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Constructivism in the Elementary Music Classroom

The final step in completing my master's degree in music education was to write a thesis. One of the options, in 2010, was to "design and conduct a field project that is relevant to music teaching/learning that bears insight and application for other music teachers." My interest in constructivism, primarily its focus on active student learning and learning through experience, sparked further research and, ultimately, the topic of my thesis. After learning about constructivism, I wanted to experiment with using constructivist-style lessons in my music classroom to see how students responded musically. Because of my background in Kodály, I wanted to know if Kodály and constructivism could be used simultaneously in my classroom. So I devised an action research project to test that theory. This article is a condensed version of my thesis, with a focus on Kodály.

Constructivism

Constructivism is method of learning in which the teacher's role is to guide students in constructing their own knowledge. The fundamental idea of this learner-centered approach is that teachers provide learners with the means to create their own knowledge through experiences. Jean Piaget theorized that learning occurs when new information becomes intimately connected with prior knowledge and experiences (Foote, Vermette, & Battaglia, 2001, p. 17). When presented with new information, learners try to make connections to previously stored information

(knowledge and past experiences); this new information either transforms or does not transform their beliefs by building (or not building) new knowledge.

According to Morford (2007), "To learn, people must have opportunities to construct their own understanding of what is being taught, suggesting that the teacher's role might be to act as the provider of opportunities for the student" (p. 79). Therefore, learning means constructing and developing one's own knowledge with experiences is the essential component.

In the constructivist process of shaping experiences into knowledge, the child is an active participant. The focus shifts from the teacher to the student as the student becomes the active seeker of ideas, and the teacher becomes the facilitator (Campbell & Scott-Kasner, 2002, p. 22). In the learning process, the student's role is to mold his or her experiences and interpretations into information; the teacher's role is to create a supportive environment that allows students to engage in meaningful experiences. Furthermore, the role of the teacher is to guide, focus, suggest, lead, and evaluate the progress of the students (Marlow & Page, 2005, p. 36). Constructivist teachers structure activities so students can control the development of their own learning (Foote, Vermette, & Battaglia, 2001, p. 24).

It's been my experience that engaging students in the learning process through a variety of exploration activities yields more focused learners and, regarding classroom management, less-disruptive students.

When students are actively engaged in a lesson, their energy and focus are centered solely on the task. Within a constructivist-based lesson, teachers should lead students to discover solutions (e.g., through open-ended questions and thought-provoking dialogue) rather than simply provide correct answers. Elementary music educators can facilitate independent learning by providing students with (and encouraging the use of) musical skills such as solfège and rhythm syllables. These musical skills will help students explore music outside the classroom and contribute to a lifelong learning process, as it is their own experiences that guide them to knowledge.

Learning-by-doing activities are not sufficient for true constructivist learning to occur. Activities must encourage learners to connect *new* information with *old* information by engaging questions, elaborate inquiries, and collaborative communities.

Kodály Concept

Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967) based his educational approach on growing knowledge about how children learn (Choksy, 1999, p. 17). According to the Organization of American Kodály Educators (OAKE), the Kodály concept "is a philosophy of education and a concept of teaching; is a comprehensive program to train basic musical skills and teach the reading and writing of music; is an integration of many of the best ideas, techniques, and approaches to music education; is an experience-based approach to teaching" (OAKE, n.d).

By Holly Charles



*Kéira Brown's demo session at the 2013 OAKE conference.
Photo by Beth Pontiff.*

Lois Choksy, well-known in the Kodály field and a founder of OAKE, describes it this way:

The Kodály Method is a comprehensive, broadly based approach to musical education that draws on the best of past pedagogical practice. It is child developmental, experimental, and highly sequential. Its primary goal is to develop a love of music supported by understanding and knowledge—musical literacy in the most profound sense. The tools used to implement the Kodály teaching/learning process are movable *do* sofa, rhythm duration syllables, and hand signs; and the materials used are folk songs and the music of recognized composers. The philosophy expressed by Zoltán Kodály stressed the importance of beginning music education early, of using the child's own voice as the instrument of instruction, of placing music at the core of the curriculum, equal in importance with science, math, and language, of using the folk songs of the child's native language as the earliest teaching material, and of moving from these to the musical masterworks of Western civilization. Throughout Kodály's writings there is implicit the belief

that man is not complete without music. (Choksy, 1999, p. 17)

