

POPULAR MUSIC EDUCATION: THE MODERN BAND APPROACH

Last fall, the Ball State Modern Band class traveled to St. Joe Central Elementary School in Fort Wayne to observe Laura McCoy's 3rd grade music class. We purposefully selected this site because Laura is one of a growing number of teachers across Indiana who is teaching Modern Band. It was inspiring to see young students playing ukuleles, keyboards, percussion, and singing a variety of popular songs. They were all engaged with the lesson, some smiling while they sang, and others deep in concentration as they moved their hands from position to position on their instruments. They played along with a backing track and a visual display of the chord changes and lyrics on the classroom SMART Board.

"Modern Band" is a term established by Little Kids Rock (LKR), a not-for-profit organization that seeks to promote the teaching and performance of contemporary/popular music and instruments in under-resourced schools. It accomplishes this by supporting licensed music teachers in developing pedagogical skills for teaching the instruments through hands-on workshops as well as providing resources, such as instruments and accessories. The organization was founded in 2002 by Dave Wish, an English as a Second Language (ESL) educator, who sought to revive music education in urban schools after its elimination due to budget challenges. Drawing on his informal music experience playing popular music in his youth, Wish began teaching guitar to his first graders in the California Bay Area. His pedagogy was inspired by second language acquisition theory. "Little Kids Rock was founded when my love for teaching children and my formal schooling in



Second Language Learning combined unexpectedly with my love for playing. Interestingly enough, my love for playing was born outside of a school setting and was decidedly informal" (Wish et al., 2016, p. 12).

Music as a Second Language, the pedagogical approach Wish developed while teaching guitar, shares many commonalities with sound before sight approaches; the emphasis right off the bat is to get students playing music they know and love. It follows the immersion process that is common to learning a language; students learn by listening and playing with competent musicians (i.e., teachers and recordings). The first day, students learning guitar may be playing simple one chord songs along with a backing track, such as *Land of 1,000 Dances* or *We Will Rock You*. Each time a new chord is learned, another hundred plus songs become possible. With four chords, most pop and rock music becomes accessible. How motivating this is for students in learning to play an instrument and to sing the music they know and love!

Beyond learning the guitar, Modern Band provides the opportunity to learn electric bass, keyboard, drum set, ukulele, vocals, computer/tablet, and any other instruments the teacher or students wish to include in the class. Many different ensemble possibilities exist. Rather than trying to replicate the typical number of musicians in a rock band, many parts are doubled as in a choir, band, or orchestra. For example, a Modern Band class might consist of 18 guitarists, 2 bassists, 3 drummers/percussionists, and 4 vocalists on a song. On the next song, the students switch

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instruments and vocal parts. This gives them an opportunity to develop skills on multiple instruments while learning the role of each of the parts in a popular music ensemble.

Introducing Modern Band at Creston Intermediate Academy

At Creston Intermediate Academy, Liz Schurger teaches a Modern Band unit to fifth and sixth grade students focused on beginning guitar. She learned about a LKR Modern Band workshop in her area from a friend. "I worked in another school corporation for about eight years. Then when this job opened up I applied and I got this job. And the demographic is really different. It wasn't [like] where I'd gone to school. I wasn't used to teaching this demographic either. And so I had been here about two and a half years and I heard about Modern Band and the Little Kids Rock stuff on Facebook. A friend of mine had posted about it. So that's how I heard about it and I feel like it's an easier way to reach this demographic than, you know, talking about the dead white composers."

As with many music teachers incorporating Modern Band in their curriculum, Liz comes from a traditional music education background, graduating from Ball State with a license to teach instrumental and general music. Her experience with Modern Band instruments was limited to some dabbling with guitar and drum set. Through the workshop, she was able to get some hands-on experience and learn pedagogical strategies. "The first day of the Modern Band workshop the morning was spent all on guitar and just kind of how to introduce stuff but we used some of the pedagogical stuff in the afternoon when we

talked about drum set and we played a little bit on the electric keyboards. We talked a little bit about bass along with the guitar stuff. And we did play on keyboards. They brought a bunch of keyboards for us to play on."

After the workshop, attendees, whose schools qualified for assistance, were able to choose an instrument allocation for their program. "So I chose all guitars because I know that with the students in my school and in this setting they would not like it if somebody gets to play this guitar and I have to play this ukulele... I wanted it equal across the whole group. So I was able to get 30 guitars with that credit through Little Kids Rock."

Within two months of attending the workshop, Liz received her guitars and began incorporating Modern Band in her curriculum. "So we have a three week rotation [through the arts classes] and I don't use [the guitars] longer than one week per rotation. The kids get tired of it. I get tired of it. You know when anybody's getting frustrated we just kind of need to move on and do something else. And so I found that four to five days is about the most in a row I can do with them. But I've also found that when I do those four or five days in a row that retention is higher. And so that's why I want to do that many days in a row. So basically we make a unit out of it."

Modern Band Values and Pedagogy

Beyond the opportunity to learn and perform popular music with authentic instruments, Modern Band pedagogy promotes five basic values: comfort zone, approximation, scaffolding, composition, and improvisation (Powell & Burstein, 2017). In order to minimize music performance anxiety, Modern Band seeks to create a safe space or

comfort zone by engaging students' interests in low-anxiety environments, while building self-esteem through acknowledging each students' success, no matter how varied. With approximation, students are given freedom to participate at the level that they feel most comfortable. For a beginning keyboardist, this may be playing one finger melodies, while a more advanced keyboardist can play melodies in the right hand, accompanied by chords in the left.

