

“From A to Jay-Z” Workshop, NCTE Boston 2013

Dr. Tim Duggan, Northeastern Illinois University

M.A.S.T.E.R. the art of incorporating music into your English classes! Here are six ways to involve students in producing musical responses to reading and course materials.

M = Mnemonics. Using musical mnemonics to remember lists of words or concepts has been a staple of early instruction for centuries, including the Alphabet Song and “Uno, Dos, Tres” from *Sesame Street*. When you ask students to remember lists of names, important details, language conventions, or other basic concepts, have them construct their own musical mnemonic devices, using tunes that are familiar to them or original melodies.

A = Adaptations. Great stories have been adapted to song by opera composers and popular musicians, and your students can do their own musical adaptations of the stories they read if you give them the opportunity. You may need to teach basic song structure, such as 1-4-5 progressions in folk or blues, or use your musically inclined students to lead groups in developing melody, but the key is in the verses they compose to retell the story (or event) and the mood that the music helps to create. Students can tie musical elements to story elements, such as having a bridge or a key change at the turning point in the story. Their adaptations should be faithful to the themes and spirit of the original text (as interpreted by the students). Have them write explanations of their composing process and choices.

S = Settings. Setting poetry and story to music is one of the easiest and most rewarding ways to incorporate music into the English classroom. Unlike the adaptation activity, when we do a musical setting, we don’t change the words of the poem or story. Ask students to use whatever musical skills they have to take the printed text and set it to music. The focus of this activity is primarily on the musical elements that are used to illuminate the text. Sonnets or other short poems work well.

T = Themes. Does anyone remember “Peter and The Wolf”? Students who play (or who would like to play) musical instruments can compose mono- or multi-tonal themes for individual characters in stories, or to represent different events or actions. The same may be done as “background music” for reading of poems. Have students develop these themes using their own musical instruments or using readily available music software, such as GarageBand or Mini-Moog. Students can then write “artist statements” explaining why they made the various musical choices they made, and how those choices reflect their understanding of the original text. Reader’s Theater readings with the theme music can be very powerful.

E = Extensions/Explorations. Imagine a character in a story at a critical moment. In a musical, typically those moments are turned to songs that step outside of the storytelling to illuminate inner conflict or desire (e.g. “Somewhere over the Rainbow”). English teachers often ask students to journal on characters’ emotions or to create diary entries from a character’s perspective. Why not write a song? Also, students may find a theme or idea in literature that sparks their own thinking, which can lead to original songwriting. Such original songwriting signifies development of independence in the student’s literary education.

R = Recital. Remember to give the students the opportunity to perform their compositions. From a recital approach to a festival or competition (if that’s what turns you on), sharing the fruits of our musical labor is essential to building community. Follow up with reflective or critical conversations about how music communicates story or emotion and how the creative and analytical mind work together to produce artistic responses to learning.

Suggested Reading: Jourdain, R. (1998). *Music, the brain, and ecstasy: How music captures our imagination*. New York: Harper.
Storr, A. (1992). *Music and the Mind*. New York: Ballantine.