

# Everyday Musical Connections

## Bringing Together Music Lessons And Students' Private Musical Worlds Through Project-Based Learning

**D**uring a recent piano lesson, my 14-year-old student Ben<sup>1</sup> informed me that he'd started using musical analogies as his preferred method for explaining complex matters at school. Not a typical teenage observation, you might think. However, for me it was something completely in sync with his state of mind, particularly because for the previous six months Ben has been investigating his own Everyday Musical Connections by using a Project-Based Learning approach. So, what do I mean by Everyday Musical Connections? And what is Project-Based Learning?

This article is about my efforts to strengthen the connection between music lessons and students' private musical worlds by engaging my preteen/teen students in projects that feature their Everyday Musical Connections (EMC). I begin by retracing the background moments that sparked my interest in exploring students' Everyday Musical Connections. Because Project-Based Learning

figures so prominently, I provide a detailed description of this structured educational process, examples of my students' projects and a depiction of the teacher's role. Finally, I consider what sets EMC investigations apart and invite teachers to seize the opportunity to similarly engage their students.

### Background

It all started nearly a decade ago when I introduced a simple activity inspired by Tricia Tunstall's book *Note by Note*.<sup>2</sup> Each week, I asked students to bring their phone or iPod so I could help them figure out the melody and chords for the opening phrase of a selection from their own music playlist. Immediately, I appreciated the diversity of their musical preferences and students' enjoyment of the activity. However, I was greatly perplexed that not one of them had ever tried this activity on their own at home in spite of having the requisite skills. Somehow, it seemed as if students thought taking piano

lessons was something completely separate from their connection to music. I couldn't help wondering what was missing.

About a year later, thinking students would benefit from increased ownership of the above process, I transferred the activity to our monthly group classes and asked students to teach their peers the melody and chords for the opening phrase of their own musical choice. This meant students needed to prepare a written four- to eight-bar transcription, bring their own recording and demonstrate how to put it all together. In this instance, students visibly delighted in the diversity of their peer's choices and seemed to enjoy the activity. I valued the skills students developed because of the project, but it still seemed as if something was missing. Then I remembered an article by music educator Randall Allsup and his observation of "the disconnection between the music studied at school and the hidden or private musical world of our students."<sup>3</sup> All of which made me ask—"What can I do to make sure my teaching helps students connect meaningfully with their private musical world, their own relation with music?"

Throughout my teaching profession and own musical development, I've always been impressed by the multifaceted and unique relation that every person has with music, regardless of age, socioeconomic standing, geographic context or education. As Daniel Barenboim proposed, "The power of music lies in its ability to speak to all aspects of the human being. Music teaches us, in short that everything is connected."<sup>4</sup> At times, music may be a companion, a diversion, an interruption, a refuge, a catalyst and a reminder. Our connections with music come in all sizes and shapes from the emotional to the intellectual,

the physical to the spiritual, the individual to the collective.

Of course, learning to play a musical instrument can contribute in meaningful ways to an individual's relation with music. Yet, when we consider the space music occupies in our lives, a breadth and depth of everyday musical experiences come to mind—like the way a favorite tune randomly pops into your head; how elevator music sticks with you for the rest of the day; the creation and sharing of musical playlists; how you respond when music intensifies cinematic drama; how music carries meaning in TV and radio advertisements; music in religious, sports and recreational contexts; not to mention how listening to and performing music can span everything from intense personal involvement to complete distraction. In other words, we all experience a plethora of Everyday Musical Connections.

Upon reexamining the above Tunstall-inspired activities, I realized that although I valued their practicality for developing students' music performance skills, they didn't exactly connect with depth and breadth of my student's private musical world. How could I meaningfully address the "disconnection" described by Allsup? During the fall 2017 teaching semester, I realized I could strengthen the connection between music lessons and students' own musical realm by making two important instructional adjustments. First, I could expand my teaching to intentionally facilitate projects in which students actively explored their own Everyday Musical Connections. Secondly, I could use a Project-Based Learning<sup>5</sup> approach to provide the structure I needed to meaningfully investigate students' Everyday Musical experiences.

