

New Directions in Arts Education

Music in the Visual Arts Classroom

by Steve Peisch

You enter a high school visual arts class, and the first thing you notice is pop music playing in the background – the same music that the students pump into their environments to add interest and energy and fun – the same songs that give them comfort while they study. You also notice the students conversing over this musical background. They talk about a variety of topics, but few relate to the task of creating expressive or skillful works of art.

The teachers in these studios don't seem to listen carefully to this music once the students dial it up. It doesn't bother them that their students are playing overly familiar selections that are relatively uninteresting musically and monochromatic emotionally, nor does it seem to matter that these songs have become clichés or are filled with misogyny and foul language. The music makes the class more fun and relaxed for the students, who get the impression that these classes are “laid back” and that these teachers are “chill,” which, in turn, make the classes and the teachers more popular.

As a music teacher and an advocate for arts education, I believe that music is an art form that should be recognized as more than just background to other more important life functions. Although it is often used as background, music should not constantly be relegated to this use, particularly in schools. Just as students need to learn to understand literature or history by studying them carefully, they also need to listen to music with focus and intensity in order to understand it as a meaningful art form. I want them to devote their entire concentration to this task. I want them to notice what a particular piece of music does to their emotional state, and I want them to understand more about how these emotional states are created through the conscious and unconscious choices of the composer and the performers.

These goals can only be accomplished with careful listening. Many music students find this new way of listening a challenge because they are much more accustomed to listening to music as background and not at all accustomed to treating it as foreground. If they come into music class conditioned to expect that something else is going to happen “on top” of the music, as it does in their visual arts class, my

job becomes more difficult. My visual arts colleagues aren't helping me raise the level of expectation for my students' listening; instead, my colleagues are ingraining the old habits that I am trying to displace with new ones.

And what effect does playing background music have on developing the visual arts skills of our students? While it might make the class more pleasurable, does it actually improve their thinking or their art-making or their conversations with peers about their work?

The happy opposite to the visual arts class described above is one that is mostly quiet. All one hears are the sounds of the students making art and, occasionally, a one-to-one conversation between a teacher and a student about the student's work or an exchange between two students about their work or a teacher addressing the entire class when an issue relevant to all can be addressed.

Silence seems to make young people feel uncomfortable, increasingly so as cell phones and iPods become omnipresent. Young people almost seem to fear silence because it is the first step towards thoughtfulness and self-awareness: silence obliges them to listen to their own minds and to find interest in what they are thinking. Since our mission as teachers is to inspire creative thought, perhaps we need to ask them to concentrate only on what they are trying to say in their own expressive art, instead of encouraging them to chat with their friends against a soundtrack of pop music. Do we want our art studios to emulate malls and elevators that constantly play “comfort” music, or are we after something more profound? More sublime?

However, if silence is too intimidating at first, an effective alternative would be the intentional use of music that supports the goals of visual arts lessons. This practice would allow visual art teachers to expose students to technically superior, more varied musical choices that might inspire emotional and imaginative states that might influence their art. Visual art and music teachers might even consider collaborating in creating lessons that explore how musicians and artists use their different media to express similar emotions and ideas.

Although it is sad that most of our students will move into adulthood without absorbing or appreciating any of the music of the classical masters, not to mention the masters of many, many other musical cultures, I am not arguing for exposure to any specific music tradition. Instead, I am suggesting that visual arts teachers simply think more carefully about the choices that their students make. I ask them to consider two questions: What function should music serve in an art studio? Shouldn't it help students achieve meaningful artistic and intellectual goals?