What is now known as the Kodály teaching sequence was developed in Hungary and “is a child-developmental one rather than one based on subject logic. In a subject-logic approach there is no relationship between the order of presentation and the order in which children learn easily” (Choksy, p. 9). The child-developmental approach to sequence within a subject “requires the arrangement of the subject matter into patterns that follow normal child abilities at various stages of growth” (Choksy, p. 10). One way Kodály's child-developmental approach is applied to the curriculum today is as the sequence prepare, present, practice.

Kodály and Constructivism

Kodály and constructivism are both philosophies of education that encourage the acquisition of knowledge through experience-based learning. In both, children learn music through active involvement in singing, moving, playing instruments, listening, improvising, and composing. It is the role of the educator to create a collaborative learning environment in which students acquire musical understanding and skill through being actively engaged (Scott, 2008, p. 5). The strongest connection between the two is their foundation in experience-based learning. Additionally, learning is centered on primary concepts. Regarding

assessment, both methodologies assess student learning in the context of teaching.

The highly sequential nature of the Kodály approach is more structured than the constructivist approach. Constructivism, unlike the Kodály concept, seeks and values students' points of view, adapts instruction to address student suppositions, and challenges the student to explore the learning environment. Furthermore, constructivism is strengthened by collaborative learning, (mainly social interaction and exchange of ideas). In the Kodály philosophy, the teacher is the leader and controller of the lessons, concepts, activities, and assessments; however, in constructivism, the teacher prepares, directs, and guides the learning while encouraging students to create their own knowledge from the available information.

Constructivism Project

As a music educator, I feel it is necessary to provide students with opportunities to develop their musical knowledge through their own musical experiences (an essentially constructivist philosophy). This goal can be achieved in a variety of ways, including encouraging independent thinking; allowing exploration of pitch, rhythm, and instruments; active questioning; and creation and improvisation.

In 2010, I was teaching in a public school with approximately 400 students in an affluent neighborhood in Boulder, Colorado. First through fifth grade received 90

minutes of general music a week (either two 45-minute periods or three 30-minute periods) and kindergartners received 40 minutes of general music a week. Each grade level presented its own annual show. Fourth and fifth graders could participate in chorus, which rehearsed before school and presented a winter and spring choral concert along with the fifth-grade musical. In addition to general music and chorus, there was an auditioned, fifth-grade-only handbell choir that rehearsed before school and performed at the concerts. In my classroom I had built-in risers, world instruments, African drums, a piano, Orff instruments, and more.

I conducted a study in which I observed how a class of first graders experienced and responded to constructivist-based music lessons and classroom environment. These lessons provided students with the opportunity to form their own music-based knowledge. I chose one of my first-grade classes, which had 22 students, to experience the constructivist-based lessons; their prior musical experience was in kindergarten with a different music teacher. The study lasted approximately 5 weeks, from late September to early November. The class met for music Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for 30 minutes.

My classroom was already Kodály-based for lesson planning, lesson structuring, and assessment. Elements of Kodály that I continued to use during my study included folks songs and traditional children's songs and games, a focus on the voice as the most natural instrument, and solfège as the best tool for ear training. I kept the educational guidelines of "prepare, present, practice," which did not interfere with the constructivist-style lessons. I found that the presentation of material in Kodály and constructivism was complementary; it was the involvement of the teacher in the learning and absorption of the material that differed.

Here are the steps I used when planning the constructivist-style lessons (Specific lessons will be discussed in detail in the Discussion section.):

1. Establish the musical elements and skills that need to be taught from the standards.
2. Search for songs and activities that pro-

vide students with entertaining ways to experience music.

