

CURRICULUM MODELS

Teaching with Diversity, Inclusion and Equity

By Merlin B. Thompson

Curriculum Model

The sequence of experiences planned by teachers so that students may achieve proficiency in a given area. Music teachers use specific curriculum models to exercise and build students' musical skills and knowledge.



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Working with music teachers over several decades, I've observed how their choice of curriculum model influences who, what and how they teach. When teachers select a specific curriculum model over another, they determine how they'll guide their students' musical journey in a way that aligns with their background, teaching priorities, skills and knowledge, and target student group. Curriculum models are especially important for today's music teachers as they provide the flexibility to meaningfully address and implement culturally relevant teaching strategies (Ladson-Billings 1995, 465–491) that acknowledge diversity, inclusion and equity (MTNA, n.d.; NAFME, n.d.; Powell, Hewitt, Smith, Olesko 2020). The following curriculum models are prominent with music teachers:

1. **Teacher-led curriculum:** This formal, pre-determined approach guides student musical development from beginner to advanced levels. Examples include sequential series like the Royal Conservatory of Music exams, the Suzuki Method and method books from Faber & Faber, Alfred, etc.
2. **Student-led curriculum:** This model puts students in charge of their own musical journey. Examples include adult amateurs who retake interest in their instrument, experienced teens with adequate music skills and beginners with strong intrinsic musical interests.
3. **Neurodiverse curriculum:** This method is sensitive to neurodiverse students with special learning needs. Teachers typically modify an established instructional series so that students may progress through more manageable steps.
4. **Shared curriculum:** This strategic blending of teacher guidance and student interests means both teachers and students have meaningful input, particularly in selecting repertoire.

What stands out for me is how each of the above curriculum models has played a distinct role in my 40-year teaching career. During the first two decades of teaching, I consistently helped my students achieve musical success most often through a teacher-led curriculum and, when appropriate, a neurodiverse curriculum. Then in the latter half of my career,

my teaching shifted in response to experiences with students, parents and teachers. Instead of relying on a teacher-led curriculum, I gradually moved to a shared curriculum as my basic operation. This led to an even greater understanding of how each curriculum model fits into the picture of teaching.

Why did I start out with a teacher-led curriculum? Simple answer: familiarity. It's what I experienced myself as a student in a master/apprentice approach. Without giving it much thought, I continued with the teacher-led curriculum model that has dominated music instruction for more than 200 years.

Why did I adopt a shared curriculum as my basic operation? Simple answer: authenticity. A shared curriculum ensures the authenticity of students' musical journeys. Based on a foundation of trust, flexibility and inclusiveness, both my students and I make vital contributions. This approach allows me to not only pass on my own musical knowledge and expertise, but also—and perhaps more importantly—to build on and exercise what students bring of themselves to their musical journey (Thompson 2022, 4). When we need to change things up with a student-led curriculum or a neurodiverse curriculum or a teacher-led curriculum, we've established the practical framework for how we'll respectfully continue to work together.

These days the trajectory of my teaching looks quite different, as demonstrated in the following student examples:

Janice: Shared curriculum throughout elementary, junior high and high school.

Arthur: Shared curriculum through elementary and junior high school. Teacher-led curriculum in high school in preparation for RCM exams and university music auditions.

Peter and Gloria: Neurodiverse curriculum in combination with a shared curriculum throughout elementary, junior and high school to accommodate their physical and intellectual disabilities.

James: Shared curriculum throughout elementary school. Gradually shifted to a student-led curriculum in junior high. For his final solo concert in high school, James sang and accompanied himself on songs by Billy Joel, Shawn Mendes and Ruth B.

Stanton: Shared curriculum for two years in elementary school. From thereon, a student-led

curriculum in response to his strong internal musical interests and home musical context.

Why do curriculum models matter? Because each curriculum model responds to students' wants and needs in different ways. When the curriculum model synchronizes with what students hope to achieve, we may anticipate a welcome outcome. Teachers confirm their commitment to diversity, inclusion and equity. When the curriculum model is out of sync with student aspirations, the consequences may be undesirable for everyone. Teachers may unknowingly maintain the top-down hierarchical control of students that goes against diversity, inclusion and equity. My responsibility as a teacher is to figure out what students need from me and what context they're coming from. Therefore, it's up to me to create an environment where we trust and value each other, where students may rely on me for what I have to offer and where I learn so much about their musical voices.

