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CROSS-CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT: 
TEACHING AFRICAN MUSIC TO AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on research that examined the effectiveness of introducing rhythmic concepts through an unfamiliar musical genre to Australian generalist primary teacher education students. The genre selected was African music, in particular action songs, dance and instrumental improvisation. The methodologies of Orff, Kodály and Dalcroze were taught through the repertoire of African music in order to foster a closer relationship between pedagogical theory and practice and to teach rhythm through cross-cultural engagement. Through analyses of questionnaire and interview data, it was demonstrated that African music had a positive effect on students’ confidence as non-specialists music teachers and enhanced their skills in staff, sol-fa, hand notation and performance. Also, students were not only highly motivated to engage with this new musical genre, but also gained an increased understanding of African culture. It is argued that African music was perceived by students not so much as a “novelty”, but as a source of genuine motivation, interest and enjoyment. Its potential for extending student understanding of rhythm as well as taking a significant step towards internationalizing the curriculum for a cohort of predominantly Anglo-Celtic, pre-service teachers is also explored.

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes my experience as a South African working with Australian primary teacher education students of predominantly Anglo-Celtic background within the context of a music education subject at Deakin University in Melbourne. As Nketia (1988) points out, I—like many expatriate music educators—have selected music from my own country of origin (South Africa) as a starting point to develop curriculum materials for my teaching. Firstly, I place myself within the context outlined by Brophy (1986), who advocates that it is essential for educators to view themselves as active socializing agents capable of stimulating students’ motivation to learn. Secondly, my decision to use of African music was based on Carver and Tracey’s (2001) notion of “empowering students” to overcome the often commonly-held belief that they cannot achieve well enough, which in turn reduces their confidence and competence. Finally my role in teaching African music to Australian students as a cultural experience falls within a broader educational context that promotes the internationalisation of the curriculum.

According to Rizvi and Walsh (1998), Australian universities are well placed to be leaders in internationalising the curriculum because of the high degree of multiculturalism in the Australian population. Internationalisation is interpreted as “studying the history and culture of another country or region” (p.7). By exposing students to other cultures and specifically to their music, we enhance students’ understandings more fully, richly and critically than previously when focussing only on Western music (Oehrle, 1991). Hence the teaching of African music may be seen as a way of internationalising the curriculum rather than being mere tokenism.

Sadiki (2002) asserts that internationalising the curriculum should not just be viewed as a “window of opportunity”; rather it should be seen as a multidimensional form of enrichment. Accordingly, the incorporation of African music may be seen as “a process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into teaching” (Knight & de Wit, 1995, p.17). This is supported by Thorsen (2002b) who points out that music is a worthwhile arena for achieving “international togetherness”. Deakin University policy (2002, p.1) supports the integration and infusion of international and intercultural dimensions and content into teaching, research and service through a wide range of activities and strategies as the means of achieving an internationalised curriculum.
Although most undergraduate teacher education programs operate within constraints of limited time, resources and staffing, teacher educators nevertheless have a responsibility to prepare students to teach effectively and confidently as non-specialist music teachers. Temmerman (1997, p.32) questions the adequacy of current curriculum content to prepare effective teachers of music, and raises the need to identify curriculum content that is both essential and achievable. Such a challenge is further highlighted by Russell-Bowie (1997, 2001 [in press]) who asserts that teacher educators need to increase the low self-esteem and negative attitudes to music often experienced by non-specialist teacher education students by providing them with positive and successful learning experiences.

The impetus for this study grew out of my own interest in African music and the decision to include it in my curriculum was based on the proposition that engaging students with an unfamiliar genre may enhance their understanding of rhythm (beat, accent, metre and duration) and hence increase their confidence and self-esteem. The basis for this contention is that the use of a non-Western musical genre could provide:

1. a “level playing field” for all students, regardless of their musical backgrounds, to learn more about rhythm;
2. an impetus for understanding other cultures and their music;
3. a model for teaching practical activities and cross-cultural understandings as defined as internationalising the curriculum; and
4. greater motivation for learning.

PARTICIPANTS
The students in this study completed the first of two arts education subjects in 2001. In 2002 some of these students undertook my elective subject as the second arts education subject in their four-year Bachelor of Education course at Deakin University in Melbourne. The subject focused on the pedagogies of Orff, Kodaly and Dalcroze through the teaching of recorder and classroom instruments but, for the first time, African music was introduced to teach rhythm, thereby engaging students with an unfamiliar music, language and culture.

