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Exploring creative music making as a vehicle for integrated teaching and learning

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The arts have evolved with each society as a means of consolidating cultural and social identity and connecting past with future generations (Russell-Bowie, 2006, p3). Situating the arts within a broader interdisciplinary curriculum, we believe, allows students to discover and explore social issues and their relevance to students’ contemporary lives. We argue that creative music making through composition promotes a deeper and more personally relevant teaching and learning experience for teacher education students, particularly when situated within an interdisciplinary framework.

The challenge for us as teacher educators’ is to prepare pre-service teachers for both disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning as is required by the Victorian Essential Learning Standards [VELS]. At Deakin University, in the Bachelor of Teaching (Primary/Secondary) Degree, the postgraduate unit called Humanities, Societies and Environments; Language and Music Education adopts an interdisciplinary pedagogy that encourages students to learn from each other, share content knowledge and make links between and across VELS domains.

In this paper we reflect on the possibilities exploring of creative music making to enhance the teaching and learning of social education, with particular reference to issues of environmental change. Specifically, we reflect on non-music specialist students’ experiences in Semester 1, 2008 using Jeannie Baker’s book Window (1991) as a platform to deliberate about the impact of urbanisation on the environment. Through dramatisation and a sonic environment students were able to both further conceptualise issues of social change and their understandings of the power of integrating music across other VELS domains.

Integrated and interdisciplinary teaching and learning

Much has been said about the potential of interdisciplinary curricula to transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries, provide teachers and students with meaningful and authentic learning experiences, and to prepare students for life-long learning (Lake, 1994; Davis, 1997; Ellis and Fouts, 2001). Chrysostomou explains that:

One of the first terms that was used to describe interdisciplinary learning was ‘integration’, which connotes combining, unifying parts into a whole, and participating as an equal (2004, p24).

Integrated curriculum can take a variety of forms and various curriculum theorists have sought to develop integrated curricula typologies. Fogarty (1991) for example describes ten levels of curricula integration (fragmented, connected, nested, sequenced, shared, webbed, threaded, integrated, immersed and networked).

Alternately, DeLeo offers the following typology:

**Disciplinary**: Epistemologies, assumptions, knowledge, skills, methods within the boundaries of one discipline (eg. Physics, History).
**Multidisciplinary**: Using the knowledge/understanding of more than one discipline (eg. Physics and History; Biology and Architecture)

**Interdisciplinary**: Using the epistemologies/methods of one discipline within another (eg. Biochemistry, Ecophilosophy, Astrophysics)

**Transdisciplinary**: Focus on an issue such as pollution or hunger both within and beyond discipline boundaries with the possibility of new perspectives (2006).

De Leo (2006) also offers the following figure to diagrammatically represent these varied curriculum structures:

**Figure 1. Varied Curriculum Structures**

![Figure 1](image)

This typology provides some clear distinctions for readers. Firstly, it is clear that disciplinary curricula are not integrated, rather they are founded on clearly demarcated, historically constituted disciplinary boundaries. Secondly, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary curricula are all forms of integrated curricula, although importantly, the degree to which integration occurs is differential as Figure 1 clearly demonstrates.

For the purpose of this paper, we contend that interdisciplinary curricula is a form of integrated curriculum and as such we use these terms interchangeably whilst simultaneously acknowledging that interdisciplinary curriculum “respects the integrity and uniqueness of each of the disciplines to be combined” (Campbell and Scott-Kassner, 1995, p.358). In this sense interdisciplinary teaching and learning can be seen as a repackaging and, perhaps, enhancement of discipline based knowledge and not as ‘integrated’ as transdisciplinary teaching and learning (Kain, 1993). To explain this difference Loepp uses of a layer cake versus a marble cake:

the layer cake represents an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum because the
boundaries between the disciplines are maintained... while the marble cake is more problem based with the various disciplines contributing to the solution of the problem (1999).

Proponents of integrated curriculum are critical of disciplinary curriculum structures which control and reduce the range of possible discourses about the social objectives of education (Lopes & de Macedo, 2006). Advocates of integrated curricula contend that the integration of a number of curricular and instructional elements will greatly benefit students because:

- they reduce the fragmentation of knowledge taught in separate subjects;
- they encourage collaborative planning and problem solving;
- they place the emphasis upon skills development rather than the coverage of subject matter;
- they encourage students to search for patterns in, and connections between, ideas; and,
- they are more conducive to involving students in the curriculum development process (Frazer and Rudnitschki, 1995).

