



Example 15: Music, Level 4 - Exploring the elements of music through composition

FROM THE ONLINE RESOURCE *INCLUSIVE PRACTICE AND THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM*

This example shows how a teacher differentiated a task to ensure that students working at a wide range of curriculum levels could create and perform a composition based upon a natural phenomenon. Most students were working within level 4 of the curriculum, but some were at level 5 and others at level 1. Some but not all students could play an instrument.

Task

The task was for students to work in groups to create and perform a piece of programmatic music (that is, music that conjures up visual images to tell a story). The composition was to represent a natural event (for example, a storm, sunrise, tsunami, or volcanic eruption) by focusing in particular on the musical elements of timbre, texture, tempo, and dynamics. The unit took place over three weeks, with three lessons per week.



New Zealand Curriculum achievement objectives

Developing ideas

- Explore and express sounds and musical ideas, drawing on personal experience, listening, and imagination (level 1)
- Express, develop, and refine musical ideas, using the elements of music, instruments, and technologies in response to sources of motivation (level 4)
- Use musical elements, instruments, technologies, and conventions to express, develop, and refine structured compositions and improvisations (level 5).

Communicating and interpreting

- Share music making with others (level 1)
- Respond to live and recorded music (level 1)
- Prepare, rehearse, and present performances of music, using [a range of] performance skills and techniques (levels 4 & 5)
- Reflect on the expressive qualities of their own and others' music, both live and recorded (levels 4 & 5).

Opportunities to use and develop key competencies

Students were *relating to others* and *participating and contributing* as they worked within groups to develop and perform their compositions. They were using *language, symbols, and texts* as they explored the language of music.

Class description

Ms Bennett teaches a year 9 class of 26 students who have chosen to take music as an option for half the year. Most of the students are working within level 4 of the curriculum. Some are just beginning to learn 'traditional' musical notation, while others have been taking lessons for several years and belong to music groups. Some of these students are working within level 5.

The class includes several students with additional learning needs. The school's Learning Support Centre ensures these students are supported to participate in learning alongside their peers.

- **Leon** is on the autism spectrum and has echolalia – he doesn't speak much, apart from repeating lines from movie or television shows, often to reflect his mood or what's happening around him. He is keen to be included with his peers and this is a focus of his individual education plan (IEP) and teacher aide support. His IEP stresses the importance of teaching strategies such as breaking tasks down into chunks and allowing opportunities for sensory breaks. He is working within level 1 of the music curriculum.
- **Xavier** has dyslexia and challenges with visual perception (the ability to make sense of visual information). He can appear to be engaged and understand instructions when, in reality, he needs a little more time and support to do so. Xavier is a mature, friendly student who enjoys music. He is working within level 4 of the music curriculum.
- **Violet** has dyslexia and dyscalculia (severe difficulties in making arithmetical calculations), both of which impact upon her ability to read music. She is a keen and able singer who enjoys singing and performing. Violet is socially engaged and displays great generosity in her interactions with other students. She is working within level 4 of the music curriculum.

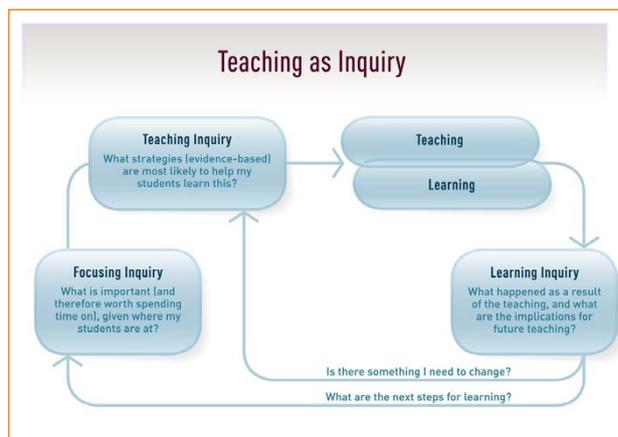
Teaching as inquiry

Ms Bennett teaches this class for three one-hour periods a week. When working with junior students, her aim is to provide all students with opportunities to play music and create their own original compositions. At the end of each two-term block, students always perform their compositions for their families, who are invited to a class concert.

This unit took place in the first weeks of Term 2. During Term 1, the class had worked through a logical progression of activities that ensured all students had the basic skills required to participate in this task. They worked first with rhythm and then with melody, finishing the term by working in groups on original compositions.

Ms Bennett had also conducted a 'round robin' activity so that students with expertise in singing or the piano, guitar, bass guitar, or drums could teach their peers. The groups spent three days learning the basics of each instrument and then performed a simple piece to their peers. This gave the 'experts' the opportunity to lead the learning and ensured all students had the skills they needed to participate in further activities. Throughout the term, Ms Bennett introduced basic musical terms using practical activities that provided multiple opportunities for the students to hear and use the terms.

