

# Student-Centered Instruction: Involving Students in Their Own Education

By Julie K. Brown

*What would happen in your classroom if students helped you determine their path of learning?*

**S**tudent-centered instruction has been a hot topic in education for some time, but what does it really mean? How can an educator create and teach in a student-centered classroom without losing control of the learning environment? What curricular models incorporate the principles of student-centered learning? How can music teachers make effective use of this model?

## **Learning by Doing**

Student-centered instruction is a form of active learning where students are engaged and involved in what they are studying. In the United States, this concept was first described around 1900 in the context of constructivism. As a teaching method, constructivism goes back to at least the work of education reformer John Dewey and Russian developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky. According to one definition, constructivism

states that students learn more by doing and experiencing rather than by observing.<sup>1</sup> If, for example, one wants to learn about the saxophone, he or she will learn more by playing the saxophone than by listening to and reading about the saxophone. Educators Jacqueline Grennon Brooks and Martin G. Brooks describe the value of allowing student responses to steer lessons and create instructional strategies. They recommend asking questions and leading students to solutions rather than simply giving answers, with the goal of nurturing students' natural curiosity.<sup>2</sup>

Put simply, student-centered instruction is when the planning, teaching, and assessment revolve around the needs and abilities of the students. The teacher *shares* control of the classroom, and students are allowed to explore, experiment, and discover on their own. This does not mean that the students are in control of the classroom, but rather that they have some influence in the deci-

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sions that are being made about their learning. Students are given choices and are included in the decision-making processes of the classroom. Education researchers Barbara L. McCombs and Jo Sue Whisler value student-centered approaches because learning is most meaningful when subjects are applicable to the students' interests, educational needs, and lives in general.<sup>3</sup> This is also true when students are actively connected to the creation and comprehension of knowledge. Ultimately, the students are treated as co-creators within the learning process and as individuals with relevant ideas about how learning takes place.

In student-centered classrooms, students are involved in creating strategies that teachers can use. In fact, some of the best teaching strategies come from students, because the students are the ones that are being taught. Often no one knows better how students learn than the students themselves. Student-centered teachers encourage them to come up with new ways of doing things. This can be done through a written reflection done in or outside of class time, or by simply engaging in dialogue in or out of the classroom environment. In a 1994 *MEJ* article, Loretta Niebur, then an assistant professor at Weber State University (Ogden, Utah), said that she believed this to be a wonderful way to get students involved in their own education because there is a true sense of relevance that is created with the subject matter.<sup>4</sup> No longer are students detached from the music they learn and the ways they learn it; rather, they are connected to each element of their learning.

## Two Learning Models

There are many excellent examples of student-centered instruction in learning and curricular models in music education. Two that immediately come to mind are Comprehensive Musicianship through Performance (CMP) and Arts PROPEL. The goal of the CMP plan is to encourage students to really learn about and truly know the music they are performing in ensembles rather than just learning the piece for a performance. Through CMP, the classroom is transformed into a "whole-music" learning environment that is, without a doubt, student-centered.<sup>5</sup>

As described in conductor and teacher



Photo by Mark Regan Photography

A high school student leads the class in vocal warm-ups.

Patricia O'Toole's work,<sup>6</sup> CMP has five points to its model. Any of these can be one's starting point, although the most common area in which to begin is *music selection*. The same questions that were asked earlier by the student-centered teacher are also asked by the CMP teacher: "What do I want my ensemble to learn?" and "What is the ability level of my ensemble?" These may also be accompanied by "How will this piece fit into our concert program?" or "How will this piece benefit my students?"

Once the piece has been selected, the teacher moves to *analysis*. The teacher must know the score extremely well before presenting it to his or her ensemble. Then, the shared analysis of a student-centered classroom can occur with the teacher as the initiation for discussion into form, melodic and harmonic structures, orchestration, or any number of other elements of the piece.

The next point in the CMP plan is *outcomes*. The teacher sets forth the goals for the ensemble. In the student-centered classroom, these outcomes can also be created by the students by way of listing a set of shared val-



Students who solve their own musical problems often remember more of what they learn.

ues. For example, “In two weeks, we want to know why this piece changes key so many times.” From these outcomes (both teacher-developed and student-developed) come *strategies* that will get the ensemble to the goal. Again, the teacher can listen to ideas the students have about how they may best learn the musical concepts being taught. This can be done through written reflection or by simply asking a student, “So, how do you think we should go about learning that tricky spot at measure 25?” I am often amazed at the wealth of wonderful teaching strategies that come from my students. Teachers so often forget to look at the ensemble they are teaching for ideas to teach!