Despite these positive attributes, integrated curriculum approaches (which tend to be process as opposed to product driven) have historically faced an uphill battle to secure legitimacy (Thornton, 2001). Critics of integrated curriculum claim that integrated teaching and learning can trivialise knowledge (Mason, 1996), can incorporate random samplings of knowledge and territorial specialist knowledge (Barton, 2001 as cited in Joseph & White, 2006, p.223), and requires specialist rather than generalist teachers.

In the face of these possibilities and challenges, teacher educators at Deakin University have been developing and enacting interdisciplinary curriculum across the first year that focuses on the Primary level of a two-year Bachelor of Teaching (Primary/Secondary) degree for the last five years as will be outlined below.

**The teaching and learning context**

The Bachelor of Teaching (Primary/Secondary) degree at Deakin University offers students the opportunity to undertake three interdisciplinary Primary units (ECJ411, ECJ412 and ECJ413) in the first year of this two-year postgraduate degree. It may be argued that an interdisciplinary approach is adopted to emphasise how primary school teachers can make meaningful links to improve student learning outcomes. The Consortium of National Arts Education Associations (2002) point out “interdisciplinary education enables students to identify and apply authentic connections between two or more disciplines and/or to understand essential concepts that transcend individual disciplines” (p.3). Ellis and Fouts add that integrated education improves high-level thinking where learning is less fragmented and students are provided with a more unified sense of process and content” (2001, p.24). The possibilities for these units to deeply engage teacher education students within and across varied disciplines, and to model a range of relevant interdisciplinary pedagogies is significant.
This paper reports on two of these units - ECJ411 and ECJ412 - as these units are taught simultaneously in Semester 1 of the first year of this degree and integrated to allow for innovative learning experiences across Humanities, Societies and Environments [HSE], Language, and Music and Dance/Drama Education. In semester 1, 2008, 90 students entered the Bachelor of Teaching (Primary/Secondary) degree and completed ECJ411 and ECJ412, both of which are core units within the Primary year of this degree. These units run for six hours a week across a 10 teaching week semester. During the 60 hours students engage with these units, they spend 12 hours (four 3 hour sessions) placed at 4 select schools that have partnerships with Deakin University to gain practical experiences, observe, ask questions and reflect on their own teaching philosophy. They also attend 10 hours of lectures (ten 1 hour lectures) during which they are provided with important theoretical understandings and concepts relevant to each of the disciplines and they are encouraged to explore the possibilities for interdisciplinary teaching and learning with a particular focus on interdisciplinary pedagogies. The rest of these units (the remaining 38 hours) are spent in workshop sessions; 18 hours are discipline based (HSE, Literacy and Music/Dance/Drama) and the remaining 20 hours are interdisciplinary in nature. In it important to note that these units focus on the ‘early years’ of Primary students – that is teaching students prep-year 4 (students who are approximately 5-10 years old).

In this paper we report on a 3 hour interdisciplinary Music/HSE workshop that students undertook towards the end of the teaching semester. Before doing so, we highlight some of the benefits interdisciplinary teaching and learning offers Deakin University teacher educators and BTeach Primary/Secondary pre-service teachers.

The benefits of interdisciplinary teaching and learning

Interdisciplinary teaching as previously highlighted, allows each contributing discipline to maintain disciplinary integrity and expertise whilst simultaneously encouraging the exploration of an issue or event through varied disciplinary lenses. Additionally, interdisciplinary curricula also provides opportunity for varied pedagogical practice and for team teaching.

Previous research (Kutnowski, 2005; White and Joseph, 2006) has recorded the positive effects of team teaching on the work of teacher educators. Kutnowski reflecting on his experiences of team teaching found that he no longer was a “lone teacher”, he saw himself “as part of the continuum of teaching and learning” (2005, p26.). By teaching in what he calls a ‘teaching community’ and across subjects he reports that he looked forward to sharing with colleagues his enthusiasm and true love for teaching (Kutnowski, 2005). Tan (2002) points out “team teaching ideally provides students with a wide range of challenging and eye-opening viewpoints on a broad subject matter expounded by faculty members who are themselves the experts and authorities in their area of specialisation” (Joseph & White, 2006, p.2). In this paper we reflect on how one discipline can ‘service’ and make connections to another. The ECJ412 unit, models how teachers find common links between different key learning areas. By linking what is
often perceived at university level as diverse and pedagogically different disciplines, we discuss and share their philosophy, content and teaching styles. “This type of discussion and team teaching approach across disciplines is actually rare in many Faculties of Education in Australian universities” (White and Joseph 2006, p.3). Ellis and Fouts (2001, p 24) warns that “experimental research on interdisciplinary curriculum is very difficult to conduct and therefore, rather rare”.