In the unit, all students worked towards the same outcomes, but Ms Bennett adapted and differentiated tasks to ensure they all could participate. For example, she adapted the task for Leon by breaking it down into its parts, which she itemised on the interactive whiteboard he carries. Adaptations for Xavier included checking understanding and, for Violet, an opportunity for her to showcase her singing ability by performing a solo for the class.



Focusing inquiry

What was important (and therefore worth spending time on), given where Ms Bennett's students were at?

Ms Bennett used a variety of sources to understand where her students were in their learning and development. Her primary approach was to closely observe the students to find out about their musical abilities, their confidence in performing, and their interactions with her and each other. All performances were followed by a session when she and the students engaged in constructive feedback. The round robin experience was particularly helpful for the students themselves when they discovered that they had an aptitude for particular instruments.

There is not much 'bookwork' in the year 9 class but early in the year Ms Bennett followed some basic work on rhythm and notation with a brief assessment. This gave her an insight into each student's developing ability to read and notate music.

At the start of the year, the Learning Support Department supplied Ms Bennett with written information about Leon, Xavier, and Violet. They also hosted a meeting with Leon's parents, which Leon and all his teachers attended. Ms Bennett adds that she also learns a lot from observing the teacher aide's interactions with Leon.

Ms Bennett observed that Leon is drawn to percussion. In the first week of the year, he always hunted out the cowbell and would bring it in to play. It became apparent that he can work with basic rhythm and that he appreciates a range of sounds and is willing to try different instruments. This has led to three specific goals for Leon in his music lessons:

- To copy a simple rhythm that is played to him, with a view to extending the sequence of beats
- To perform with his group
- To extend his time on task.

Ms Bennett always uses a three-pronged approach to explain a task: writing about it, talking about it, and demonstrating it. Her observations in Term 1 led her to realise that while Xavier would say he understood, his body language suggests otherwise. Because of this, he is the group she always checks first in the practice rooms.

Ms Bennett realised that performing is important to Violet and that she relishes the positive feedback she gets. She works well with other students, but needs support to access written information.

Teaching inquiry

What teaching strategies (evidence-based) helped Ms Bennett's students learn?

Laying the foundation

- The unit began with a pre-task to introduce the students to the concept of programmatic music and start them thinking about how a composer uses the elements of music to create a particular mood. Ms Bennett played the piano to demonstrate styles of music associated with different television and film genres – for example, a set of lush chords to suggest a romance; loud, 'busy' music for action; and a simple, repetitive song for a children's television theme. The students had to listen to the music and guess which genre was being represented. They discussed the elements they could hear being employed, recalling some of what they had learned in Term 1. As the students named the different elements, Ms Bennett noted them on the board as a reminder.
- Ms Bennett invited the students to join in the demonstration. When the teacher aide, Johnno, played the two key notes from the theme for the *Jaws* movie, Leon jumped up to join in.
- Ms Bennett then set a 'quick-fire task', for the students to create their own theme music. Their piece needed to be about 30 to 60 seconds long and represent a particular movie or television genre. Afterwards, they would have to demonstrate their piece to the rest of the class. She scaffolded the task by explaining it in writing, verbally, and through the practical demonstration.

Learning inquiry

What happened as a result of the teaching, and what were the implications for future teaching?

James: *That's gotta be a horror movie.*

Ms Bennett: *OK, so what's happening with the elements of music to make this sound like a horror movie?*

Violet: *It's the harmony – those are weird, dissonant chords.*

Murray: *And the rhythms, all jerky and irregular.*

Johnno (teacher aide): *As I began to play, I could see that Leon was listening attentively. To my surprise, he got up and played with me. He was improvising, but it made sense with what I was playing. It was a big moment for Leon. The other students were very accepting and clapped for him. He doesn't speak very much, but he beamed.*

Ms Bennett: *Leon loves the movies. I think that helped capture his interest.*

Ms Bennett: *Think about the instruments, which can include voice, and how you'll use the elements of music to create the effect you're after.*

Ms Bennett: *I knew that Leon needs a clear plan to follow, so I sat down with him and talked about what he would do during the lesson. Johnno wrote this down on his whiteboard.*

The teacher set an open-ended task that would build initial knowledge and that was achievable for students at all levels of musical ability.

Teaching inquiry

What teaching strategies (evidence-based) helped Ms Bennett's students learn?