The last point on the CMP model is *assessment*. Assessment in CMP is done throughout the learning process by way of “before, during, and after” assessments. Students can be involved in reflecting on their own progress and development in a number of ways—from journaling to rubric design to recorded assessment. CMP makes students the focus of the instruction and allows them to be a part of and often lead their own learning process.

Another teaching model rooted heavily in student-centered instruction is Arts PROPEL.<sup>7</sup> Created by edu-

cation researcher Howard Gardner and Harvard Project Zero in 1984, Arts PROPEL originally focused on three main art forms: music, visual art, and imaginative writing. Gardner describes three intersecting pathways that give Arts PROPEL its name and by which students approach the given art form—in this case, music. First, there is *production* where students perform and/or create music. Then comes *perception* where students study others’ works to understand the thought processes in which musicians engage and to see connections between their own and others’ work. The final step is *reflection*—students assess how their work was created, how effective their work is, and how it can be improved. These three pathways, along with *learning*, are the foundation of PROPEL.

There are two main instruments of instruction associated with Arts PROPEL. The first is the domain project, a set of exercises for each of the three competences that feature perceptual, productive, and reflective elements. It is through domain projects that the teacher and students ask themselves, “Where are you going?” “How will you get there?” and “Are you getting there?” In asking, “Where are you going?” they are looking for goals and outcomes in each lesson. These can

be national content or performance standards or involve something more personal to the student. Through Arts PROPEL, students are encouraged to create cognitive (knowing), artistic (performing), and aesthetic (feeling) outcomes that connect to the desired standards. The question, “How will you get there?” involves setting strategies for how the learning will take place. Strategies in Arts PROPEL are most often engaging the students in self-directed learning through exploration, creative thinking, and problem solving.

The final question, “Are you getting there?” refers to the assessment that occurs throughout the instruction. Assessment is done through criteria set by both the teacher and the student. Involving the students in their own assessment is crucial and at the heart of the Arts PROPEL philosophy. Students are engaged in creating rubrics on which to base evaluation and open-ended reflections, as well as other means of assessment. Domain projects encourage students to think creatively about open-ended problems and formulate a solution.

The second instructional tool of Arts PROPEL deals with portfolios. Portfolios follow the students’ development through examples of the students’ work in each stage of the creative process. Some educators who use these tools refer to them as *process folios* because the work included therein is work in progress rather than a collection of one’s best work. Whatever they are called, they house students’ original sketches, interim drafts, other works that the student admires, and critiques done by teacher, peers, and self. Through all steps in the Arts PROPEL plan, students are involved in their own education—from the formation of goals to the constant assessment of their own work.

There are several other teaching methods not directly tied to music and the arts that use student-centered concepts at their heart. In *cooperative learning*, for example, students work in small groups to maximize their own and each others’ learning. Students are encouraged to direct themselves through lessons in *learning through discovery*. When a chal-

lenge arises, students must find a solution that works for them and their needs. In both methods, students are at the core of the instruction, and lessons are driven through the students' own personal experiences and methods of learning.

### Why Student-Centered Instruction?

What are the benefits of student-centered learning? This question can perhaps be best answered by realizing that through student-centered learning, students become self-sufficient, creative thinkers and people who appreciate and value the subject being taught. As a music educator, I believe that my goal is not to turn out professional performers or experts in the field of composition, but rather to instill a love of music and a quizzical mind that stays with each student throughout life. This can be achieved by the teacher letting go of the "teacher" role and allowing the students to explore ideas and teach themselves. In doing this, the teacher becomes a coach, or instigator, who is always there to assist, but never to give away answers.

It has been said that people learn best when they have to teach others. The same can be said here, although the students are teaching themselves alongside their peers. My own students know that they are responsible for the learning of each member of their section. For example, I have a fairly even split in my seventh-grade band between percussionists who feel confident on mallet instruments and those who do not. When we work on mallet technique, the students who are strong mallet players will pair themselves with students who are not as strong and work as "student teachers" to assist the other student in learning the piece. A number of good things occur through this. First, the students who do not feel confident on the mallet instrument get a private tutor of sorts for that time to help them. It gives the students who are strong on mallets the chance to not only show what they know, but also work with other classmates to help them improve. It also helps develop a sense of community in the percussion section when students see their own

strengths and work with others to improve the section as a whole.

