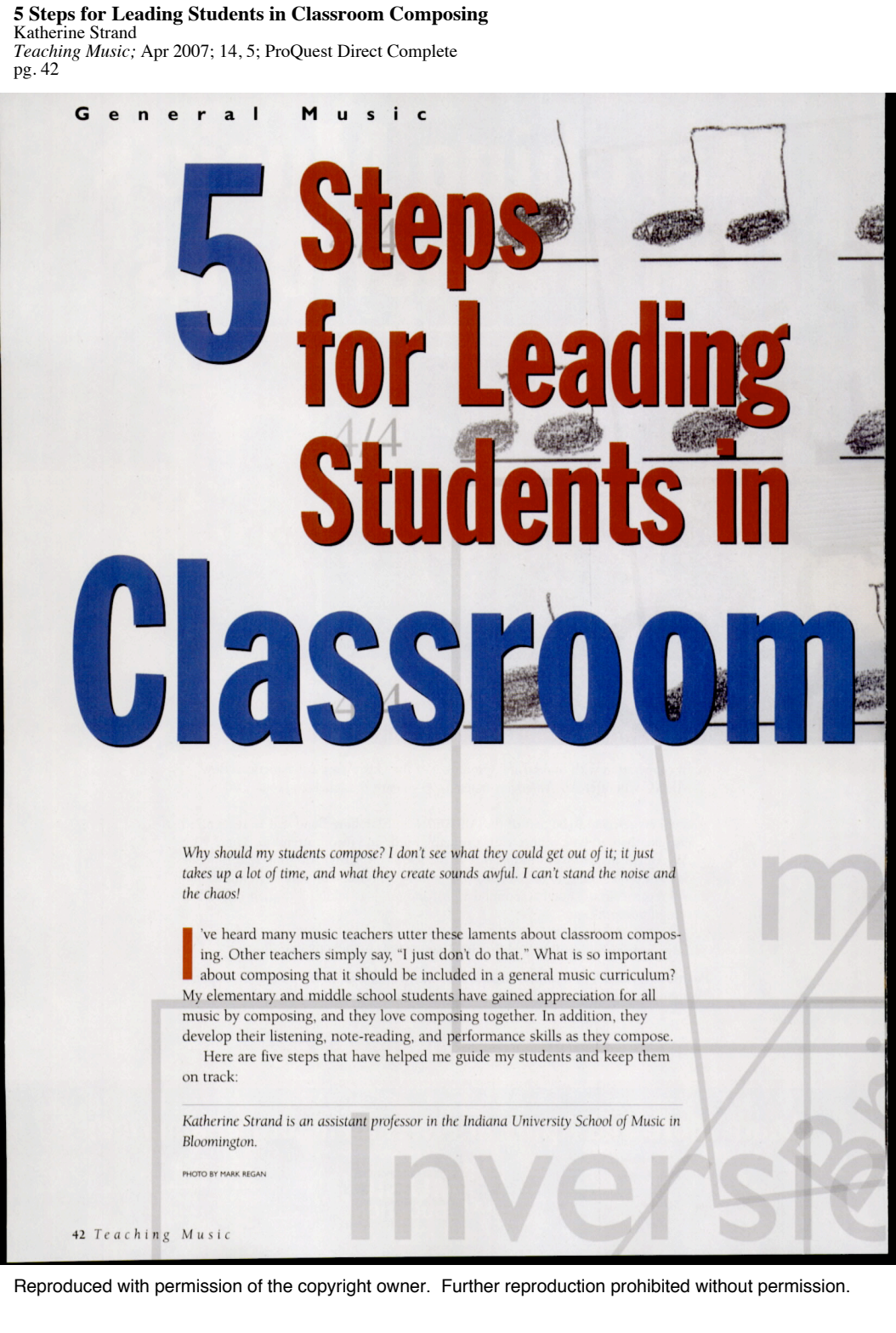


General Music



5 Steps for Leading Students in Classroom

Why should my students compose? I don't see what they could get out of it; it just takes up a lot of time, and what they create sounds awful. I can't stand the noise and the chaos!