- The students formed into small groups and went to the practice rooms. Ms Bennett waited for a few minutes to let them get started. She knew that while Xavier had paid attention, he might not have understood the instructions, so she went to his group first. She found that they had chosen a genre and had a few notes, but it was pretty clear they were procrastinating, with one boy playing on his phone. She re-directed them: *Oliver, what do you think the task is about? Can you show me what your group has so far? Okay, you have three notes and about 10 seconds of music. How are you going to get that up to 30-60 seconds?*
- The class began their second lesson with a reminder of their task and time to practise their pieces. Leon had participated with his group, while needing several breaks. Earlier, Johnno had noticed that Leon could sing well and had asked Leon's mother about the songs he knows. The group decided to do a young children's show for their genre, for which Leon sang "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star".
- With half an hour to go, the students reassembled to listen to each piece and provide informal feedback. Ms Bennett prompted the students to guess the genre and provide constructive feedback on the compositions. They discussed what was happening in each piece and how it was producing its effect.

Learning inquiry

What happened as a result of the teaching, and what were the implications for future teaching?

Ms Bennett: *I find that letting the students negotiate their own groups usually works well. It's not often that anyone is left out. And as much as possible, I let the groups develop their own solutions. I try not to give too much scaffolding, because then it can end up being my work.*

Oliver: *What if Xavier joins me and plays those three notes at a different part of the piano?*

Xavier: *And I could try playing them at half speed.*

Ms Bennett: *I've learned to make the expectations public. Everyone needs to know Leon's boundaries. I told Kyla's group, "I'm so pleased that you've volunteered to work with Leon. He may only last five minutes, so don't worry if he wants to leave partway through. But do remember to invite him back after a while."*

Ms Bennett: *What did you think of that, Xavier?*

Xavier: *It sounded like a thriller - it had lots of suspense.*

Ms Bennett: *How do you think they got that effect?*

Xavier: *It went from really soft to really loud, and it was fast.*

Ms Bennett: *What do we call that in music?*

Violet: *Dynamics - it went from piano to forte. And (looking at the board) the word for speed is tempo. It had a quick tempo.*

Read more about [drawing on whānau knowledge](#) to support students' learning.



With your colleagues,

discuss:
How can you facilitate group interactions that enable learning for all participants?



Teaching inquiry

What teaching strategies (evidence-based) helped Ms Bennett's students learn?

Building shared understandings

- The third lesson was a whole class lesson that required active listening. Ms Bennett began by asking the students to discuss with each other what's required when we listen to a piece of music.
- She then played the opening bars of Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, asking the students to focus on three questions: *What is the first instrument you hear? What is the last instrument? What words would you use to describe the music?* The students' answers included 'majestic', 'bright', 'light', 'brassy', and 'luscious'.
- The second time Ms Bennett played the music, she told the students the name of the composer and work and explained that the music represents a sunrise. She asked the class to close their eyes to see what they imagined when hearing the music.
- For the third listening, Ms Bennett asked the students to describe what was happening in the music. She drew out their responses and, where necessary, she or another student gave them the musical terms for what they were describing. She supported these explanations with demonstrations on the piano, and one of the students talked about his experiences as a trumpet player.
- The strongest response was from Leon, who was entranced.

Learning inquiry

What happened as a result of the teaching, and what were the implications for future teaching?

Ms Bennett: *OK, so the question was 'What does it mean to be an active listener?' What did you decide in your group discussions?*

Violet: *To not talk while the music is playing.*

Max: *To concentrate on what the music is saying to us.*

Xavier: *I knew right away that the music was from 2001 Space Odyssey. When I closed my eyes, I could see the darkness of night. Then a finger of light starts to creep up over the hills and spread across the sky. It lightens and there's pink and purple. Then suddenly it explodes in a bright orange ball.*

Violet: *The start opens up. It makes you expect something is going to happen.*

Ms Bennett: *So which element of music is the composer using there?*

Beth: *It's pitch, those two notes.*

Ms Bennett: *Yes, it's that perfect fifth, the brightest interval in music. [She plays it on the piano] The music for Star Wars also starts with a perfect fifth.*

Tane (trumpet player): *And The Last Post!*

Johnno: *Leon got out of his seat and walked right up to the speaker, opening up his arms in this huge gesture. The music triggered something in him that I've never seen before. I'll have to tell his Mum about it!*

The teacher supported students to listen actively, systematically helping them to build a shared understanding of how a composer had used the elements of music to portray a sunrise.

With your colleagues,

discuss:

How do you support your students to develop the important skill of active listening? In the first three lessons, Ms Bennett and her students chose musical examples that were appropriate for their particular context. What examples would you and your students choose?



Teaching inquiry

What teaching strategies (evidence-based) helped Ms Bennett's students learn?

