

by Benjamin Bolden , Nathan Rickey, and Christopher DeLuca

Nurturing Musical Creativity through Assessment for Learning

Abstract: Assessment is one of the thorniest aspects of teaching for creativity. Nevertheless, research suggests there is tremendous potential for nurturing creativity through assessment. This article identifies how music educators can leverage assessment for learning (formative assessment) as a powerful tool for cultivating creativity within a variety of music activities. Four core strategies are described: (a) developing flexible success criteria, (b) providing and supporting engagement with feedback, (c) activating self-assessment, and (d) optimizing the classroom context for creativity-nurturing assessment.

Keywords: assessment, assessment for learning, creative thinking, creativity, feedback, formative assessment, self-assessment

Here are four strategies for using assessment to promote creativity in your class.



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Creativity has emerged as a key 21st-century learning objective for students across educational systems in the United States,¹ Canada,² Europe,³ Asia,⁴

and indeed around the world.⁵ Creativity has been identified as the number-one predictor of success within the global knowledge-based economy,⁶ recognized for its value

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in helping young people negotiate an uncertain future⁷ and linked to enhanced well-being.⁸ Perhaps now more than ever, it is critical for educational endeavors to actively nurture students' creativity.⁹

Creativity in Music Education

Music education has tremendous potential for supporting creativity, and creativity has a vital and long-standing role in music teaching and learning. The 2014 National Core Arts Standards recognize creativity as a key artistic process.¹⁰ Inviting student creativity within music classrooms is crucial not only because it develops creative capacity but also because it is a way to engage democratically with diverse learners, centering their voices and experiences.¹¹

Scholars have conceptualized musical creativity in varied ways. In 1990, music education and creativity scholar Peter Webster focused in on creative thinking as a “dynamic mental process that alternates between divergent (imaginative) and convergent (factual) thinking, moving in stages over time.” He further explained that the process “is enabled by internal musical skills and outside conditions and results in a final musical product which is new for the creator.”¹² In 2012, Cambridge University professor Pamela Burnard promoted a pluralist conception of musical “creativities” that emphasized how creative work can differ from one sociological context to another.¹³ Also acknowledging the importance of context, in 2013, Clint Randles of the University of South

Florida and Peter Webster held that the product must be “novel and of value within specific sociocultural contexts” and located musical creativity within (but not limited to) improvisation, composition, performance, analysis, and listening.¹⁴

Borrowing from these conceptions, we understand musical creativity to involve the production of something *new* or *original* (through divergent thinking) and *of value* or *appropriate* (through convergent thinking) within a given context.¹⁵ When the context is a classroom, we believe it is helpful to acknowledge what creativity researcher Anna Craft called “little-c” creativity¹⁶—the everyday creativity of seizing opportunities and overcoming obstacles—that *all* people (including young students) can demonstrate when the product is original and valuable *to them*. Craft used the term to intentionally honor the creativity of young people, distinct from the history-changing (big-C) creativity of great figures. As Webster pointed out, what matters in music education contexts is that the product is “new for the creator.” Creativity in music education has sometimes been equated with composing and/or improvising. While recognizing these as potent sites for creativity, there are many others. We believe students can develop and display creativity through a range of music learning activities, including listening,¹⁷ performing,¹⁸ composing, improvising, songwriting, DJing, DAW-based production,¹⁹ video game sound design, live coding, and more.²⁰

Numerous music education scholars have addressed musical creativity in this journal and elsewhere.²¹ However, many teachers still feel uncertain as to how to practically support students' creativity in their classrooms.²² In this article, we focus specifically on core strategies to guide creative work once it is underway.

Assessing Creativity

Assessment is one of the thorniest aspects of teaching for creativity. Teachers tend to shy away from assessing

creativity for a number of very good reasons. They may believe creativity is too subjective to assess, or they might fear that assessment will discourage a student's self-expression.²³ Sometimes teachers struggle to define or even recognize what creativity is.²⁴ Furthermore, research has clearly shown that evaluative or summative assessment can cause anxiety and inhibit motivation and capacity for creativity.²⁵ Nevertheless, we believe there is tremendous potential for nurturing creativity *through* assessment when educators take a formative approach. In this article, we draw from recent research conducted with practicing music educators to identify how formative assessment—also known as assessment for learning (AfL)—can serve as a powerful and effective tool for supporting creativity in classrooms.²⁶

AfL refers to an ongoing process of teachers interacting with students to gather information about their learning. Teachers use the information formatively, to guide teaching strategies, thereby embedding assessment as foundational to the learning process.²⁷ Teachers and students collect information through a variety of classroom interactions, such as diagnostic assessments, questioning, and reviewing performances and products. Teachers and students then use this evidence to inform feedback that drives students' learning forward. It is important to recognize that AfL makes students active agents in the assessment process through student-driven activities such as peer and self-assessment and co-constructing assessment criteria.²⁸ Assessment experts Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam²⁹ articulated a theory of AfL that outlined essential assessment strategies to support learning (see Table 1).