Repertoire and Shared Curriculum

I am a huge fan of formal repertoire collections and established series. I value how publishers and experienced music teachers put together sequential volumes that move from one level to the next. At the same time, I always want to keep in mind that repertoire collections and series don't tell the whole story of music in my students' lives. There's another key element in students' musical makeup—the music that's part of their personal lives, culture and community (Gay 2002, 106–116). All students come to lessons with their own musical background. No parents sign up their child for music lessons without ever hearing a piece of music. No child continues music lessons without ever listening to music outside formal music lessons. People are interested in music lessons because they already have music in their lives and want to do something with it. They have a musical life that's more than studying with a teacher, which brings us to examine what's involved when teachers incorporate the vibrant dynamics of students' musical lives through a shared curriculum.

I admire a colleague who uses a 50/50 shared curriculum with her students: She chooses 50% of the repertoire and students choose the other 50%. Her rationale is if students want to learn

a piece, there's nothing she can do to stop them. And why would she want to? Isn't the whole purpose of music lessons for teachers to help students so they can make musical explorations without their teacher's assistance? My colleague's shared curriculum strategy is impressive because she taps into motivation driven by students' ownership of their musical journey.

Using a shared curriculum with my own students, I enjoy a blend of teacher's choice and student's choice from the very beginning. With beginners and elementary students, I use a ratio of four to one with my students. For junior and intermediate students, I use a pattern of two or three teacher's choice followed by one student's choice. From there on, we make it up as we go along.

I enjoy watching my students take charge of their repertoire choices. In recent months, my beginner student, Ashley, came up with her own rhythmic variation, *Dolphins swim a lot*. My intermediate student, Patrick, chose "Perfect" by Ed Sheeran. Senior student Spencer decided he wanted to learn to sing Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" and accompany himself. In the weeks following my annual Students' Choice Concert, it's wonderful to see the enthusiasm on students' faces inspired by their peers as they add to their own list of potential explorations.

By inviting students' choices into their musical journey, students become very familiar with their own set of learning skills. Beginners rely on their ability to play by ear. Elementary reading students find resources on the internet or at the music store. Junior to advanced students explore what's necessary to make pop song arrangements playable and sound like the original recording. Senior students find out that not all repertoire suits their personality or fits their hands—similar to the way we imagine Elton John and Lang Lang tailor their performances to synchronize with their personal passion, technical competency and audience interest. It's an absolute delight to witness the emergence of my students' musical voices in ways that I could never anticipate.

What happens when students choose repertoire that's well beyond their current level of mastery? This question indicates the worries teachers may have regarding students' choices. And there's good reason for teachers to

CURRICULUM MODELS

be hesitant because students may need to be protected from challenges that are potentially damaging to their long-term technical health. When students choose repertoire well beyond their learning mastery, I'm always open to seeing how far they can get. Even learning one line of Beethoven's "Für Elise" may be adequate and inspirational. Sometimes they get further than I anticipated. With my help, they may utilize more productive processes outside their own experiences. On other occasions, there's nothing wrong with moving on to another choice.

Discussions with vocal and instrumental teaching colleagues across North America in recent years revealed consistent enthusiasm for the shared curriculum teaching approach. Some colleagues have already incorporated a shared curriculum for many years, silently keeping it to themselves while enjoying their students' keen uptake. Other colleagues are excited by the opportunity to incorporate students' choices without giving up the integrity of their established repertoire. Still, other colleagues expressed how a shared curriculum matches their own intuitive impressions of what their teaching might accomplish. With a shared curriculum, students benefit from the pedagogic structure of established repertoire resources while expressing and exercising their own authentic musical persona; teachers benefit by establishing the awareness and trust necessary to move into student-led, teacher-led and neurodiverse undertakings.

Conclusion

Music teachers do everything we can to fill students' musical journeys with celebration and achievement. At the same time, today's music teachers face questions previous generations may not have considered. Strategies that worked in the past may need rethinking or even setting aside to make room for new ideas. My goal in this brief article has been to expand teachers' awareness and understanding of various curriculum models. These curriculum models are highly relevant for today's music teachers because they present the practicality and flexibility needed to respond to their students' comprehensive and diverse musical needs. My enthusiasm for a shared curriculum is immense, given its potential as the trusting foundation for moving in diverse directions that support and nurture what students bring

forward. Each of the curriculum models presented here has its own unique role to play in cultivating the vibrant musical aspects that spring from students' own resonant musical interests, community, wish lists and curiosity (Hendricks 2018). I hope teachers will take advantage of what each distinct curriculum model has to offer. My impression is that when music teachers value our students for who they are and what they do, they make important gestures about diversity, inclusion and equity.

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