Within ECJ411 and ECJ412 members of staff team-teach and also theme teach. Although both of us have, over the years, taught in these units, we did not in this instance team-teach although we did collaboratively plan the Music/HSE workshop and have spent significant time critically reflecting on the possibilities and challenges that staff (in this instance Catherine as the HSE academic taught this workshop individually) and students experienced as a result of engaging in this workshop.

Methodology

We draw on our reflective practice as our methodology for this paper. Jorgensen, Onosko and Weir (n.d.) point out that reflective practice has the potential to improve instruction, increase collaboration among faculty and promote great success among the increasingly diverse students enrolled. Thinking is not new to the domain of teacher practice; deeper reflection leads us to new insights and improvements in our practice as we prepare students to exist as teacher graduates. As both of us have been part of the teaching team since the unit was introduced five years ago we firmly believe in the benefits on reflecting on our unit and practice. Phillips, Bain, Mc Naught, Rice, and Tripp (2000) are among those who regard reflective practice as a conscious attempt to plan, describe, and reflect on the process and outcomes of the action. Like Drummond (2002) we recognise that teaching and preparing teachers is both an art and science. Hence we concur with Brookfield (1995) and Thiel (1999) that reflective practitioners engage in a continuous cycle of self-observation and self-evaluation in order to understand their own actions and the reactions they prompt in themselves and in their learners. Working at tertiary level Schön (1987) confirms that this does not mean we just contemplate in the ‘ivory tower’ rather we make links to each other’s practice and through reflection we aim to improve our practice and think about how best to do what we always do (Phillips, et. al 2000). Through weekly meetings, the teaching team found the reflective process to be a beneficial form of professional development which helped gain a better understanding of our individual styles (Ferraro, 2000). Additionally, through an intense process of sustained collaborative reflection (which includes the writing of this paper) we have been able to better evaluate the possibilities for integrated music and HSE curricula.

In this paper, as reflective practitioners we report on the application of creative music making in relation to social issues and its relevance to contemporary society using Jeannie Baker’s book Window (1991). By combining these two areas in promoting interdisciplinary and critical thinking we contend that students better understand the class content with encouragement for social negotiation, they also develop a connection between their peers and the ‘gap’ between lecturer and student and between student and student is narrowed opening the door for more dialogue to take place between all.
Integrating music into the primary curriculum

Much has been written on the potential of the Arts within integrated curricula. According to Russell Bowie (2006, p.259) “using the arts to connect with other key learning areas [or disciplines] … enhance[s] the learning experiences of children who learn kinaesthetically, visually or musically; may help them achieve outcomes in key learning areas where previously they have failed and may provide all children with enjoyment and motivation”. Whilst ECJ411 and ECJ412 certainly value the importance of the Arts, time restrictions and an overcrowded curriculum have meant that the Arts (Dance, Drama, Music and Visual Arts) share the same teaching time as Language and HSE (each of these three ‘disciplines’ have 30 hours of teaching time across the three interdisciplinary units of ECJ411, ECJ412 and ECJ413). This is problematic in that ‘the Arts’ are classified as a single discipline when in fact music alone, for example, constitutes a singular discipline. In positioning ‘the Arts’ as a single discipline within ECJ411 and ECJ412 has meant that each of the four contributing areas of the Arts receives a limited amount of teaching time. Specifically, Dance, Drama and Music receive 20 hours of teaching time combined. Given the importance of music to student learning, we are committed to using the interdisciplinary spaces provides in ECJ411 and ECJ412 to encourage the development of students creative music making skills.

Chrysostomou (2004) further explains the problematic nature of music and integrated curricula:

In practice, unfortunately, the discipline of music is quite frequently trivialized or even distorted when made part of an interdisciplinary effort. Although listening to music in the background when studying mathematics or learning a song about colors may be interesting methodological approaches for the mathematician or the art teacher, they do not constitute an interdisciplinary curriculum. Valuable and meaningful knowledge must be promoted in both subjects [disciplines] for authentic integration to occur (2004, p25).