Nurturing Creativity with Assessment for Learning

Black and Wiliam theorized AfL as a support for learning across multiple domains but did not specifically discuss its potential for supporting creativity. However, working from the assumption that creativity can be learned,³⁰ we

TABLE 1**Assessment for Learning: Black and Wiliam’s Core Strategies**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engineering effective classroom discussions and other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing feedback that moves learners forward
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activating students as instructional resources for one another
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activating students as owners of their own learning

TABLE 2**Core and Substrategies for Nurturing Creativity through Assessment for Learning**

Core Strategies	Substrategies
Develop flexible success criteria.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-construct with students. • Incorporate enabling constraints. • Address value/appropriateness <i>and</i> novelty/originality. • Revisit and refine criteria.
Provide and support engagement with feedback.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refer to creative process framework. • Guide peer feedback. • Promote exploration. • Promote refining. • Refer to success criteria.
Activate self-assessment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask questions that honor students’ creative intentions. • Support holistic self-reflection of creative experiences.
Optimize the classroom context for creativity-nurturing assessment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultivate a safe space. • Build relationships. • Communicate enthusiasm. • Avoid or delay evaluative feedback.

through AfL. In Table 2, we lay out this framework, identifying four core strategies and related substrategies. We then describe the strategies and suggest how they might be applied.

Develop Flexible Success Criteria

The first of Black and Wiliam’s core evidence-based AfL strategies is to clarify learning intentions and criteria for success.³⁵ When engaging in creative work within a music education context, creativity researchers Pamela Burnard and Martin Fautley emphasize that students need a “clear and shared understanding” of the creativity they are striving for.³⁶ Ideally, teachers will work *with* students to co-construct success criteria—what success on a task will look like—so that students have greater ownership over and insight into what is deemed important within their creative efforts and achievements.

One purpose that the success criteria can serve is to set constraints for a task. Essential components and the scope of the creative product can be articulated. The concept of “enabling constraints” identifies that delineated restrictions can, ironically, stimulate creative work.³⁷ (A deadline is a prime example.) If the creative task is for students to collaboratively write a song for an upcoming coffeehouse performance, for instance, success criteria might stipulate that the song should be between two and four minutes long and have a melody and accompanying chords and some kind of instrumental solo. Such constraints may help students get past the paralysis that can result from too much possibility—the fear of a blank canvas. Success criteria like these address to some extent how students can satisfy the “appropriate” aspect of creativity by meeting structural requirements, but students also need more nuanced indicators that guide them toward products “of value.” For example, criteria might suggest the song should express a feeling, align with a certain genre, or have musical ideas that emphasize lyric content.

endorse the notion that the development of creativity can be assessed³¹ and that feedback can enhance students’ creative efforts.³² Given that AfL has been identified as one of the most effective approaches for supporting improvements in student learning,³³ we see

powerful potential in AfL for promoting and nurturing student creativity.³⁴

With AfL theory as a starting point and informed by our own research with music educators in Canadian elementary and secondary schools, we constructed a framework for musical creativity

FIGURE 1

Ontario Ministry of Education Model of the Creative Process



Source: Benjamin Bolden and Christopher DeLuca, "Nurturing Student Creativity through Assessment for Learning in Music Classrooms," *Research Studies in Music Education* 44, no. 1, (2022): 273–89.

