Music Education for Life: The Three Artistic Processes—Paths to Lifelong 21st-Century Skills through Music
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The Three Artistic Processes: Paths to Lifelong 21st-Century Skills through Music

by Scott C. Shuler, MENC President

Have you been looking for a model that helps you organize and teach all the national standards in your classroom? Perhaps you seek a valid way to illustrate that musical excellence stems from thoughtful effort, rather than—as many erroneously believe—purely from talent? Or maybe you need a way to explain how studying music prepares students for lifelong success, regardless of their career choice?

The “Three Artistic Processes” provide a powerful model for organizing standards-based music teaching and assessment as well as a vision of the musically educated student. They also clarify how student-centered music education helps children master 21st-century skills necessary for future success. This column outlines why and how you can use the processes to guide your instruction and advocate more effectively for your program.

A Practical Model

In the early 1990s, when arts educators were simultaneously developing the National Standards for Art Education (published in 1994) 1 and the 1997 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in the Arts, I served as music liaison between the two projects, working with the music committees of both initiatives to make sure that the music standards were assessable and that the national assessment measured student achievement of those standards.

One of the challenges with which the committees struggled was to find a framework to organize NAEP that worked for all four art forms, each of which had unique pedagogic traditions as well as its own idiosyncratic priorities and terminology. I initially developed and proposed the Three Artistic Processes model to provide a common framework for all four art forms to use when designing the 1997 NAEP. The version in Table 1 is the more refined model I developed later.

The NAEP design team adopted the Three Artistic Process model because it is

- **Comprehensive**—the steps of the processes encompass all of the standards, including the key skills that students need to learn;
- **Practical**—the processes provide a functional way for teachers to organize instruction to teach and assess all of the standards; and
- **Authentic**—the processes are those that real artists use when Creating, Performing, and Responding to music and the other arts.

Since the NAEP framework was first published in 1994, a number of states and districts have used the model effectively to organize arts standards, instruction, and assessment. 2

Comprehensive

The Three Artistic Processes provide a means for teachers to deliver a balanced, comprehensive music curriculum. The processes also provide the “big ideas” or “enduring understandings” required by contemporary curriculum development systems, such as Understanding by Design. 3

To carry out the steps of the processes, students must learn and apply skills and understandings outlined in all the National Standards. For example, successfully selecting literature for performance—step 1 of the Performing process—requires understanding technical demands (Content Standards 1 and 2), reading notation (Standard 5), analyzing form (Standard 6 and, to some extent, Standard 4 as well), and evaluating quality (Standard 7) as well as an understanding of style and cultural/historical context.
(Standard 9). Hence, when Performing is taught as a thoughtful, student-centered process, students have opportunities to learn and apply most of the standards. The Creating and Responding processes similarly integrate multiple standards.

**Practical**

Teachers who use the processes to organize music instruction and assessment find that they help them address all of the standards in a natural way. Music educators sometimes feel overwhelmed just keeping track of multiple standards, much less teaching them. The processes help solve this problem by lending form and sequence to standards. Think of the processes as the strings on which the pearls of the standards can be strung.

The processes clarify how teachers can help students transfer learning developed through making (Performing or Creating) music to musical listening (Responding), and vice versa. The colored horizontal bars in Table 1 highlight important parallels between the steps of the three processes. For example, the steps of analyzing and interpreting (decoding meaning) in the Performing and Responding processes are the counterparts of planning (encoding meaning) in the Creating process. This alignment affords opportunities to encourage students to transfer what they have learned from engaging in one process to their understanding of one or both of the other processes.

Effective lesson plans encourage young musicians to move between the processes, immediately applying their work in one process to reinforce their skill in another. Teachers might, for example, have their students listen to how two composers create variety using ABA form (analyzing), then ask the students to apply that understanding by creating their own ABA pieces (planning). Conversely, students who have created and discussed their own ABA compositions (planning) will perform and respond to music with

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Artistic Processes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Creating</strong></td>
<td><strong>Performing</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagining</td>
<td>Selecting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>developing idea(s) (concepts, ideas, feelings)</td>
<td>choosing an artistic work (repertoire) to perform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Analyzing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experimenting, researching, and designing ways of presenting the idea(s) through artistic materials</td>
<td>analyzing structure and researching background of work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making, Evaluating, Refining</td>
<td>Interpreting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>applying knowledge and skills/technique to bring idea(s) to life through artistic work evaluating quality and refining successive versions (“drafts”) of the work</td>
<td>developing a personal interpretation of work (an idea of its expressive intent or potential)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting</td>
<td>Rehearsing, Evaluating, Refining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting in performance or exhibiting completed work for others</td>
<td>applying knowledge and skills/technique to bring personal interpretation to life through performance evaluating quality and refining successive versions of the performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Presenting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
greater interest and understanding (analyzing and interpreting), because they will have a deeper appreciation of how skilled composers create variety without sacrificing unity.