## Project-Based Learning

With an emphasis on students' involvement in active learning and inquiry-based learning, the roots of Project-Based Learning (PBL) may be traced to the educational philosophies of John Dewey (1859–1952), Maria Montessori (1870–1952) and Jean Piaget (1896–1980). From a historical perspective, PBL represents the departure away from western educational systems in which teachers were primarily tasked with directing or transmitting knowledge to students. The overriding consideration in a PBL approach is that teaching is not about telling students what to learn or what to do, but about organizing experiences that prompt students to actively participate in their own learning experiences. William Kilpatrick (1871–1965), a professor at Columbia Teachers College, was instrumental in promoting PBL in the early 20th century. He believed in learning environments that cultivate purposeful activity and student engagement. As he described in the 1918 *Teachers College Record*, "Learning of all kinds and in all its desirable ramifications best proceeds in proportion as wholeheartedness of purpose is present."<sup>6</sup>

PBL is a student-centered pedagogy that advances learning through genuine exploration of real-life situations, ideas, concepts and challenges. Because PBL purposefully integrates knowing and doing,<sup>7</sup> students deepen their understanding of a particular subject and learn to apply what they already know to come up with solutions and produce results that matter. They experience firsthand the difference between acquiring information and putting that information into use. Advocates of PBL promote numerous beneficial layers to its implementation in educational contexts including increased student engagement, and opportunities for both practical and creative application, in addition to improvements in communication, interpersonal skills, critical thinking and self-management.<sup>8</sup>

To get results and ensure quality learning, PBL follows an intentional process in which

the following four elements are integral: student engagement, sustained inquiry, public presentations and reflective evaluations.

**Student Engagement**—PBL starts with teachers acknowledging students' voice and choice in identifying a topic or question that's meaningful and doable.<sup>9</sup> This means students perceive the project as something that matters to them and want to do well. There's a feeling of authenticity<sup>10</sup> in the way students' choice of topic fits with their interests, culture, identity or concerns. From another perspective, doable projects refers to scope or intent, making sure to challenge students without overwhelming them. By valuing students' reasons for learning, PBL fosters a sense of ownership in students that contrasts remarkably with passively doing an exercise or blindly following a set of directions.

**Sustained Inquiry**—PBL students conduct investigations that draw information from multiple sources and teachers act as instructional guides who coach students through the process. The key to sustained inquiry is that such processes take time,<sup>11</sup> incorporate ongoing cycles of fine-tuning, and involve equal attention to content and personal development. Teachers help students with brainstorming, with creating a framework to organize their thoughts, and with asking deeper questions. Students, through their own hands-on experience, may witness how ideas emerge and evolve to subsequently fuel further questioning or investigation. Knowing that inquiry-based processes can range from non-linear to structured and predictable to random, effective PBL teachers are attentive to the practice and thinking time necessary for students to put together their best work.

**Public Presentations**—At the end of a PBL investigation, students prepare a recognizable public product. Presenting results in a public setting encourages students to adopt a level of accountability that goes beyond the private exchange between an individual student and teacher.<sup>12</sup> This social dimension of

PBL reinforces the notion of a learning community wherein students' learning is tangible and rich with potential to stimulate further discussion. An important aspect of presenting is for students to demonstrate what they know about a topic.<sup>13</sup> Being open to public scrutiny and input, students demonstrate how their work has value for themselves, their peers, their teachers, their parents and their communities at large.

**Reflective Evaluation**—Although projects may seem to end with a public presentation, the PBL process is not complete without a final reflective evaluation. After project activities have been concluded, students and teachers intentionally debrief the project. Taking time to reflect on the content knowledge and understanding gained from the project may help students solidify what they've learned and consider how their learning might be applied elsewhere. Reflections on skills utilized may shed light on the skills students automatically bring with them and which skills may require further growth. Reflections on the project's design and implementation may help students in deciding how they'll approach their next project.<sup>14</sup>

Project-Based Learning goes beyond teachers simply finding projects for students to complete.<sup>15</sup> Its framework of student engagement, sustained inquiry, public presentation and reflective evaluation calls for the dynamic integration of knowing and doing. Also PBL rejects the portrayal of students as vessels to be filled with knowledge, instead choosing to promote and draw from students' own passion, creativity, accountability, empathy and resiliency to accomplish learning. The advantages of such an approach are that PBL offers teachers the structure to help students overcome learning obstacles they didn't even realize were possible. PBL also makes it possible for teachers to get out of students' way, empowering students to take the lead and propel investigations that teachers could never imagine.