Integrating music into the curriculum cannot therefore assume what Bresler (1995) refers to as, the subservient approach in which the arts are used to teach other subjects or make them more interesting. Rather, Bresler argues there are numerous ways in which music can be incorporated into the curriculum. These are:

- The co-equal cognitive approach, in which arts concepts and practices are combined in some way with instructional goals from other disciplines
- The affective style, in which music and arts are used to create the mood, or are seen as an outlet for children’s creativity; and,
- The social integration approach, in which arts performances are used to build school spirit or provide a form of community relations (as cited in Chrysostomou, 2004, p25).

It is with this theoretical frame in mind that we developed the integrated Music/HSE workshop. This workshop was designed for non-music specialist teachers and underlying
this workshop was the imperative that students develop an intensive understanding of the concepts and elements of music, and learn how to compose through graphic notation in the avant garde style. Before we further explore the Music/HSE workshop it is important that we provide the reader with a brief overview of the content students had already covered in both Music and HSE.

**Music Context**

ECJ411 and ECJ412 students undertake two specific music discipline workshops (a total of 6 hours) early in these units. In the first workshop they are introduced to the elements in music for example tempo, dynamics, timbre, duration and pitch and so forth. At both workshops they are taught about graphic notation and composition in the avant grade style. Students are also given self-directed readings online and a prescribed book to support their understandings of music, composition and integration and interdisciplinary teaching and learning. The workshops are all practical hands on where students gain an understanding of the elements and then experience and explore it through voice, classroom instruments, movement, listening and basic graphic notation. In the second workshops they are placed in groups of 6-8 to create soundscapes through body percussion, classroom instruments and non-conventional sounds. It is through such soundscapes that they experience and explore the elements of music more richly through group music making.

**HSE Context**

ECJ411 and ECJ412 students undertake four specific HSE discipline workshops (a total of 12 hours) early in these units. In these discipline specific workshops students explore the importance of teaching and learning HSE with specific reference to the Victorian Curriculum policy context. Students identify and explore key HSE concepts (historical concepts such as time, change, continuity, cause and effect; geographical concepts such as spatial patterns and distribution, economic concepts such as supply and demand, needs and wants, and civics and citizenship concepts such as rights and responsibilities, values, participation). They also make connections between these concepts and relevant teaching content (the individual, family and friends, school, local community, State and Nation) and relevant global issues (peace, sustainability, global warming, social justice). Importantly, these early workshops highlight the relevance of HSE to the development of students’ critical thinking skills and to the scaffolding of students’ abilities to be able to effectively participate in Australian society.

**Discussion: The Music/HSE workshop**

ECJ411/412 students undertook a three hour Music/HSE workshop designed to highlight the ways in which non-music specialist primary teachers could teach a particular issue (in this case the issue of change) from an interdisciplinary perspective incorporating music and HSE. The workshop comprised two specific introductory activities. The first was a hands-on jigsaw activity where students had to identify a range of percussion instruments, research the history of various percussion instruments and map the geographic origins of
these instruments. This activity whilst music focused, explicitly addressed key HSE concepts such as time and continuity and the geographic concept of spatial association. The second introductory activity was a hands-on exploration of percussion instruments with emphasis on exploring both conventional and non-conventional sounds. Here students realised the opportunities that soundscapes offered across the curriculum when theme teaching or integrating across varied learning areas. They explored many of the elements learnt in their music workshop especially focusing on timbre and texture using various instruments. They also made up many different rhythms using sounds and silences to create descriptive program music in relation to the book Window.

As a class, they read Jeannie Baker’s *Window* (1991). Baker’s book is designed for primary school students and contains a series of handcrafted visuals (with no written text outside of that included within visuals). It is available in ‘big book’ form and designed for class discussion. The purpose of *Window* is evident when reading the author’s note:

> We are changing the face of our world at an alarming and increasing pace. From the present rate of destruction, we can estimate that by the year 2020 no wilderness will remain on our planet, outside that protected in national parks and reserves. By the same years 2020, a quarter of our present plant and animal species will be extinct if we continue at the current growing pace of change. Already, at least two species become extinct each hour. Our planet is changing before our eyes. However, by understanding and changing the way we personally effect the environment, we can make a difference (Baker, 1991, p.14).

The content of the book focuses on the changes evident in the home environment of one boy from his birth to the age of 24. Book excerpts on the following page provide examples of the content of the book.