3. Identify the simplest way for students to experience, learn, and retain musical information. (For example, if I want students to experience singing *so-mi*, I look for a song that only has *so-mi*, not a song with a variety of pitches.)
4. Search for songs that have accompanying activities that encourage students to create knowledge from experience.
5. Supplement curriculum series with additional materials.
6. Think outside the box by providing students with tangible ways to experience music (e.g., exploring pitches with pipe cleaners).
7. Ensure that students experience music in as many ways as possible: aurally, orally, visually, verbally, kinesthetically, physically, emotionally, and so forth.

Throughout this study, I wrote detailed journal entries following each lesson, describing the failures and successes of the lessons, along with student quotations. In addition to journal entries, other data included aural assessments, pre- and posttests, and student reflections.

Discussion

After the data were read, reviewed, and evaluated, three clear themes emerged from the constructivist-themed lessons: independence, creative thinking, and community building. I felt that these three themes were evident in the data and accurately displayed what the students learned in my classroom. All the results and conclusions made in this discussion are focused solely on this class and not necessarily generalizable to other children or classes. Regarding the pre- and posttest scores, I used them as a way to compare the students' knowledge of rhythm and pitch for two specific songs when the information was taught normally and when the students explored the information.

Independence

For students to grow as learners and as children, they must feel valued as individuals and safe to express their individuality in a variety of ways. In constructivism, the student is an active seeker of ideas; there-

fore, when children feel valued and safe, they openly share more about themselves, and their thoughts and ideas. This, in turn, creates an open environment for sharing and learning.

One example of how I encouraged individuality in the music classroom was in the Questions and Answers of *So-Mi* activity. The questions I asked included "What is your favorite color?" "What is your favorite animal?" and "What is your favorite food?" All students were guided to sing their answers on *so* and *mi*. Some answers were concise, such as "pink," "hot dogs," and "cats": whereas other answers were more specific or elaborate, such as "green, blue, and red," "lavender," "owls," and "Australian animals."

One of the questions I used was about colors. I sang the following question:

"Rachel, what color would you be?"
s m m f m r r d

Each student was prompted (when it was his or her turn in the circle) to sing the answer on *so* and *mi* (which students are familiar with). One student might answer,

"I'd be pink."
s m s-m

As the students continued to answer the question (over multiple lessons), their answers became increasingly more complicated and elaborate, such as, "I'd be all the colors in the world." "I'd be every color in the world but not pink." "I'd be all the colors in the world but not pink and purple." "I'd be every color in the world that sparkles." "I'd be light blue and light green and light pink." and "I'd be Christmas colors." Students' more and more elaborate answers forced them to adjust their solfège. For example:

"I'd be all the colors in the world."
s m s s m-m s m s-m

Through answering this simple question, the students were expressing their individuality. Non-constructivist educators might have insisted that student answers be in a specific format or follow certain guidelines; however, I allowed students to be in control of their learning through their own

answers and encouraged their independence. Additionally, for assessment purposes some educators would want restrict all students to singing the same simple pattern of *so* and *mi*, only giving the students the option of a single-word color. However, it is certainly possible to aurally assess a student's ability to sing solfège whether they sing "pink" or "all the colors in the world."

In another lesson, we used the book *Mary Wore Her Red Dress* (The words of the book are "Mary wore a red dress, a red dress, a red dress. Mary wore a red dress all day long."). At the conclusion of singing the book, I sang, "Mrs. Charles wore her pink shoes, pink shoes, pink shoes. Mrs. Charles wore her pink shoes all day long," replacing "Mary" with my name and "a red dress" with something I was wearing. I asked each student to think of what piece of clothing they would like to sing about. Some students answered "red shirt" and "green pants"; however, some students provided more elaborate responses, such as "rainbow socks," "football shirt," or "cupcake dress." After each student gave their answer, the entire class sang their line. For example, "Jason wore his green socks, green socks, green socks. Jason wore his green socks all day long."

The students actively participated in the Question and Answers of *So-Mi* and the *Mary Wore Her Red Dress* activities because they enjoyed sharing something about themselves. I have discovered that when students feel valued, they participate more eagerly and share their ideas; additionally, activities that highlighted their individuality made them proud about themselves and their role in the music classroom. With that being said, as a result, students participated more in musical activities and had fewer inhibitions.