### Students' EMC Explorations

Beginning in January 2018, I asked individual students ages 11 and older to come up with topics they'd like to explore from their own Everyday Musical Connections.<sup>16</sup> I organized a schedule of public presentations to take place every four to six weeks. As expected, students all had their own unique interests and processes. Here are some examples:<sup>17</sup>

**Meaghan**—At 11 years of age, Meaghan was the youngest student to take on an investigation. For her first project, Meaghan decided to explore two of her favorite songs from the movie *La La Land*. As Meaghan was unsure how to proceed, I asked her to tell me about the two songs in a couple of sentences. Then I explained how the characteristics she'd just identified could serve as an outline for her investigation. She prepared a *PowerPoint* presentation consisting of slides with info about the movie, sound clips of the songs and her explanation of the characteristics. After four weeks of preparation, Meaghan presented her project. At her next lesson, Meaghan and I used reflective evaluation to identify her strengths (knowledge of music and speaking skills) and weaknesses (clarity of ideas, language, *PowerPoint* design). Six weeks later, she presented the project in a public setting with improvements to her weaknesses and additional relevant information. In her final reflective evaluation, she wrote—"There's more to a presentation than making a few slides. You need to think."

**Colin**—Fourteen-year-old Colin titled one of his investigations *The Benefits of Learning to Play the Piano in the Workplace*. He focused on three different aspects that ranged from biological to intellectual to enjoyment. Colin created a *PowerPoint* presentation with images and text. I encouraged him to make sure he included relevant musical examples. During his post-presentation reflective evaluation, Colin noted how he wanted to include a better "hook" to engage his audience at the

beginning. I suggested he needed a more deliberate summary of his presentation at the end. At his next presentation six weeks later, Colin demonstrated something quite remarkable—he spontaneously referenced two other students' presentations during his own presentation. Following his presentation, he asked for and responded to questions from the audience. In his final reflective evaluation, Colin noted his ability to think on the spot as one of the skills he used in his presentation.

**Natalie**—For one of her investigations, 12-year-old Natalie chose to examine *What Makes a Good Song Good?* She interviewed several of her friends to come up with three elements that contribute to a good song. For each element, she selected three songs that demonstrated the element. She created a *PowerPoint* with text, her own transcriptions of appropriate sections and sound clips embedded in the slides. During her post-presentation reflective evaluation, she acknowledged that she spoke too quickly and softly to be clearly understood. I suggested she needed to practice speaking at home, streamline her language, and take more time to explain the data on each of her slides. At a second presentation four weeks later, it was obvious that her home practice and additional material brought huge improvements to her presentation. In her final reflective evaluation, she wrote—"I learned that I know more about music than I thought."

**Spencer**—After several indecisive weeks, 14-year-old Spencer decided to cram until 2:00 A.M. the night before the presentation deadline to put together a video mockumentary titled *The Voice: Piano Edition*. Modeled after the TV program, Spencer himself played the roles of judge and performer. His video captured many of the TV show's signature moments and demonstrated his capacity as an entertainer and visionary producer. In his reflective evaluation, he listed creativity, editing, work effort, good mood and time management as the skills he used. I thought it interesting that he interpreted time

management as finishing his video before the presentation time!

During students' lessons, the amount of time devoted to their EMC projects relates directly to their individual interests and processes. For students with large amounts of repertoire, I typically spend no more than 5 minutes in tweaking and clarifying their current project. Students doing upper-level RCM exams most likely don't have adequate space for taking on EMC projects. For students who are more committed to their EMC investigations than repertoire study, it seems appropriate to spend the bulk of our time in supportive discussion.