Crucially, success criteria must also indicate how creators can achieve novelty/originality. These are probably the trickiest criteria to design and articulate, and they tend to be neglected.³⁸ The emphasis here is on making explicit the need for students to produce work that is in some way different than what they have done before. Recalling that little-c creativity is about products that are valuable and original from the perspective of those creating them, we suggest designing criteria with reference to the individual creators. For example, "the song should include chords and/or melodic ideas and/or structures and/or instrumentation choices that are new or unusual *from the viewpoint of the student songwriters.*"

To ensure that success criteria remain relevant and meaningful for the duration

of the project, they should be revisited and refined. When students work and consult with the teacher and their peers, they may come to recognize new criteria as important and previously identified criteria as no longer relevant. Ideally, the success criteria can be flexible enough to accommodate changing emphases and refinement as students get further into the work. When followed too strictly, established criteria can limit students' agency.³⁹ Sometimes criteria may need to be modified to match individuals' creative goals and trajectories. A common misconception of AfL is that success criteria cannot change. On the contrary, we argue that there is immense value in students and teachers continuing to reflect on the fit between criteria and process or product, readily making adjustments along

the way to meet overarching learning and creative intentions. Multiple peer, teacher, and self-assessment strategies involve referring to success criteria, and it is crucial that students and teachers understand the criteria as flexible across engagement with these strategies. Flexibility is key to students actualizing their *own* conceptions of novel and valuable musical products.

Provide and Support Engagement with Feedback

Another core AfL strategy is for teachers and peers to provide feedback that drives learning forward.⁴⁰ It is important to recognize that teachers have a role in not only providing the feedback but also helping students engage with it in a meaningful way.

Aligning feedback to stages within a theoretical model of the creative process can build students' understanding of the various phases and processes involved in creative work and can offer them a bird's-eye view of where they are at and where they need to go. Psychologist Graham Wallas's well-known model, published in 1926, describes five stages of the cognitive creative process: preparation, incubation, intimation, illumination, and verification.⁴¹ Other useful models include Peter Webster's "model of creative thinking in music"⁴² and Martin Fautley's model of "the composing process deconstructed."⁴³

In Ontario, Canada, where we teach, music teachers and students often refer to a model featured in provincial curriculum documents that describes a circular creativity process encompassing multiple stages: challenging and inspiring, imagining and generating, planning and focusing, exploring and experimenting, and so on (see Figure 1).⁴⁴ Referring to this model, a teacher might say, "*Great. You've made it through the planning and focusing stage. Now you're ready to experiment and produce some preliminary work—time to lay down some ideas!*"

The unidirectional arrows between stages in the Ontario model suggest a linear path that students may wish to follow. We acknowledge that creative

work rarely follows a set path, and students will likely choose their own adventure as they move through the process.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, feedback in reference to a model can help students conceptualize their work within the full trajectory of creative production. A model can offer touchstones along the creative journey to help students engage with feedback at various stages.⁴⁶ Furthermore, teachers can guide students in accessing the model as a shared framework and for language to generate peer feedback:⁴⁷ “As you’re providing peer feedback, check in with the process model. Is there a particular stage you could offer some feedback about?”

The crucial role of feedback from peers, teacher, and self is represented with the circle at the center of the model in Figure 1. Bidirectional arrows between the inner circle and outer circles representing the various stages in the creative process indicate that work in each stage can generate feedback and that feedback can inform each stage. Activating peers as a source of formative feedback can be powerful. Peers often give different feedback than teachers, providing students with diverse perspectives on their work.⁴⁸ In a creativity context, peer feedback can thereby offer alternative viewpoints on what makes products novel/original and valuable/appropriate. Peer assessment can also support students in learning to self-assess: When students give feedback to others, they will likely consider the work in relation to their own creative processes and desired outcomes.

Working with a model can also help identify where and how to focus creativity-nurturing feedback. Research suggests, for example, that students often do not spend a lot of time exploring and experimenting.⁴⁹ Teachers and peers can encourage divergent thinking and exploration with feedback that recognizes inventiveness and risk-taking. If the creative task was to write a blog post about a new release from a favorite artist, for instance, the feedback might

acknowledge a student’s use of unusual (divergent) metaphors or similes to describe musical gestures: “*I never would have thought to describe the drum-kit making me feel like I’d been caught in a hailstorm!*” Through exploration, creators can balance novelty/originality and value/appropriateness within a given context. Feedback can promote this kind of exploration: “*Okay. Your blog post is structured in sentences and paragraphs, which is what I’d expect. That’s appropriate. But what if it was structured as a poem or a stream-of-consciousness rant? Could that still work, or would that be pushing the novelty too far, lessening the value? Maybe people wouldn’t take it seriously because it was too bizarre? Or might they be intrigued and drawn in?*”