Using adaptation and differentiation to enable full participation

- Ms Bennett explained that the major task for this unit was for the students to create their own piece of programmatic music to portray a natural event like a sunrise or storm. She pointed out that they had already succeeded in creating mood music in their pre-task. Now, they were to create a longer piece of music with a beginning, middle, and end.
- Using her three-pronged approach, Ms Bennett wrote the brief and success criteria on the board, talked the task through, and demonstrated with examples.
- The students organised themselves into their groups and then departed for the practice rooms. When Ms Bennett checked in with Xavier's group, she found they'd decided to do a storm. They had the piano and had chosen a bongo and guitar. They were working well together, but Xavier was finding it difficult to bring the multiple aspects of the task together. She helped the group to chunk the task.
- Violet continued to work with Beth and Murray, two very capable students who play the piano and drums respectively. Their group developed quite a complex piece, which Beth and Murray captured in a score. Violet couldn't read the score, but recorded the piece on her phone so that she could practise it at home. Then the group realised that Violet could use coloured pens to create a simpler version of the score. She highlighted her part and used colours to indicate changes, such as from loud to soft.
- On the first day, Leon managed longer with his group than ever before. On the second day, his group leader said, *I have a drum kit for you, Leon. Come with me.* To the teacher and teacher aide's surprise, Leon went with her straight away, a breakthrough moment for him.

Learning inquiry

What happened as a result of the teaching, and what were the implications for future teaching?

Ms Bennett: *Think about how you can create a structure. Something needs to change. It might be to do with the tempo, the dynamics, the timbre, or the pitch. Feel free to use 'found sounds' like a door or footsteps. And your instruments don't have to be used conventionally - what happens if you tap the guitar?*

Ms Bennett: *Let's look at the opening 10 seconds, when it's calm. Xavier, can you show me what you're doing? Now stop and focus on what Tom is doing. What do you two sound like together?*

Tom: *Now let's add Oliver in with the bongo.*

Xavier: *This'll be our middle section, when the storm arrives.*

Violet: *It was great when we worked out that I could have my own score. It made me feel more independent.*

Ms Bennett: *This made me wonder whether the reason Violet hasn't joined the choir is that she can't read music. I'm going to follow up on that hunch. We've found ways to get around that issue before.*

Kyla: *It just felt natural to include Leon. He's been with us before and he's part of our group.*

Johnno: *It was so good to see Leon being included in the group so naturally and that he just went with them. It was a big step for him!*

The teacher and students responded in the moment to ensure everyone in each group was able to participate and learn.

Read more about [making learning accessible for all students](#) using differentiation and adaptation.

With your colleagues,

discuss:
How can students at differing levels of ability be supported to participate in the same activity and work towards similar outcomes?

Teaching inquiry

What teaching strategies (evidence-based) helped Ms Bennett's students learn?

Assessing to recognise learning

- There was no formal written assessment for this task, but the groups were encouraged to self-assess and the audience were encouraged to peer assess by commenting in relationship to the success criteria. Ms Bennett also provided feedback based on her observations throughout the unit.
- Ms Bennett emphasised that this was a composition task, not a performance task. The focus was on learning to use sounds to create a particular effect. *Does the piece have structure – a beginning, middle, and end? How have the elements of music been used?*
- Ms Bennett explained that the focus was also on participation. *I'm looking for group co-operation. Your performance will show how well you worked together. Was everyone participating and involved? What part did each person play? Who took the lead? Who came up with ideas? Who kept everyone on task?*
- The class also agreed on criteria for giving feedback, which Ms Bennett explained must be positive. *You can question where things have gone right or wrong, but it must be constructive.*
- Ms Bennett was pleased with the quality of the compositions, all of which met the success criteria and some of which showed considerable accomplishment. She was equally pleased with the way in which the groups had worked together.

Learning inquiry

What happened as a result of the teaching, and what were the implications for future teaching?

Ms Bennett: *Xavier's understandings and involvement have definitely improved; his group's piece was so well crafted.*

Violet: *I feel so good performing for people. My group did an earthquake. We had lots of contrasts in dynamics and texture, and we varied the timbre by beginning with one instrument and gradually adding others.*

Ms Bennett: *There have been some big breakthroughs for Leon. His notes show that he doesn't participate in his other classes so well, but in music he's taking part and has discovered new interests. His response to Kyla's invitation was one of those moments you cherish.*

Johnno: *I wrote down the feedback Leon received from the other students for his family: "Leon, you played that so well. Your drumming stood out. You were in time. You faced the class."*

Ms Bennett: *Each of the students brings something special to our class. The world is a diverse place. It's wonderful that our students are learning how to actively include all the people in their community without making a fuss of it.*

Assessment was informal and involved teacher observation and student self- and peer assessment.

Read more about what makes for [effective teacher observations](#)



With your colleagues, discuss: How do you prepare for and conduct your observations of students?



Next steps

Now that you have explored this example, work with colleagues to:

- consider the challenges and opportunities in relation to inclusion for *your* students
- decide on the next steps in your music teaching to ensure *all* your students are participating, learning, and achieving
- plan for a future meeting to review the impact of your next steps and what *now* needs to happen.