### Teacher's Role

Over the past several centuries, the master/apprentice model of instruction has dominated vocal and instrumental performance teaching in music studios, bands, orchestras and choirs. Within this model, teachers are cast as the authoritative fount of knowledge and primary source of feedback.<sup>18</sup> Music instructors maintain a top-down hierarchy for instructing students wherein carefully sequenced, linear, incremental and standardized processes are prioritized. Often, music is presented as an autonomous art form that calls for explicit aesthetic, technical and interpretive explorations. While the master/apprentice model remains a practical option for many music educators, there is considerable debate about the appropriateness of the current degree of reliance on the master/apprentice model in music instruction.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to the master/apprentice instructional approach, the teacher's role in Project-Based Learning is commonly described in terms of moving away from the "sage on the stage" to the "guide on the side."<sup>20</sup> PBL teachers take on the role of facilitator—that is someone who helps to bring about an outcome by providing indirect assistance. They excel in watching, listening, asking or answering questions, challenging, offering suggestions or lending a hand<sup>21</sup>

because their goal is to engage students meaningfully in the application, exploration and extension of what they know. All of these points are prominently represented in current education literature as affirmed by Maria Montessori, “The teacher’s task is not to talk, but to prepare and arrange a series of motives for cultural activity in a special environment made for the child.”<sup>22</sup>

My own PBL teaching takes on a blending of diverse roles including facilitator, collaborator, provoker, mentor, guide and resource. The diversity in this lengthy list is intentional because it’s my responsibility to cultivate, support and nurture my students as they are; while equally importantly, I also have an unspoken obligation to introduce processes that expand and refine my students’ capacity for learning. This means when students struggle to get started, I help them by pulling out the prominent concepts from their description to assist with organization. Elsewhere, when students become overly reliant on certain tools like visual images in their presentations, I collaborate with resources that encourage comfortable connections with written text. The underlying belief of PBL teaching is that students explore relevant experiences and that a key aspect of teaching is well-timed informative assistance. PBL instructors substantiate their teaching with philosophical values and educational principles that champion openness, awareness, and communication as vital to meaningful interactions between teachers and students.

### Concluding Thoughts

When we consider the “disconnection” and potential for genuine interplay between music studied and students’ private musical worlds, it seems certain that teachers play a major role in setting up instructional frameworks that fuel students’ musical development. Looking back at my lengthy teaching career, what seems limiting is my own past tendency to address the “disconnection” by implementing performance-based initiatives.

For example, at various times and with varying intensities, I’ve encouraged my preteen/teen students to choose their own repertoire, make and play their own compositions, develop creativity and improvisation skills, participate in structured exams and competitions, and take on increasingly challenging repertoire. While the merits of these performance-based strategies may explain why I continue to employ them in my teaching, it’s noteworthy that each of these examples falls clearly under the category of “music studied” rather than “students’ private musical worlds.” Despite my good intentions, I readily acknowledge that encouraging students’ autonomy is a long way from connecting with their Everyday Musical Connections.

What makes it meaningful for students to tap into their own Everyday Musical Connections? How do EMC explorations impact students in learning new repertoire and improving their overall musicianship? My impression is that EMC explorations shed light on three fundamental and influential layers of personal development: emotional, intellectual and social/cultural.<sup>23</sup>

First, emotional reactions matter because they spontaneously tell students about what they like or don’t like; what seems right and wrong; what students may choose to believe in and ignore. Acknowledging students’ emotional relationship with music is like giving their emotions a pat on the back. This musical recognition or validation lets students know that their relations with music aren’t random or insignificant. Everyday Musical Connections are integral to their identity and immensely worthwhile to explore.

Next, EMC explorations provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate their own disciplinary knowledge of music, to express their emerging competency and expertise in aspects of music that are important to them, and actively implement what they know about music. By attempting to understand or make sense of music, students exercise their intellectual capacities. Thinking



about music is important because students value their efforts in making meaning. The point is that students transfer their learning from the formal lesson environment into real-life musical applications.

Furthermore, EMC explorations also carry social/cultural stories and ideas. When students tell their musical stories, they demonstrate how their narratives intertwine with and differentiate from the narratives of past and present generations. Giving voice to students' Everyday Musical Connections is important because such opportunities offer insight into another person's viewpoints, consciousness and subjectivities. Given the universality of music in people's lives the world over, sharing Everyday Musical Connections may offer a way to achieve a better understanding of one another.

What I find most remarkable is how EMC explorations achieve what I call a genuine amplification of the student's musical persona. Over the many of months of working with students on different projects, I've witnessed how this process results in an intensifying of students' musical esprit—their musical creativity, musical imagination, musical character and musical well-being. By highlighting, interrogating and challenging students' Everyday Musical Connections, a heightened degree of confirmation or valuing of students takes place, as well as a sense of freshness and flourishing in students' musical confidence as knowledgeable musicians. I appreciate the way EMC explorations affirm students' mindset of immediate independence as musically involved individuals, therein reinforcing the attitudes and skills that will support them later on as adults who engage in a wealth of rewarding musical activities.

