

On music and literacy learning in the middle years

For Literacy Learning: The Middle Years

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ACCEPTED VERSION

Abstract

This article highlights music as a largely untapped resource in the literacy classroom, despite a growing body of evidence suggesting that there are strong links between language and music. Music plays an important role in the developing identities of young learners and there is significant potential in working with the multimodality of music and language to support literacy learning activities.

Introduction

I used to teach English in a P–12 school that happened to have a spare piano sitting against a wall in a classroom where I found myself timetabled. I also brought in an acoustic guitar from home and would regularly compose the Song of the Week with both my Year 7 and Year 8 English classes. These would be based on the curriculum we were working on at that time. Sometimes these songs were useful as a strategy for learning new concepts or remembering things, but mostly they were a fun excuse for having more music in my English lessons.

Perhaps it was easy for me to do this as a musician, but I have always been fascinated by the link between music and literacy learning, which is what prompted me to do my doctoral thesis on the topic (Riddle, 2012) and eventually led me to my current position at university, where I now teach literacy and English curriculum courses to future primary and secondary teachers.

In this short piece, I would like to make a case for embedding more musical experiences into literacy learning activities, not as some trite add-on but as a way of tapping into the deep, rich musical lives of young learners. There is a real power in music, which I think is often left largely unrealised in the busy work of classrooms, where a crowded curriculum, standardised testing and large administrative burdens make it difficult to find time for play, creativity and expression.

The potential of music in literacy learning

In his riveting book, *Musicophilia: Tales of music and the brain*, musician, neurologist and author, Oliver Sacks (2008), remarks, ‘It really is a very odd business that all of us, to varying degrees, have music in our heads’ (p. 43). He goes on to argue that music is an intrinsic part of being human and that we do not need to be musically-trained or know how to

play an instrument to tap into the enormous potential of music as a human experience of being, knowing and doing.

It is commonly understood that the memorisation of things such as lists, rules and concepts is assisted through the use of musical mnemonics, including rhymes, rhythms, alliteration and melodies. No doubt everyone has experienced having a song stuck in their heads for an entire day, or the moment we are trying to remember something and start automatically humming to ourselves. These *ear worms* can be a potent memory recall tool; just think of what happens when you are trying to remember the sequence of letters in the alphabet or colours of a rainbow. Music often triggers memories, sensations and emotions that take us to a particular place or time in our lives where we first heard that song.

As well as being a useful memory trigger, music can also have a calming effect and is used in many different ways by music therapists working with patients who are suffering from conditions 17 Literacy Learning: the Middle Years Volume 24 Number 3 October 2016 including neurological disorders, as well as significant mental, physical and emotional trauma (Bunt & Stige, 2014; Davis, Gfeller, & Thaut, 2008). I had the great privilege of spending my Year 11 work experience placement with a blind music therapist and saw first-hand the awe-inspiring work that they do.

There is a growing body of research indicating that the links between language and music are much stronger than we previously thought (Hansen & Milligan, 2012; Tomlinson, 2013). As neuroscience gains more sophisticated tools for mapping the brain, there is increasing evidence to support the argument that music and language learning are closely linked (Brown, Martinez, & Parsons, 2006; Patel, 2010). The French playwright and novelist, Victor Hugo, is famously supposed to have said that, 'Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent.' Perhaps there is a potential at the point where music and language meet.

Much research has been done into initial language acquisition in the early years (Brandt, Gebrian, & Slevc, 2012; Kay, 2013; Salmon, 2010; Standley, 2008), working with second language learners (Paquette & Rieg, 2008) and the importance of using songs and rhymes with young language learners (e.g., see Hansen, Bernstorff, & Stuber, 2014). Furthermore, we know that music is a great vehicle for developing expression, fluency, aesthetics, collaboration and interaction, self-regulation and social competence (Wiggins, 2007). But what about literacy learning in the middle years?

I argue that music has a central role in the formation of young teenagers' identities, building important social and emotional connections to their lives, as well as acting as a backdrop to other daily activities and as a refuge from the complexity and confusion of the world (Riddle, 2013). Music, like language, is an inherently social practice and thus, I believe we can make meaningful links between music and literacies learning in order to connect to the lives of young learners (Riddle, 2014).

Both music and language are multimodal in nature, combining various modes of social communication in dynamic and interrelated ways. Cope and Kalantzis (2009) demonstrate the links between modalities of meaning made possible in literacies learning and music through 'audio representation: music, ambient sounds, noises, alerts, hearing, listening' (p. 178), alongside written, oral, visual, tactile, gestural and spatial modalities.

The New London Group (1996) claims that it is the role of schools and teachers to ‘recruit, rather than attempt to ignore and erase, the different subjectivities – interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes – students bring to learning’ (p. 72). School literacies learning experiences should be multimodal, multi-textual, multi-sensory and multicultural, and perhaps a little more music will go a long way.

While I am not claiming that music should always be embedded in literacy lessons, I am suggesting that there is a case for its inclusion, both from a cognitive angle and its links to language processing and speech, and also from a social and emotional perspective. Music is good for us and might be just the thing needed in the lesson after lunch on Friday afternoon.

Strategies for music and literacy learning

Some particular strategies for experimenting and playing with music and literacy learning might include:

1. Using a popular song as a stimulus for a short creative writing activity. Play the recorded song to the class, brainstorm a descriptive word list using the song lyrics, musical style and students’ responses, then write a creative piece from these, such as a poem, a narrative or a scene-setting description.
2. Playing a short instrumental melody to students and ask them to put lyrics to it. This is a useful strategy for working with figurative language.
3. Teaching language concepts such as grammar rules, literary devices and generic features through songs, whether they are pre-existing or ones you make up with the class.
4. Trying to spend an entire lesson or part of a lesson singing rather than speaking with the students and get them to do the same. This is good for playing with pitch, pause, pace, cadence and rhythm, which are important aspects of developing effective public speaking skills.
5. Analysing song lyrics for poetic devices, parts of speech and figurative language. This works really well for poetry units, but also can be useful in working with language features of narrative, persuasive and expository texts.
6. Playing music in the background while students are working individually on a writing task.
7. Inviting students to bring a song to share, where they present a short analysis of the musical and textual features to the class. This provides students with the opportunity to make connections between their musical knowledge, language use and literacy learning.

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