The Three Artistic Process are also effective means to guide assessment—they were, after all, chosen as the model for the 1997 and 2008 NAEP assessments. The steps of the processes provide the key verbs (selecting, analyzing, etc.) that describe skills students need to master. Teachers who want their students to become independent musicians assess how well students carry out each step of the processes and use that information to design more effective instruction. Individual report cards as well as school and district achievement reports can adopt the approach used in NAEP by organizing and presenting student learning data by the categories of Creating, Performing, and Responding.

Authentic

The Three Artistic Processes should look very familiar to you, because they describe what we do as musicians. For example, when we prepare a performance, we first select repertoire, examine and analyze the music to develop our understanding, come up with an interpretation, rehearse until the quality of performance meets our personal standards, and, finally, present the work to others. Similarly, when we are in the responding (audience) role, musicians begin by choosing repertoire for listening (concert, CD, radio station, iPod), then apply expert listening skills.

The ultimate goal of music education is to empower our students to continue active musical involvement as adults. Since the ability to carry out the steps in the Three Artistic Processes is what makes a person a musician, the “mission” of every music teacher should be to help all students learn to carry out each of those processes independently.

Conversely, a major reason that so many students set aside their instruments or vocal skills after graduation is because their music instruction has been primarily teacher-centered—in other words, teachers have done most of the steps in the processes for the students (selecting and analyzing repertoire, evaluating performance, etc.). When students in a teacher-centered program graduate, they are musically dependent at best, and often helpless. If they do want to continue their musical involvement, they are dependent on a community ensemble director to make musical decisions for them.

To give their students the gift of “music education for life,” music teachers must apply the processes daily in their classrooms. They must ensure that their students gradually assume responsibility to

- make musical decisions, such as when interpreting existing music or creating their own;
- self-assess in relation to appropriate quality standards; and
- diagnose areas of weakness and identify strategies to improve their own work.

Ultimately, students should also learn to select music appropriate to their abilities, for performance or listening.

Only to the extent that we teach our students to carry out the steps of the processes can we graduate independent musicians who have the skills to remain actively engaged in music throughout their lives. This is truly “music education for life.”

Higher-Order Thinking through Music

Education leaders have long criticized classrooms that emphasize rote memorization of facts and imitation of skills; experts recommend that emphasis should be placed instead on higher-order thinking. Most educators define a “higher-order curriculum” as one that encourages students to work at the upper levels of Bloom’s taxonomy.

Research since Bloom published his original cognitive taxonomy led to a significant revision that offers music teachers an opportunity to claim the educational high ground (see Figure 1 comparing taxonomies). The placement of Create at the top of the new taxonomy suggests that students engaged in creating music (improvising, composing) are functioning at the highest possible levels of musical thought. This change makes sense: creating music requires assembling all of the bits of musical skill and concepts that we have learned over time to express something new, and is yet another reason why music educators need to increase the quantity and quality of creative work in local music curricula.

Three Artistic Processes “Thread” the Standards: Comments from a Teacher

Last year, as I was in the process of teaching my [BEST teacher assessment] portfolio lessons, my principal was scheduled to come in to observe me. The day before my observation, he voice-mailed me with a “By the way . . . make sure your lesson aligns with the national/state music content standards.”

Having been concentrating so hard on the portfolio, I had written my lessons with only the three artistic processes in mind, so I cross-referenced my lesson with the standards. I was happy to see that I’d covered nearly every one—in just a thirty-minute lesson.

The conclusion I came to was that concentrating on a variety of activities within creating, performing, and responding is a GREAT way to cover the standards! I had found it challenging and overwhelming to concentrate on so many standards in the past, but found that “CPR” is a great and effective shortcut to make sure everything’s covered.