Similarly, teachers know the abilities of their students and can scaffold the learning process to meet their varying needs. A group of guitarists with different skill sets can be given options for playing a four chord song: (a) play all four chords in time with a syncopated strum pattern, (b) play all four chords in time with a single down strum, or (c) play every other chord in alternation with a partner, etc. By providing multiple entry points, everyone can participate on some level and benefit from being part of the process of making music together. Liz explained how it works at Creston. "So when we're learning [new material] I talk about how if something is hard, then drop this and do these things; if this is easy, then add this other thing on top of it. And I feel really fortunate that I teach in a setting where we're not striving for perfection for a contest performance. You know it can be whatever it needs to be. And if that means that like the high ability kids can take it three steps further than that's okay too."

One of the hallmarks of contemporary musicianship is the value of creating one's own music through composition and improvisation. Modern Band regularly promotes this type of creative thinking and play, whether it's learning to solo, creating a new melody and lyrics to a common set of chord changes, or composing an entirely new song. When students are given the tools for constructing a song (e.g., form, chords, lyrics), their imaginations come alive and personal stories are told. It also allows students to focus their energy in positive ways. Liz shared an example. "I have a student who is a huge behavioral challenge but he loves to just make up a song. When he's doing that, he's just totally in his element. He's having a good time. The kids think that he's great instead of a bother and it's a chance for him to feel really good about it."

Modern Band repertoire is any contemporary or popular music that students listen to in their daily lives. As such, Modern Band is really a student-centered curriculum, focusing on what students know and want to learn, immediately tapping into their intrinsic motivation. Liz explained that it also helps students from other countries connect more quickly to learning in the classroom, because of the music's familiarity. "I have a lot of students who don't speak English well. There are students in my class that just came to this country sometime this school year, but they've heard the music and so we can kind of connect that way. The music that they're hearing isn't completely foreign to them

even though maybe the things that I'm saying to them don't make a whole lot of sense. But they seem like they can understand when I'm showing them stuff on the guitar and they're participating with a song that's already familiar to them. They feel more comfortable."

At the *Enacting Curricular Change in Music Education through Vernacular Music* Conference, held at Case Western Reserve University in March 2019, UNC-Greensboro Professor Connie McKoy shared her vision for a broader, and more inclusive field of music education. Noting that music education reaches the most children at the elementary level, the population of students participating in school music diminishes in middle and high school on account of its elective status, as well as its focus on specific kinds of performance ensembles. Dr. McKoy suggested that the current model only serves a certain (i.e., small) population and that curricular change is necessary.

Her call echoes sentiments of the Tanglewood Symposium (1967) in which a growing number of music educators and scholars challenged the music education profession to be more inclusive of the many music genres and styles that exist. They suggested that students in schools be given opportunities to experience a wide variety of music cultures to learn about themselves and others, while developing their musicianship through listening, connecting, responding, performing, and creating. New music offerings, such as Modern Band, are important for creating greater access to music that is culturally relevant and engaging. The growth of Modern Band has reached a point that in Fall 2019, the inaugural 2019 All-National Honor Ensemble Modern Band will make its debut in Orlando, Florida. Scott Burstein of Little Kids Rock will lead this group of young all-star musicians.

Preparing the Next Generation of Teachers

Recognizing the importance of preparing future music teachers to teach popular music, Ball State University offered its first elective Modern Band course in Fall 2018. This course provided instruction in all Modern Band instruments, as well as composition and improvisation. Reflecting on his experience, one student commented, "Before taking this class, I had zero experience on singing, guitar, bass, and drum set. Guitar was one of the hardest instruments. It took a lot of practice being able to move from the chords that we have learned fluidly in a song. While I was home over Thanksgiving break, me and my grandpa were able to play songs together on the guitar. If I hadn't taken this class, I would not have been able to experience this. I am very excited to be able to take this knowledge into the classroom."

Another student discussed the relevance of the course:

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"The experience of taking this course was one of the most formative in my trajectory as an educator as I could ever imagine having. This course gave me a framework and ideological foundation to build upon with ideas and grievances that I had had going through my own musical education. I plan to use the information that I gained in this class no matter where I end up as a professional. The passion that I felt about being able to play music that was important to me was also a great help in taking this course. I hadn't been able to imagine before a concrete way in which students could play music that they found culturally relevant. The ways in which a teacher can cope with differences in backgrounds, skill levels and even language in a modern music setting are leaps and bounds ahead of the ways they're handled in a traditional music classroom. Letting students communicate about things that they are passionate about gives them the ability to say as much or as little as they want with their playing."

One of the highlights of the class was visiting St. Joe Central Elementary School in Fort Wayne, where Laura McCoy teaches Modern Band to students in grades 3-5. After observing the young students perform a variety of

songs, the Ball State students set up their band and performed "Wonderwall" by Oasis and "The Old Days" by Dr. Dog. It was a unique experience in which everyone in the room appreciated the opportunity to share music with one another. Perhaps one of those young students will be leading his/her own Modern Band class one day?

To learn more about Modern Band, please visit the Little Kids Rock website: www.littlekidsrock.org •

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