I've heard many music teachers utter these laments about classroom composing. Other teachers simply say, "I just don't do that." What is so important about composing that it should be included in a general music curriculum? My elementary and middle school students have gained appreciation for all music by composing, and they love composing together. In addition, they develop their listening, note-reading, and performance skills as they compose.

Here are five steps that have helped me guide my students and keep them on track:

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Composing

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- Set learning goals for each activity, and share them with students.
- Model composing before the students try it.
- Practice individual steps in the process before giving students more complex composing tasks.
- Scaffold early composing tasks to help students develop their composing and collaborative skills.
- Always have the students perform their compositions for each other and discuss their decisions so they can learn from each other.

Setting and Sharing Goals

As with all learning activities, it's important to know the goals for each composing task you give your students. Composing activities could have many different goals: for example, to explore timbre and the sound possibilities of various instruments, to learn to express personal thoughts and feelings, or to practice and create with music concepts learned in class.

I've found that my students respond enthusiastically when I share the learning goals with them. They become inspired by both the challenge and the opportunity to create, and they actively evaluate their work in light of the goals. What's more, if they know the destination, they are less likely to become sidetracked by collaborative problems or noise.

Model Composing First

Most of your students have made up music on their own at some time in their lives. Nevertheless, unless you give permission to create in the classroom, some will be hesitant, and some will simply not know how or where to start. Just as I model singing skills, performance skills, and listening skills, I've found that modeling composing skills helps my students when they begin composing on their own.

To focus students on the aspect

of composing that you want them to learn, discuss your thinking as you compose in front of (or with) them. For example, if you want them to learn how to create musical accompaniments, you might teach the class a new song and then develop a rhythmic ostinato in front of the students. While creating it, explain how you make a pattern that fits the song's rhythm and meter. Then sing the song with the new pattern, and ask the students whether it works.

One specific skill that I model is divergent thinking—showing them that, for any creative problem, there are many right answers. I might share my strategy, saying, "I like to start with the mood I want and experiment with ideas in that style until I hear something I like." If you share your reasons for choosing some ideas over others, you will help students think of strategies themselves.

Practice Individual Steps in the Process

In singing, we teach students to use their head voice and speaking voice *and* to breathe correctly *and* to shape their mouths to make pleasing vowel sounds *and* to keep their throats relaxed—but we teach these skills separately, and we develop exercises and games to practice each one.

It makes sense to help students develop the skills for composing through guidance and practice as well. Composing involves generating ideas, putting ideas together (form and texture), revising, rehearsing, finding a way to codify or notate, choosing instruments, and making artistic choices about tempo, dynamics, and articulation.

Generating ideas. Musical ideas can be generated a number of ways: through sound exploration, by first notating and then listening to the creation, or by starting with a known musical idea and altering it

until it becomes a new idea. I use brainstorming techniques (and remind administrators that this helps develop divergent thinking skills!), encouraging students to think of several possible answers for a given musical problem and reminding them not to discard any ideas. If your students need inspiration for generating ideas, consider poetry, children's literature, painting, current events, or listening activities.

Putting ideas together. Ideas can be put together by placing them one after another (form) or playing them at the same time (texture). You can help students practice developing form and texture by providing melodic or rhythmic ideas on cards and asking them to practice arranging them in order and layering them. One of the joys of this type of activity is that several groups working with the same cards will come up with different arrangements. Once again, you can show them that musical decisions are not math problems: there is always more than one right answer.

Revising. Students may be accustomed to giving answers in other classes and then moving on to the next topic; they may not always consider revising. Practice revising by having them alter known melodies, or create a melody with the class and have groups revise the melody and share their ideas with the rest of the class. By practicing revision with the class, you give them permission to make changes as they work out their own musical ideas.

Rehearsing. Students need to hear what their musical ideas sound like. To help students learn to rehearse, explain the rehearsal process when you introduce a new piece in class. Explain how a leader counts off in time, rehearses without instruments and then transfers to instruments, practices parts, runs

through the whole piece, practices sections, and so on. With many groups working together in one classroom, have students use *rehearsal volume* (with fingernails, stick ends of mallets, whispers) not *performance volume*. Then, practice rehearsing by giving a simple piece to small groups and talk through how to choose a rehearsal leader and how to do the rehearsal process. You can save yourself and your students many headaches by practicing this skill before sending them off to compose on their own.