Students in a student-centered classroom also become involved in learning music, not just learning how to play the pieces in front of them. This can be accomplished through shared analysis. In this method of teaching, the teacher seldom gives out an explanation or the answer, at least

not right away. For example, when working on a piece in ABA form, the teacher may ask students to find where they think the first main theme or melody is. The students would then systematically go through the piece finding different themes and where they are. The teacher simply acts as a recorder and takes the information the students come up with down on the

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chalkboard. (A student recorder can also be used, of course, making the teacher less of a “teacher.”) It is the students who are catalyzing the conversation and analysis of the piece’s form. The teacher is simply instigating the conversation and keeping things on task.

In another method of shared analysis, the teacher explains a concept and

ples of a rondo. There may be patterns in the walls, in the way boys and girls are sitting, in colors or chairs, or in other combinations of objects. In doing this, the students are fully engaged in understanding the concept of rondo form, rather than trying to memorize what their teacher told them. We do this in my classroom a lot. I want my students to understand

that we are playing, but are also able to compose music later in the semester using that form.

### Some Basic Concepts

If you have considered incorporating some student-centered ideas into your own classroom, I advise you to start small. Any changes in the normal routine of the learning environment will be best experienced in small doses. Don’t look to completely rework your classroom over a short period of time. This will only frustrate you and confuse your students. You may want to consider the following as points from which to begin:

- *See yourself as a “guide on the side,” not a “sage on the stage.”* I have heard this statement from many superb music educators who have inspired me throughout my career. Our students should not view us as the ultimate answer to all questions about music because, frankly, we aren’t!

- *Start asking students more questions in class.* Don’t be so quick to always give students the answers. Instead, let them come to their own. If their responses are not the desired answers, do not correct them. Rather, let other peers help out, or gently steer in the right direction.

- *Ask your students what they think of your class.* Though this can be scary, it is a wonderful window into your students. Start out by doing this in some sort of written journal to you. It can even remain anonymous if you think it would produce more truthful answers.

- *Listen to your students.* As I stated earlier, my students have given me some of the best strategies for learning. One should not take his or her students up on every suggestion they give, but rather keep their ideas and feelings in mind.

- *Personalize a unit of study.* For example, if your students are really interested in film music, create a unit where they can learn more about film music. This could involve the study of a particular movie’s music, or having students research their favorite film composer online, or selecting a piece of music for your concert from an important film in movie history. I’m not advocating a rewrite of whatever

“Through student-centered instruction, our students can achieve independent minds.”

then asks students to create similar meanings in their own words. (This is especially appropriate if a concept is completely new to the ensemble.) Using our ABA form example, let’s say the teacher just finished explaining what rondo form is. He or she could then ask students to look around the room and try to come up with exam-

form, and because of the visual nature of our society, I ask the students to find examples around the room of any given form we are studying. By doing this, students become completely involved in the moment and learn more deeply what the form means and how it is created. They are not only able to recognize it in a piece of music

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### Goal: Independence

By keeping students at the center of one's classroom, a teacher can encourage and inspire students to seek out knowledge and to strive for understanding at a deeper level.<sup>8</sup> Through this process, students see a greater relevance for and a stronger connection to the subject at hand. Through student-centered instruction, our students can achieve independent minds and the capacity to make educated decisions and value judgments about music their entire lives.

### Notes

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2. Jacqueline Grennon Brooks and Martin G. Brooks, *In Search of Understanding: The Case for Constructivist Classrooms* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000).

3. Barbara L. McCombs and Jo Sue Whisler, *The Learner-Centered Classroom and School: Strategies for Increasing Student Motivation and Achievement* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass Publishers, 1997).

4. Loretta Niebur, "Assessment as a Class Activity," *Music Educators Journal* 80, no. 5 (March 2004): 23–25, 47.

5. Laura Sindberg, "The Wisconsin CMP Project at Age 21," *Music Educators Journal* 85, no. 3 (November 1998): 37–42.

6. Patricia O'Toole, *Shaping Sound Musicians* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2003).

7. Howard Gardner, "Zero-Based Arts Education: An Introduction to Arts PROPEL," *Studies in Art Education: A Journal of Issues and Research* 30, no. 2 (1989): 71–83.

8. Alexa Stuart, "Student-Centered Learning," *Learning* 26, no. 2 (1997): 53–56. ■

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