As a concluding gesture, I'd like to invite vocal and instrumental studio instructors, band/orchestra directors, and choral conductors to seize the opportunity to engage their preteen/teen students in EMC explorations. My hope is that music teachers and their students may experience precious moments

like when I asked my student Eric (age 14) for his impressions following his first public presentation. He replied, "It's interesting how my parents have always known more than I do about everything. Last week, I think they actually saw me for the first time as being the expert. I'm the one in our family who knows the most about music!" Hearing the uncanny self-awareness in Eric's remarks, I value the way EMC explorations accomplish more than bringing together music lessons and students' private musical worlds. By giving life to students' everyday connections with music, such explorations also fuel, challenge, and champion students' understanding of who they are, how they learn and what they know of the world around them. ◀◀

### Notes

1. All student names are anonymized.
2. Tricia Tunstall, *Note by note: A celebration of the piano lesson* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 29–60.
3. Randall Allsup, "Mutual learning and democratic action in instrumental music education," *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 51 no. 1 (2002): 25.
4. Daniel Barenboim, *Everything is connected* (London, UK: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), 134.
5. My familiarity with Project-Based Learning comes from its role as a mainstay of the BEd program at the University of Calgary, where I instruct courses in education philosophy and teacher professional development.
6. William H. Kilpatrick, "The project method," *Teachers College Record*, 19 no. 4 (1918): 334.
7. Thom Markham, "Project based learning: A bridge just far enough," *Teacher Librarian* 39 no. 2 (Canadian Business & Current Affairs Database, December 2011): 38.
8. John Larmer, John Mergendoller, and Suzie Boss, *Setting the standard for project-based learning: A proven approach to rigorous classroom instruction* (Alexandria, VA: ACSD, 2015).

9. Markham, "Project", 39.
10. Dannon G. Cox and Karen S. Meaney, "Lights, camera, project-based learning!" *Strategies* 31 no. 1 (2018): 25.
11. John Larmer, John Mergendoller, and Suzie Boss, "Gold standard PBL: Essential project design elements," *Buck Institute for Education* (2015): 2.
12. Larmer, Mergendoller, Boss, "Gold standard," 4.
13. Acacia M. Warren, *Project-based learning across the disciplines* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2016), 152.
14. Larmer, Mergendoller, Boss, "Gold standard," 3.
15. John Larmer & John R. Mergendoller, "Seven essentials for project-based learning," *Educational Leadership*, 68 no. 2 (September 2010): 34–37.
16. Band and choral directors may find it more practical to have groups of 3–4 students work together on their EMC explorations.
17. Select examples of student EMC investigations are available at [www.merlinthompson.com](http://www.merlinthompson.com), see Everyday Musical Connections.
18. Peter Luff & Don Lebler, "Striking a balance in brass pedagogy" in H. Gaunt & H. Westerlund *Collaborative Learning in Higher Education* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2018), 173–177.
19. See for example Randall Allsup, *Remixing the classroom* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016); Ryan Daniel & Kelly Parkes, "Assessment and critical feedback in the master-apprentice relationship," in Don Lebler, Gemma Carey, & Scott Harrison *Assessment in Music Education* (Springer, 2015), 107–124; Helena Gaunt, "One-to-one tuition in a conservatoire: The perceptions of instrumental and vocal students," *Psychology of Music*, 38 no. 2 (2010) 178–208; Lotte Latukefu & Irina Verenikina, "Expanding the master-apprentice model," in H. Gaunt & H. Westerlund *Collaborative Learning in Higher Education* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2018), 101–109; William Westney, *The Perfect Wrong Note* (Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 2003).
20. Markham, "Project," 38.
21. Steven Wolk, "Project-based learning: Pursuits with a purpose," *Educational Leadership*, 52 no. 3 (1994): 42–45.
22. Maria Montessori, *The absorbent mind* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 1995), 7.
23. John Blacking described how musical creativity draws from feelings, cultural experiences, intellectual, social, and musical activities in *How musical is man?* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1973), 24, 99.

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