralph W. *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949.
- Walker, Decker F., and Jonas F. Soltis. *Curriculum and Aims*. 3rd ed. New York: Teachers College Press, 1997. Also see Colleen M. Conway, "Book Review: Curriculum and Aims." *Journal of Music Teacher Education* 8, no. 1 (1998): 25–26.
- Whitehead, Alfred N. *The Aims of Education*. New York: The Free Press, 1929.
- Wiles, Jon. *Curriculum Essentials: A Resource for Educators*. MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1999.

## Curriculum in Music

- Abeles, Harold F., Charles R. Hoffer, and Robert H. Klotman. *Foundations of Music Education*. 2nd ed. New York: Schirmer Books, 1994. (Chapter 10, pp. 303–41.)
- Colwell, Richard J., and Thomas Goolsby. *The Teaching of Instrumental Music*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992. (Curriculum references on p. 23.)
- Elliott, David J. *Music Matters*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. (Chapter 10 and 11, pp. 241–95.)
- Fallis, Todd L. "Standards-Based Instruction in Rehearsal." *Music Educators Journal* 85, no. 4 (1999): 18–23, 50.

*continued on page 59*

ability for music teachers is not related only to musicals and half-time entertainment at football games?

*Curriculum alignment* refers to "matching what is taught to what is tested; activities are designed to promote predetermined outcome."<sup>13</sup> I believe that most music teachers do a good job aligning their curricula to meet the predetermined outcome of performing the literature well at concerts. However, is the concert literature the only content to align to? How do we fit in the other content, how do we test it, and how do we align the curriculum to meet all the goals?

*Interdisciplinary curriculum* refers to "combining two or more subjects into a new and single organizational construct."<sup>14</sup> Can we accommodate this growing trend without sacrificing the teaching of music for music's sake? If we are to do it, how?

*Readiness* refers to "a student exhibiting a particular behavior thought to be a prerequisite for learning."<sup>15</sup> What are the readinesses for success in music? Do we provide instruction in these areas in all music classes? Do we see to it that there is a place for every student at every grade level regardless of previous musical experience? Particularly in instrumental music, do we provide instruction in the readiness areas, or do we allow students without the necessary readinesses to drop out? Do we facilitate communication between music teachers at various grade levels to discuss issues of readiness?

## Tips for the Writing Process

*Curriculum Committees*. It is important, if possible, for curriculum writing to be done by a team of music educators. Teachers must be involved in the curriculum development process if they are to take ownership of the document. Committees take time, but they must be a part of the process if the written document is going to interact with what is taught and what is learned.

*Time and Resources*. Do not underestimate the time it will take to write a good curriculum document. Time is needed for brainstorming, deliberating over questions of design, considering issues reflected by the key

words discussed above, gathering sample resources, developing assessment measures, and reflecting on the process. Teachers should be compensated for the time they spend in curriculum development. Music teachers have many financial battles to fight, but compensation for curriculum work is important. Staff support for the presentation of the document should be considered as well.

*Political Nature of Curriculum Work.* Curriculum work is inherently political. The decisions about what gets taught in any area of the curriculum represent a political point of view. The music teacher must be aware of the political nature of curriculum work as well. A good curriculum document can provide support for your program and may demonstrate the need for additional resources. However, it is problematic if it appears that the curriculum document is being provided for purely political reasons. The music curriculum developer must always focus on the students and the relationship between the curriculum document and what is taught and learned.

### In-Service Teacher Education and Curriculum Writing

The process of curriculum development can be a valuable professional development experience for music teachers. It is often rare for music teachers to be able to meet and share their thoughts and ideas regarding music teaching and learning. The teachers that I have worked with often comment that just being able to talk about teaching is a great opportunity for them. A curriculum document will have the greatest positive effect if the development of the document is tied to professional development of the music teachers. I believe that music teachers must be proactive in suggesting music-related in-service ideas so that in-service days and professional development experiences are useful for them.

See the Curriculum Resources sidebar for a list of general resources. Consider adding some of the sources to your holiday or summer reading list. Many of the authors listed in this section may be familiar to you—per-

### Curriculum Resources, continued from page 58

- Labuta, Joseph A., and Deborah A. Smith. *Music Education*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997. (Curriculum references on 57–68.)
- Lehman, Paul R. "Curriculum and Program Evaluation." In *Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, edited by Richard Colwell, 281–94. New York: Schirmer Books, 1992.
- Reynolds, H. Robert. "Repertoire Is the Curriculum." *Music Educators Journal* 87, no. 1 (2000): 31–33.
- Wells, Richard. "Designing Curricula Based on the Standards." *Music Educators Journal*, 84, no. 1 (1997): 34–39.
- Wing, Lizabeth B. "Curriculum and Its Study." In *Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, edited by Richard Colwell, 196–217. New York: Schirmer Books, 1992.

*Note:* Additional resources are available on the MENC Web site at [www.menc.org](http://www.menc.org) and the ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) Web site at [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org).

haps from one of your undergraduate educational psychology courses. My graduate students who are experienced teachers tell me that these sources have a much greater impact on their thoughts now than when they were student teachers. Best of luck in your curriculum adventures.

### Notes

1. This article is based on a paper entitled "Curriculum Writing in Music," presented by the author at the 2000 Midwest Clinic in Chicago, IL.
2. Lizabeth B. Wing, "Curriculum and Its Study," in *Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, ed. Richard Colwell (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992), 196, quoting R. Barrow, *Giving Teaching Back to Teachers* (Brighton, Sussex: Wheatsheaf, 1984): 67.
3. Lizabeth B. Wing, "Curriculum and its Study," 211–12.
4. Ralph W. Tyler, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).
5. H. Robert Reynolds, "Repertoire Is the Curriculum," *Music Educators Journal* 87, no. 1 (2000): 31–33.
6. William H. Kilpatrick, "The Project Method," *Teachers College Record* 19 (1918): 319–35.
7. Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, *National Standards for Arts Education* (Reston, VA: MENC, 1994).
8. Jon Wiles, *Curriculum Essentials: A Resource for Educators* (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1999).
9. *Ibid.*, 193.
10. Thomas L. Good and Susan Marshall, "Do Students Learn More in Heterogeneous or Homogeneous Groups?" in *The Social Context of Instruction: Group Organization and Group Process*, ed. Penelope L. Peterson, Louise C. Wilkinson, and Maureen T. Hallinan (New York: Academic Press, 1984), 15–38; Maureen T. Hallinan and Aage B. Sorenson, "Effects of Ability Grouping on Growth in Academic Achievement," *American Educational Research Journal* 23 (1986): 519–42; Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton, "Detracking Schools: Early Lessons from the Field," in *The Challenge of Detracking*, ed. James Bellanca and Elizabeth A. Swartz (Palatine, IL: IRI/Skylight Publishing, 1994); Robert E. Slavin, "Synthesis of Research on Grouping in Elementary and Secondary Schools," *Educational Leadership* 46, no. 1 (1998): 67–77.
11. Edwin E. Gordon, Richard F. Grunow, and Christopher Azzarra, *Jump Right In: The Instrumental Series Teacher's Guide* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2000).
12. Wiles, *Curriculum Essentials*, 193.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, 194.
15. *Ibid.* ■