Research indicates that the refining stage of creative work is also often neglected in music learning contexts.⁵⁰ Teachers and peers can help by providing feedback that invites reflection and refinement. Questions are a useful structuring device for feedback. Ideally, the questions will invite students to identify their own vision and whether their creative choices support it. It is crucial that the feedback guides students toward revision that supports their agency and intentions.⁵¹ Returning to the creative task of writing a blog post about a new release, feedback could sound like this: “*When I read this, I get the impression that you like parts of the song, but mostly you find it pretty bland. Is that what you’re trying to communicate? Or are there things about the song that you really like and want to tell the reader about and make them excited to listen for?*”

To encourage further refinement, teachers and peers can return to the established success criteria to determine meaningful feedback. A success criterion might be “The blog post communicates how the music made the listener feel.” Relevant feedback could accordingly address whether a reader receives this information: “*This post tells me you liked the song, but I’m not getting a sense of how it made you FEEL.*”

Activate Self-Assessment

Self-assessment refers to a broad array of classroom activities that support students in assessing their own products, processes, or abilities.⁵² As seen in Table 1, the final core strategy of Black and Wiliam’s assessment model is to activate students as owners of their own learning.⁵³ Consequently, students learn *how* to learn and become independent learners. Teachers can accelerate learning—and foster creativity—by facilitating student self-assessment.

We suggested earlier that teachers and peers can use questioning to promote exploration and refinement. Questioning can also prompt self-assessment. Asking students about their creative thinking and works in progress—with questions that reference success criteria *or* questions derived from considering the work itself—can guide students toward products that they *themselves* see as novel and valuable. Questioning that provokes self-assessment is a powerful tool for helping students recognize, realize, and actualize their own creative intentions.

As an example of prompting students to self-assess creative choices, imagine students in a high school band class preparing a solo instrumental performance. Circulating among them, the teacher asks: “*I notice you’re using slightly detached articulation in this passage . . . why did you make that choice?*” Questioning about performance decisions can encourage students to voice their creative choices and consciously consider how best to support their own artistic visions. Alternatively, questioning could invite the student to choose what they wanted to discuss, perhaps by encouraging deliberate reflection on success criteria: “*What success criteria are you focusing on in your performance?*” Or simply asking, “*What are you working on? What are some things you’re hoping to achieve?*”

In an elementary classroom, imagine students working in small groups to prepare a rhythm-band performance. The teacher squats down and asks a group to

play through what they've got. *"Thanks! Now, I'm really interested in what YOU think. What's sounding good to you right now about the part you're playing? Is there anything you would change?"* Note that in this context—with younger musicians—the teacher's questions focus less on specific criteria or technical knowledge and instead provoke instinctive judgments. Younger students with limited experience of self-assessment may find simple, intuition-based assessments most accessible.⁵⁴

Another way self-assessment can foster creativity is by inviting students to reflect holistically on their creative work. Learners can be invited to zoom out and consider their experience of the creative work broadly rather than focusing on their creative products. Dedicating time for students to think about their emotions and motivations can support the affective dimension of creativity. Holistic self-reflection can help students realize, for example, what they value in their products and processes and identify affective barriers to originality (e.g., worrying about what others think).

Returning to the high school instrumental performance example, at the end of class, the teacher could invite students to reflect holistically by journaling about their creative experiences that day. Prompts might ask, *"What do you like about your performance so far?"* *"How did developing your performance feel today?"* *"What features of your performance are original?"* and *"What is your next step in developing this performance piece, and what resources/supports do you need to get there?"* In an elementary context, the teacher could conclude the class with a game of "four corners," with emojis showing different emotions taped to the wall in each corner of the room. Students pick a corner based on how their creative work that day made them feel. The students then share, either with each other or the whole group, why they picked their corner, where they hope to be tomorrow, and how they might get there.

Overall, self-assessment cultivates creativity by helping students recognize and then actualize their own creative

intentions. Assessing creative work and experiences against personalized criteria activates intrinsic motivation.⁵⁵ Self-assessment then empowers and propels students toward creative products and performances new and valuable *to them*.

Optimize the Classroom Context for Creativity-Nurturing Assessment

While we believe that assessment strategies have significant potential for nurturing creativity, we also acknowledge that creativity and assessment can have a challenging relationship. Feedback is almost always evaluative in some way and often feels like a personal critique, particularly in music classrooms. It makes sense for teachers to proceed cautiously and to proactively shape the learning environment so that assessment responses support and do not thwart creativity. Teachers need to cultivate a space where students feel comfortable sharing their creative work and receiving feedback about it.