Notating music. Young student composers can create musical ideas that are far more complex than they could ever notate, and even students fluent in writing traditional notation may find the process too time-consuming. Furthermore, once students notate music, they tend to act as though the piece cannot be changed, and they stop revising. To solve these problems, invented notation systems, manipulatives, and guided traditional notation can provide shortcuts to help students move through the composing process. It's important that the notating process not bog down the composing process.

First- and second-grade students can notate by inventing maps of their pieces with symbols to signify musical ideas. Provide paper and crayons, and they can notate instruments, dynamics, melodic contour, and rhythmic patterns to remember the music. As students develop note-reading skills, you can guide their notation efforts. For example, you might ask them to figure out the rhythms they create and then write pitch names as solfeggio below each duration. You should always keep in mind that students can create rhythms that are more complicated than the rhythms they can read, so you may have to help them notate even rhythmic ideas. This will give you a terrific opportunity to introduce new rhythmic figures to your students.

Figure 1. Work with Composing Cards

Students can use manipulatives like these composing cards to arrange their ideas. Give several of each card to students and allow them to arrange form and texture. Musical ideas (like the A theme) can be notated separately, but are often memorized by students.

Examples of whole and half cards

A Theme	B Theme	Intro	Bridge	Coda
Unpitched Rhythmic Ostinato	Rhythmic Ostinato on Drone	Melodic Ostinato	Diminution	Inversion
			Retrograde	Change to minor

Composer's arrangement of cards

Intro	A Theme	Bridge	B Theme	A Theme
				Inversion
	Unpitched Rhythmic Ostinato	Unpitched Rhythmic Ostinato	Unpitched Rhythmic Ostinato	Unpitched Rhythmic Ostinato
		Melodic Ostinato	Melodic Ostinato	Melodic Ostinato

As a group activity, once the compositions are complete and have been performed, you can work as a class to transcribe student compositions into notation. This form of dictation is exciting for students, because they have the challenge of writing and reading music that they and their classmates have written!

Another notating idea is to give students manipulatives like the composing cards shown in figure 1. Manipulatives help students arrange

and vary ideas in larger compositions. In this example, each card represents one musical idea. Half-size cards, placed on top, allow students to map variations or changes to ideas. Finished compositions can be preserved by taping cards to poster paper, and then can be used as listening maps and displayed on the walls.

Selecting instruments. Sometimes there are issues when students associate specific instruments with

Figure 2. Directions for an Early Composing Project

Create Two Question-and-Answer Melodies

Part A. Create your melody.

In pairs, work together on your xylophones to create a question-and-answer melody.

Step 1. Begin by creating a rhythm pattern, and write it in the beat-spaces below. (You can use quarter, eighth, and half notes and rests.) Remember to use rehearsal volume!

4/4 _____

Step 2. Now, use your rhythm pattern to create a question-and-answer melody in C major. Have one member of the pair create a question and the other member create the answer. Practice the two parts together. Make certain that you can *both* play the whole melody. Write the letter names you choose on the beat-spaces below, in place of the rhythms.

Question	Answer
4/4 _____	_____

Step 3. Rehearse your melody, and revise if you want to make it sound even better.

Step 4. Perform for the class!

Part B. Create an accompaniment.

Create a drone with a 4-beat rhythm pattern that one partner can play on *do* (C) while the other plays your melody. Write the rhythm for the drone in the beat-spaces below.

Rhythm for the drone _____

Practice your melody with the accompaniment drone, revise if you want, and perform for the class.

Part C. Arrange your melodies.

Join with another pair of composers and arrange your two melodies and drones together into a longer composition. Decide which melody will be the A theme, and which will be the B theme. Write the form for your new piece below. (For example, you might want to do A–B–A–B or A–A–B.)

Write the form here: _____

Raise your hand for the teacher to check your work, then go on.

Part D. Add finishing touches.

Decide together if you would like to create an *introduction* and *bridges* to connect the themes. Decide how to use the drones, what are the best dynamics and tempo, and how you want your composition to end.

