

Literature Review: Project-Based Learning in the Music Classroom

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## Project-Based Learning in the Music Classroom

In society today, much has changed. Technology is available to many more people than in previous decades and is ever-changing. Students today have many more issues to deal with, both in and outside of school. This creates a problem with student engagement and motivation to learn. In prior decades, music teachers could use a standard music curriculum and keep students engaged without the use of technology. Today, music education runs the risk of becoming outdated as technology advances and educators do not adapt to these advances. This review will analyze literature to support the implementation of project-based learning within the music classroom. The review will also emphasize the benefits of project-based learning and how it can increase student engagement and motivation while building skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner.

### **Project-Based Learning Definition**

According to the Buck Institute for Education (n.d.), “project-based learning (PBL) is a teaching method in which students learn by actively engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects” (para.1). Project-based learning has many elements which include significant content, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, in-depth inquiry, driving question, need to know, voice and choice, critique and revision, and public audience (Smith, 2015, p. 26). In his book, *Blended: Using Disruptive Innovation to Improve Schools*, Horn (2015) states that “project-based learning focuses on helping students explore real-world problems and challenges in a dynamic, engaged, active way” (p. 55). It can take place either online or offline and is used to inspire students to delve deeper into their subject of interest.

### **Project-Based Learning Benefits**

There are many benefits to incorporating project-based learning within the classroom. Students can build confidence and become more engaged when given choice through the COVA

learning approach. Project-based learning also helps to develop 21<sup>st</sup> century skills such as creativity, communication and collaboration with peers, and critical thinking. While it is not limited to just the classroom, it can help make connections to the community for students.

## **COVA**

COVA was developed as an active learning model that “gives the learner choice (C), ownership (O), and voice (V) through authentic (A) learning opportunities” (Harapnuik, Thibodeaux, & Cummings, 2018, p. 68). This approach is centered around the student, allowing for active learning to take place. Creating a significant learning environment “takes into account all the key elements essential to effective active learning” (Harapnuik, n.d.). Each of the elements are crucial to this learning approach and are defined below.

**Choice.** Through an authentic learning experience, students have the freedom to choose how they wish to present their work in order to show proof of learning. The student and teacher work together to ensure effective choices are made.

**Ownership.** Along with teacher guidance, students take ownership and control of their learning process. This includes selecting projects and learning tools that will engage and motivate the student.

**Voice.** Students use their voice in order to share their work and ideas with others. The ability to share with others outside from the teacher gives students a chance to find their own voice and purpose.

**Authentic Learning.** Students have the “opportunity to select and engage in authentic learning opportunities that enable them to make a genuine difference in their own learning environments” (Harapnuik, et al., 2018, p. 17).

## **21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills**

Project-based learning focuses on many 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and learning outcomes. These skills include, but are not limited to, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication. Common elements that are incorporated include the testing of knowledge and understanding, examining a thought provoking problem, involving students in sustained inquiry, a touch of reality, giving students choice, reflecting on learning, handling feedback and presenting to the public (“A Closer Look,” 2018). These elements aid in skill development. Meaningful problems give students a chance to use these skills to actively ask questions, research, collaborate and reflect. They can provide and receive feedback, as well as present their findings to those outside of the classroom.

### **Student Engagement and Motivation**

Wagner (2016) found that project-based learning “allows students to connect deeper with the material and music we are teaching” (p.15). He also states that it is a great motivational tool that can “build meaningful connections that students will carry for the rest of their lives” (Wagner, 2016, p.15). Hayden (2015) states this “learning environment has students learning by doing and by allowing all to explore individual interests and passions, learners are more motivated and excited about school” (para.2). This creates a direction connection to the lives of the students and the real world outside of school. Implementing projects with the use of technology tools enhances student and teacher project motivation (Blumenfeld, et al., 1991, p.384).

### **Implementation in the Music Classroom**

Project-based learning in the music classroom can increase student engagement and aid in community connections. When making pedagogical decision, Tobias, Campbell, and Greco (2015) state the following:

we might consider the degree to which the approaches we use (1) support the flexibility required for independent musical thought and engagement; (2) promote students' inquiry, curiosity, and investment in their own education; (3) help students develop musical understanding and skills; and (4) afford evidence of students' growth and learning.

Reconceptualizing our classes and ensembles with this balance in mind can inform when and how we integrate project-based learning. Additionally, a culturally relevant pedagogy that "helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives" may help music educators facilitate projects in a comprehensive manner that accounts for students' diversity (p. 46).

Tobias et al. (2015) created vignettes to illustrate the attributes of well-designed and well-taught projects: (1) student centeredness, (2) teacher facilitation, (3) collaborative interaction and inquiry, and (4) disciplinary expertise (p. 40). These attributes help align projects with content standards while also allowing students to connect to real world interests outside of their classroom and within their communities.

### **Conclusion**

Project-based learning has many benefits including developing 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and increased student motivation and engagement through choice and ownership. Students become more responsible for their individual relevant learning while connecting it to their interests and talents. Project-based learning helps develop skills in order to select and use various appropriate technology. Student-centered projects will also help learner outcomes and give students a fresh outlook on school (Hayden, 2015).

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