Lindsey MacNab
Band and chorus director, Salem, Connecticut

[Insert Figure 1 comparing taxonomies here]
FIGURE 1

Bloom’s Taxonomy Comparison: Old Versus New

Bloom’s Taxonomy Comparison: Old vs. New *

Old Taxonomy
- Evaluation
- Synthesis
- Analysis
- Application
- Comprehension
- Knowledge

New Taxonomy
- Create
- Evaluate
- Analyze
- Apply
- Understand
- Remember


If you compare the revised Bloom taxonomy to the Three Artistic Processes model, you will also notice that the steps of the processes are full of higher-order thinking verbs (analyzing, evaluating, creating, etc.). Hence, when music teachers empower their students to carry out the processes, they are developing students’ higher-order thinking. In fact, children in student-centered music classrooms engage in some of most deeply thoughtful work in any school. Music educators can point to this as one reason schools should support high-quality music programs and to debunk the misconception that musical excellence results primarily from nimble fingers or exceptional vocal chords.

21st-Century Skills through Music

One major goal of contemporary “education reform” is to help students master 21st-century skills, broadly described as those necessary for future success in a rapidly changing world. Many policy makers believe that these skills will help students get into college and compete successfully in the workforce. Another positive result of teaching the Three Artistic Processes is that doing so helps students master 21st-century skills.

The set of 21st-century skills that has achieved widest acceptance is the one published by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills. MENC: The National Association for Music Education and other professional arts education organizations recently collaborated with the partnership to create an “arts skills map” that illustrates how standards-based instruction in music and the other arts can teach 21st-century skills to students at various grade levels. Download and share this skills map (available at www.p21.org) with your community to demonstrate how music prepares students for success in college and careers.

Here is how teaching the Three Artistic Processes model helps students master the headline 21st-century skills in the partnership map, the so-called four Cs:

- Creativity,
- Critical Thinking,
- Communication, and
- Collaboration.

Our national music standards highlight the importance of creativity by suggesting that students engage in improvisation, composition, and interpretation of music. As a result of national and state standards, more music teachers are including creative activities in their classrooms. An increasing number of state and national music conferences feature students’ compositions, and all-state jazz choirs in several states encourage teachers to offer vocal students improvisational opportunities parallel to those traditionally limited to jazz bands. Students who learn to independently create and perform music are able to think and act creatively.

Critical thinking for many policy makers has become the new way of talking about higher-order thinking. Music teachers help their students become critical thinkers when they empower their students to carry out the higher-order thinking verbs that comprise the steps of the Three Artistic Processes.

Communication is arguably the primary purpose of music and the other arts. In a world where communication increasingly takes place through multimedia, the need for arts study should be obvious, because the arts are the media! Music students develop 21st-century communication skills when they learn to interpret music during the Performing process, express their own ideas and feelings through the Creating process, and understand others’ musical ideas during the Responding process.

Collaboration would seem, on the surface, to be an almost automatic result of music study. After all, students in large instrumental and choral groups work alongside one another to create an integrated, harmonious product. And in ensembles, unlike most sports teams, no one sits on the bench—every student contributes to the final performance.
Music teachers who want their students to learn this skill must, however, bear in mind the difference between collaboration and compliance. There are certainly times in classrooms when students should simply do what they are told, in their music making as well as conduct. Collaboration, on the other hand, occurs only when students help make decisions. Successful collaboration requires attributes such as empathy, willing acceptance of a contributing role, and respectful participation in group decision making, including an understanding of when to offer ideas versus when to listen to those of others.

To foster collaboration, teachers need to place students in musical settings that cultivate individual responsibility and shared leadership, such as student-directed sectionals, chamber ensembles, and collaborative composition groups. In such settings, teachers should act as facilitators and coaches, rather than constantly directing decision making.

When music teachers empower young musicians to carry out the Three Artistic Processes, they also help them master 21st-century skills.

Music Learning for Life

Teach your students to carry out the Three Artistic Processes independently, and you will set them on paths to lifelong musical involvement. By doing so, you will also

- teach all the standards,
- develop your students’ capacity for higher-order thinking, and
- demonstrate how music education cultivates 21st-century skills.

Most important, if you empower your students to create, perform, and respond to music, they will lead richer, happier lives.

Notes

1. National Standards for Arts Education: What Every Young American Should Know and Be Able to Do in the Arts (Reston, VA: MENC, 1994).

2. Arts Education Assessment Framework, Arts Education Assessment and Exercise Specifications, Recommendations for Background Questions, and Recommendations for Reporting Student Achievement

Results for the 1997 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in Arts Education (Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers, 1994).