This paper reports on students’ responses to their learning about rhythm, to their motivation and confidence levels, to their cross-cultural understandings, and to their understanding of African music and culture as a result of their experience in the subject.

AFRICAN CULTURE AND MUSIC
African music and culture are inseparable. Floyd (1987) makes the point that, for Africans, music plays an integral role in their existence at every stage of life and is an expression of that existence. Dargie (1996) suggests that the African child in the womb feels the mother’s movement and dancing which, after birth, is continued when s/he is carried on her back. Dargie argues that children are thus exposed to musical participation from a very early age.

My unit aimed to familiarise students with the broader role of music in an unfamiliar culture. This approach is supported by Thorsén (2002a, p.5), who maintains that music education is not just about content and method; rather it should develop attitudes to and understandings of the role of music in society. In African societies, music (song and dance) is the medium through which children and young people receive instruction about traditional customs and practices, obligations and responsibilities. They learn about members of their families, important people, places and events, their tribe and their country (Warren, 1970, p.12). Thus, music and dance are seen as important ingredients in the socialisation of Africans (Blacking, 1983).

Unlike the Western system, the basis of music education for Africans is an oral tradition, which includes the performance of vocal and instrumental music interwoven with dance (Amoaku, 1982; Okafor, 1988, 1989 cited in Kemp & Lepherd 1992). According to Amoaku (1982, p.116), oral transmission is just as reliable as a written tradition and is “essentially derived from an inter-relationship with the universe, which a traditional society regards as factual and constant”. An example of this is the teaching of rhythm through drumming; as there is no notated tradition, skills are passed on from generation to generation through imitation (Vulliamy & Lee, 1982, p.171).
By learning African folk songs (lullabies, work songs, youth songs and protest songs), my students gained an understanding of the nature and role of music in African society. The most common languages of black people in South Africa are Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho. Songs from these tribes were chosen to teach rhythm and also served to make cross-cultural connections with Western repertoire and pedagogies.

CROSS-CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT
Students gained a richer understanding of the musical content and greater cross-cultural connections by incorporating African music with the methodologies of Orff, Kodály and Dalcroze. The term "cross-cultural" is used as it encapsulates the fusion of music and dance/movement within the context of African music and the three European pedagogies.

Amoaku (1982, p.118) asserts that, of the many contemporary approaches to music education, Orff Schulwerk—particularly through its use of speech, rhythm and movement—perhaps correlates best with traditional African concept of music making. By experiencing a variety of Western and specifically South African repertoire, students gained an understanding of how differences in pedagogy and culture were offset by similarities through cross-cultural engagement. This supports my contention that learning through an unfamiliar genre gives greater prominence to the concepts being taught and that learning is made more meaningful, as the study’s findings highlighted.

According to Nketa (1998, p. 98), what appears to be different cross-culturally may operate in similar contexts, hence the discovery of common principles, usages and behavioural patterns. He contends that it is not just the music we hear, but a knowledge of the culture of music makers—their lives, what they do, and the occasions when they make music—that puts us in a frame of mind to explore their music (p.101). This cultural experience through music is summed up by Du Preez (1997, p.4) who states that “culture embodies the knowledge, values, norms, beliefs, language, perceptions and adaptations to the environment of a certain group of people”. Hence, incorporating African music assisted students to assimilate new elements and experiences into their own knowledge base, thereby establishing new understandings about musical style and the broader culture. Nketa (1988) found that “practical experiences of a simple aspect of the music process that we can manage … helps in our efforts to get to know and understand the music” (p.103). This was fully experienced by my students through African music.

RESEARCH PROCEDURE
The first source of data was an anonymous questionnaire that employed both open and closed questions, the latter requiring Likert-scale responses. The questionnaire provided a snapshot of the class regarding their experiences of rhythm in the workshops, their attitudes and understandings regarding cross-cultural engagement, and the levels of motivation and enjoyment they experienced. Due to a small sample (twenty-nine from thirty-one students), only inferences rather than statistically-validated conclusions were drawn. The second source of data was taped interviews with self-selecting members of the student cohort (about a third). The discussion points raised during the interviews were an extension of issues raised in the questionnaire.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Only some of the points raised in the questionnaire and interviews will be discussed. A positive outcome from the study was that students generally agreed that their knowledge, understanding and skills in relation to rhythmic elements had increased principally through the use of African music (see Table 1).