A key aspect of making the space safe and open to risk-taking is *how* teachers and peers provide feedback. Creative work often expresses or represents highly personal thoughts, experiences, and feelings. Students sharing that work are vulnerable and need to trust that feedback will be supportive and constructive. As Clint Randles points out, "When using peer assessment, it is essential that the teacher first work diligently to foster a community where it is safe to share original ideas."⁵⁶ Teachers can help shape that ethos by clearly explaining that creativity-nurturing feedback should (a) provide information rather than evaluate and (b) recognize effort rather than ability.⁵⁷ Teachers can also intentionally model appropriate feedback and guide students as they practice giving feedback.⁵⁸

Another strategy to help make the space feel safe for creative work entails teachers deliberately taking an interest in students' lives within and beyond the class context. When teachers get to know and recognize students as unique individuals, they establish the basis for

trusting relationships that can help students feel comfortable and open to sharing of themselves through their creative work.⁵⁹ Another strategy related to creating an open and safe space is activating teacher enthusiasm, that is, overtly showing excitement and communicating to students that their creative work is valued: *"This is FANTASTIC! I never would have thought of this!"* In a study of middle and secondary students, creativity researcher Ronald A. Beghetto found that teachers telling students they were creative was stronger than any other variable in predicting a student's creative self-efficacy.⁶⁰ Teacher enthusiasm can go a long way toward helping students see the value in their creative outputs and move past a natural reticence in sharing them. Having the teacher as a champion of their work boosts students' confidence and desire both to be creative and to share what they have produced.

A final, very significant strategy for optimizing the classroom context for creativity is to deliberately *not* respond to creative work with grades or other forms of evaluative or summative assessment that positions the work on an achievement continuum. In the study we conducted, teachers specifically avoided feedback in the form of grades, having recognized that grades stifled creativity and did *not* help learners move forward.⁶¹ This approach aligns with the advice of many creativity experts who identify that impending evaluation impedes students' motivation and creativity.⁶² Music educator and champion of student composition Daniel Deutsch points out that assigning grades or descriptors like poor, good, and excellent to creative work can negatively impact students at all levels of achievement. When anticipating a summative response, students' motivation shifts from intrinsic to extrinsic.⁶³ Furthermore, summative responses promote a performance mindset rather than encouraging mastery.⁶⁴

We acknowledge, of course, that at some point, teachers may need to assign grades to creative work to fulfill reporting obligations. To mitigate the

potential negative impact of evaluative assessment, we encourage teachers to (a) where possible, carve out space to enable and support creative work that will *not* be graded;⁶⁵ (b) delay evaluative assessment until the end of the creative process;⁶⁶ (c) find ways to value students' creative intentions within evaluative frameworks;⁶⁷ (d) consider self-assessment evidence as part of grade decisions; and (e) emphasize formative assessment (AfL) instead of summative.⁶⁸

Strategies such as cultivating a safe space through careful teacher and peer feedback, building relationships with students, demonstrating teacher enthusiasm for creative work, and avoiding grades can help students feel confident enough to take risks and think divergently toward original creative outputs. These strategies can also help students to feel comfortable *sharing* their work. And when the work is shared, peers and teachers can offer feedback to guide creators toward products of even greater originality and value. Optimizing the classroom for creativity-nurturing assessment practices is foundational to the success of AfL implementation and ultimately to all forms of assessment in music classrooms.

Closing Words

Drawing on recent research with practicing music teachers, we have illustrated how AfL can be leveraged to cultivate student creativity in music classrooms. We identified and exemplified four core research-based strategies: (a) Develop flexible success criteria, (b) provide and support engagement with feedback, (c) activate self-assessment, and (d) optimize the classroom context for creativity-nurturing assessment. Note that these strategies do not operate in isolation. Instead, they work in concert to curate conditions in which students can progress toward performances and products *they themselves* consider both original and valuable within a given context. For teachers who may feel anxious about the potential for assessment to negatively impact student creativity, these strategies offer pedagogically integrated

assessment approaches that support and promote students' creative development. By helping students recognize and actualize their own creative intentions, AfL can activate intrinsic motivation and propel creative work forward. Reframing assessment in ways that make students the central agents of creative processes is at the heart of teaching for creativity.

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NOTES

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