(Baker, 1991, p.1)
In small groups of four or five members, students were given the task of developing and performing a musical composition to accompany a ‘reading’ of the book. They did not have to present a graphic notation composition to the rest of the class to show how their composition worked rather they worked that out in their own group and only performed the sounds in relation to the book pages they were initially set out as a task. The soundscape was avant-garde in that it related to the picture in the book. Students used melodic and non-melodic instruments (xylophones, drums, shakers etc) and unconventional sounds (electronic, water, paper, etc.) to interpret *Window* (Baker, 1991). Students were encouraged to consider how they would represent the natural and urban environments and how their composition would reflect the theme of environmental change. Such an activity allowed students to improvise using the instruments to compose. Groups were allocated 30 minutes to develop their compositions they used graphic symbols to symbolise the sounds they wanted to perform. Each group performed their avant-garde composition as the book was so-called ‘read’. At the end of the workshop, the class reflected and discussed the possibilities for music/HSE integration in the upper primary classroom ensued.
Conclusion

The purpose of the music/HSE workshop was manifold as it aimed to increase the confidence of non-music specialist teacher education students to learn about music per se and how it can be integrated in the primary classroom. The workshop demonstrated how music can be used as the focal discipline in integrated teaching in the primary classroom as students’ explored creative music making in relation to issues in HSE. The workshop also served as a discussion point for us to develop future team-teaching opportunities as it gave us the opportunity to theorise the process of integrating music/HSE.

Anecdotal student feedback suggests that teacher education students became engaged and motivated as well as challenged to open up their minds eye and ear to creative thought exploring social issues in Jeannie Baker’s book *Window* (1991). Campbell and Scott Kassner (1995) identify that there are close relationships between literary, arts and music, they further purport that “books stories and poetry can be used as a stimulus for musical composition” (p.366). In this instance using Jeannie Baker’s book *Window* (1991) serves as a visual book (there is little written text) that can be told through sounds rather than words and serves to describe social issues over time. Such books, comments Lamme (1990), or even fairy tales can stimulate student’s creative writing skills or musical composition. This was evident in the creative soundscapes students produced and their discussions about changes in the environment and in society over time. By integrating the arts (music) with Humanities, Societies and Environments and Language it is argued “the arts have a unique power to release imagination” (Greene, 1995, p.27) not only at school level but at tertiary level where all students for this unit are all on a level playing field.

The workshop provided us with the opportunity to address the ways in which music is positioned in integrated learning. Many primary teachers are non-music specialists and do not feel competent and confident in teaching music and/or incorporating music into their classroom. Many primary teachers therefore consider music education the domain of the ‘music specialist’. Interestingly, we do not offer in any of our courses a primary music specialisation. Consequently, our primary teacher education students’ experience music as a watered down curriculum shared with the other performing arts areas (dance and drama).

These issues were explicitly embedded into workshop discussions to encourage students to consider their orientation to and confidence in teaching music or integrating music with other subjects. During class discussions students did report that when they were on practicum, many generalist teachers do engage with music in their lessons and also integrate music into their lessons. Students therefore became more aware of their responsibility as primary teacher to include or use music when they teach. It was most promising to see the workshops prove effective as students integrate what they learnt from the music workshops into the Music/HSE workshop. Importantly, students found working in groups affirming as there was no pressure to perform as a so-called soloist. Students also enjoyed the opportunity to be creative and improvise in their group compositions. In doing so, students realised the possibilities for effectively integrating music in to the primary in the primary classroom in ways that do not position music as
subservient to other disciplines. Students were also encouraged to critique the ways in which the Music/HSE workshop modelled the varied approaches to music integration outlined by Chrysostomou (2004): the co-equal approach, the affective style and the social integration approach.

In sum, Russell-Bowie (2006, p3) confirms that the arts have evolved with each society as a means of consolidating cultural and social identity and connecting past with future generations. By situating the arts within a broader interdisciplinary curriculum, we believe, this allowed students to discover and explore social issues and their relevance to students’ contemporary lives. Within the Bachelor of Teaching (Primary/Secondary) the interdisciplinary approach that Chrysostomou (2004) outlines proved an effective way for our students to exploring creative music making as a vehicle for integrated teaching and learning. Greene argues “we must make the arts central in school curricula because encounters with the arts have a unique power to release the imagination” (p.27). By promoting an interdisciplinary teaching and learning activity we aimed to promote connected learning beyond music and HSE. We wanted out students to engage in different disciplines by sharing the difficulties and richness of such possibilities (DeZure, n.d.). Newell (1998) reminds us that interdisciplinary learning broadens our context of knowledge making links to our discipline base knowledge. This has proved true for our students; we ask - does it for you?

References