Write the new form here: _____

Practice together, revise as needed, and perform for the class!

social status (e.g., everybody wants the big drum). I teach instrument choice by practicing it together, discussing with the class how to choose based on dynamics, tone quality, and the function of an instrument's part with other parts. Then when I assign groups to work together, I have the group vote on all instrument choices or have peers evaluate each other's instrument choices. Another good trick is to tell each student to choose an instrument for another teammate to play. With practice, the students begin to think like composers, assigning instruments to make the best musical compositions.

Making artistic choices.

Students often begin to make expressive artistic choices before you direct them to do so, but at other times they forget they can do this until you remind them. I practice artistic decision-making with students in pieces performed together in class by asking questions like, "Should this section be loud or quiet?" or "What would make this melody sound more like a horse galloping?" You will be amazed at their interest in every piece of music if you involve them in such choices; students raise hands to share ideas about dynamics, tempo, and articulation, and they want to try everything out.

Students Become Independent Composers

Once you have modeled and practiced all the skills involved in composing, it's time to assign larger and more complex composing tasks and guide students supportively. I organize my directions to help students learn to collaborate as they work through the composing process, splitting a task into smaller segments and providing guidance to help students move through it successfully.

Figure 2 is an example of task

directions I might give to third-grade students for their first large-scale composition. I guide notation efforts to help them generate ideas and practice transcription and guide the collaboration by naming jobs for each teammate. I may even choose the instruments for them. I have students stop and perform for each other after every part of the activity for several reasons: to give each group the chance to show off developing ideas, to improve performance skills, to check on collaboration, and to give me the chance to help notate and explain if there are any misunderstandings. For example, I can listen to a performance after the second step and then explain, "Oh, that's not a drone, but it is a melodic ostinato" when they create something they like that isn't listed in the directions. It's important to remember that directions can be changed if student composers like their "incorrect" ideas!

An important consideration when creating directions is that early tasks can have lots of guidance, but in later tasks, as the students gain skill and confidence, your guidance should diminish. This can be difficult for teachers, because it means standing back and staying out of the way, but it's worth the effort. You will be amazed by how hard students work, how carefully they think about the music, and how much pride they take in their finished products. Figure 3 is an example of a guiding worksheet that I might give a third-grade group late in the year. The directions simply remind students of possibilities and provide places for them to organize their musical ideas.

Have Students Perform and Discuss

All too often, composing is taught as a product for paper and pencil. It's *vital* that students hear

Figure 3. Guiding Worksheet for a Later Composing Project

Create a Composition to Express One of the Poems Shared in Class

- This worksheet can be completed in any order. Work together to design and create your composition—remember to practice at *rehearsal volume* so you do not interfere with another group's work.
- Choose your musical form. Use the composition cards to decide what you will do, and copy the form here:

Form _____
 Tonality (write "major" or "minor" and home tone) _____
 Will you change tonality? _____
 If so, what are the new tonality and home tone? _____

- You can use question-and-answer phrases to create your melody (or melodies). Remember, you can extend a question-and-answer melody, like Q-Q-A or Q-A-Q-A. Notate melody (or melodies) below in note names and rhythmic ideas:

Theme A _____
 Theme B _____
 Theme C _____

- Use your composing cards to map out your composition.
- Decide whether you want accompaniment, and if so, notate it here and name the chosen instruments:
 1. Instrument choice and/or notation _____
 2. Instrument choice and/or notation _____
 3. Instrument choice and/or notation _____
- Practice, revise as needed, and perform for the class!

what they create so that they connect symbols to real sounds. Your students will sometimes have problems performing their compositions. But this can be a great motivation: they often enthusiastically practice the music they create to develop their performance skills.

After each composition is performed, take a moment to have the composer(s) talk about the piece. It's important to have students articulate their musical choices, both for you to assess their learning and for them to learn from each other. When the students listen to their own and other students' ideas, they begin to

listen to each other in a new way—as collaborators. You may even find them collaborating with famous composers: when you play a new piece of music, you may hear the response, "Wow—Beethoven had the same idea that I had!"

Reaping the Rewards

Classroom composing is a lot of work, but it's tremendously rewarding for your students and for you. The learning and skill development that attends composing efforts can make the addition of composing activities to your music classroom both useful and enjoyable. ☺