Table 1. Degree of Agreement about Learning Rhythm through African Music (n=29)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements of Rhythm</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Partially agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heat</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accent</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metre</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students reported that they engaged more readily with the musical concepts to be learnt by experiencing
movement, improvisation, staff and sol-fa notation, and hand signs through African music rather than only Western repertoire and traditional teaching methods (Orff, Kodály and Dalroze). All twenty-nine participating students stated that they had no prior knowledge of the three methodologies, but twenty-six of these students indicated that their sol-fa reading improved through the African song experience and that, by applying French time names to the African rhythms, they were able to recognize simple repeated rhythmic patterns more easily. Other students commented that the Orff concept of using speech patterns and improvisation in association with the African repertoire was an important factor in their understanding of rhythm. This was clearly demonstrated through their African drumming exercises and improvisation. Twenty-four students were able to apply the Dalroze principles of movement to rhythm and its sub-elements and, having experienced the African song and dance “culture”, they realised how inseparable movement is from song. The following comments summed up students’ experiences in this regard:

I read about Dalroze and I’ve got some idea of what the theory was. Now [being] involved with movement...gave me an understanding of how the approach is used and how it works.

I found the Kodaly [method] quite difficult at times because I did not do it before, but using [it] in the songs made it easier. We moved from very simple to complex ones.

I liked using the instruments. Especially, I think, the Orff approach works well with the African music; we could improvise and play different rhythm patterns which I enjoyed.

The use of African music as a curriculum innovation clearly motivated students to learn more about rhythm and promoted cross-cultural engagement. Words used by students to describe their attitudes and experiences were “new”, “different”, “challenging”, “fun”, “exciting”, “stimulating” and “interesting”. One student remarked: “Initially I thought I’d just sit back and try and hide but, as things picked up, I was fully participating and learning”, while another said “yes, it was a challenge but it was good because it was a goal you could reach”. Within this context, I moved from simple to complex examples of rhythms and songs that made it easy, enjoyable and fun for learning to take place. It was apparent that students learnt more when they were having fun through a “hands-on” practical approach. As one interviewee stated, “it’s all ‘hands-on’ experience; it adds to the enjoyment and understanding as well because you learn all the elements of music and rhythm and everything by being involved. It’s great. I just loved it”.

African songs were seen as different and therefore more exciting because they were from another culture and language. As such, this brought about a different aural experience with interesting beats and rhythms. Students commented:

The beat was kind of off-beat rather than a regular beat, and the movement was another part I liked because in every session we were up and dancing and putting actions to our songs. Even if we could not sing the song at first, it was still fun and challenging. Yeah, I really enjoyed it.

I liked the drumming and the instruments because they were different. I learnt more about the elements and learnt more of rhythm and beat and accent with the drumming whereas using the recorder. I felt I sort of learnt the musical notes and not really about accent and that sort of thing.

Whether just putting on a compact disc of Africa music, or using the drums, or movement, or introducing Kodály time names (taa or ti-ti), the African music provides an alternative to what we see as traditional music education in schools.

The students made cross-cultural connections between Western and African music which played a large part in their understanding of the musical concepts and of African life. In interview sessions, students remarked:

...rather than just teach us music, you also brought your culture in which, for me, is really interesting. I’d probably be really frustrated if I saw you up the front of the classroom with your accent and just telling me about [Western] music only which I already know about.
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Exposing us to the [African] culture was interesting...because it is so different from ours. I guess they [Africans] are so involved in singing and movement about their whole life style—something we would never do...

CONCLUSION
The findings show that the inclusion of African music is an effective means of teaching rhythm and its sub-elements. Moreover, students gained greater confidence to teach rhythm and expressed the view that their levels of competence had increased. Students were highly motivated and challenged as they engaged in a number of activities to learn about rhythm through the Orff, Kodály and Dalcroze methodologies in combination with the African repertoire.

As a South African teaching music to Australian students through African repertoire, I was able to help them establish greater musical and cultural connections that subsequently synthesized their learning, understanding and interest in African music as a cross-cultural engagement. The use of African music as a curriculum innovation also supports the ongoing process of internationalising the curriculum.

REFERENCES


