

Life-long learning through music!

Music performance has served as my “art of choice” for the past twenty-seven years. During my tenure I have helped many young people learn about the arts and about themselves through music. As a high school music educator I have expended much time and energy helping students to develop the skills and techniques necessary to perform, music. You know the drill; plan, organize, instruct, practice and perform and then begin again.

Most would say it’s a bit late in my career to make drastic changes, but that’s what’s happening and I’m really excited about it!

A few years ago I was asked to work with a team of arts educators who had been assigned the task of creating assessments to measure arts concepts and processes. This sounded like fun so I signed on. One of our first tasks was to review national and state standards that defined what students studying that arts should know and be able to do. This led us to ask; “Are there critical processes that all artists understand and do as they create art? and are these processes common to all of the arts?” These seemed like important questions to me. If there are common processes, am I making sure that my students understand and can do them?

After much discussion, many contacts nation-wide and then more discussion, we came to the conclusion that yes indeed there are processes that artists follow and for the most part they are common to all of the arts. The processes are generally grouped by arts creation, arts performance and arts interpretation.

The arts performance processes are:

- selecting
- analyzing
- interpreting
- rehearsing, evaluating and revising
- performing and
- reflecting

Coming to better understand these processes and planning how to better instruct and assess my students’ ability to work with each process has caused great change in what I do as a music teacher.

The good news was that yes, for the most part I had been including these processes in my teaching. The bad news was that it was me, and not my students who understood and did these things. I mostly did the selection of music. I mostly did the analysis of the music elements and what was going to be difficult in order to present the music. I mostly did the interpretation of the style and the composer’s intent. Sure, the students rehearsed the music, but I told them what and how to rehearse, what needed work and how to refine it. I did allow them to perform the music (one out of six isn’t bad). Sometimes I even asked them to reflect and evaluate their performances.

I’m not there yet, but I’m now trying hard to get my students to understand and use these important music performance processes. I’m convinced that if my students learn these processes, they will be better prepared to use and appreciate music all of their lives.

I am trying by best to make learning these processes a part of each rehearsal, sectional, lesson and performance. Sometimes that’s a hard thing to do. It’s easy enough to

explain each process and even have the students practice doing things like analyzing each music element of a new piece that we are working on. The hard thing for me is to avoid just telling the students the answer. Just too many years of doing that! They need to consistently think about and find the solutions for themselves.

It really is exciting to have students who can talk intelligently about musical styles and composers' intent. It does make sense to have students be able to determine what to rehearse in the music and how to rehearse it. Slowly my students are getting better at understanding and doing these things. It's now my job to get the students to continually focus on these processes as they go about making music. It's also my job to periodically assess their ability to understand and use each process. This now becomes a part of their grade right along with skills, techniques and attitudes.

Over time I hope to have a much more student centered learning process. One in which students can truly work as independent musicians. Give me time though, old dogs make changes slowly! Even important changes!

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