Creative Thinking

Throughout the course of this study, I observed students thinking creatively and sharing new ideas. One singing game that we played was "Doggie, Doggie." In "Doggie, Doggie" everyone sits in a circle with one student in the middle. Everyone sings, "Doggie, doggie, where's your bone?" The student in the middle of the circle closes his or her eyes and sings, "Someone took it

from my home. Who has my bone?" The student with the bone sings, "I have your bone." Then the student in the middle has to guess who has the bone by aurally identifying the singer of "I have your bone." One student asked if she could be a kitty. When asked how that would work with the song, the student sang, "Kitty, kitty, Where's your fish? Someone took it from my dish." Another student sang an alternative, "Kitty, kitty, Where's your mouse? Someone took it from my house." In the next class, another student asked if she could be a mouse and sang "Mousey, mousey, Where's your cheese? Someone took it from my knees." From that point on, when playing "Doggie, Doggie," students could choose ether dog, kitty (with fish), kitty (with mouse), or mouse (with cheese). My continual encouragements for students to share their thoughts allowed them to drive lessons.

In another lesson, I asked students to draw a picture, write the word, and notate the rhythm of a Halloween item for the song "Pumpkin Stew." (The words are, "Pumpkin Stew, Pumpkin Stew, What shall we put in our Pumpkin Stew?") After everyone sang that and stirred the pot, each student (taking turns around the circle) clapped the rhythm and spoke what they drew. For example, one student might say "witches" and clap *ti-ti* as they say it. After showing his picture of witches (which also says "witches" and has the symbol for *ti-ti* on the paper), the student places it in the large pot of "stew." The song continues. One goal of the activity was to observe and assess student's ability to notate the rhythm of Halloween words with combinations of *ta* and *ti-ti*.) The Halloween items drawn included a haunted house, a haunted bat, vampires, a haunted bus, a witch bus, monsters, devils, witches, Halloween bags, and a Halloween parade. The students greatly enjoyed adding their own Halloween composition to the pumpkin stew, as illustrated by the beaming smiles on their faces (and subsequent requests to repeat this activity).

Community Building

Through classroom rules, established norms, my demeanor, and a variety of building activities, I have established and built a community of learners in my class-

room. By a "community of learners," I am referring to a safe and welcoming classroom environment in which my classroom functions as a learning community that supports and encourages learners and learning. As part of our community of learners, we often switch the roles of leader and follower. In the Questions on *So-Mi* activity, the students were able to sing questions to me as I did to them. They were thrilled to ask me questions. In asking their questions, some sang, "Mrs. Charles" on *so-so-mi-mi* and others on *so-mi-so-mi*. Students asked questions about a variety of my favorite things, including my favorite chips, movie, fruit, hair, shoes to wear, picture, sea animal, dragon, tree, fish, and least favorite planet. I answered every question the students asked me, which surprised some, and encouraged them to think of more questions. By sharing something about themselves and expressing their individuality, the students felt accepted and acknowledged; by building a safe environment for students to share their favorite things (in this instance), the students will, in turn I hope, share other music-related opinions, feelings, and emotions.

In my opinion, collaboration is a large factor of community building. Collaboration was highlighted by the Trick or Treat lesson plan in which students selected words to match the rhythm I played on the drum. In this lesson, I asked students to choose any Halloween word they wanted for each rhythm: quarter note (*ta*), eighth notes (*ti-ti*), and half note (*ta-a*), all of which students were very familiar with. "Bat" was selected for *ta*, "candy" was selected for *ti-ti*, and "ghost" was selected for *ta-a*. The students spoke the words, clapped, stomped, and moved to all three rhythms, spoken and unspoken, and with a piano and with a drum.

Students were able to adjust their movements to the rhythmic changes on both the piano and the drum without verbal prompts. I observed that the pitch element of the piano, as well as the visual element of the drum helped students aurally and visually distinguish between the rhythmic patterns.

I then asked students what the first step in trick-or-treating is and wrote that on the board, then I asked them for the next step,

and so forth. After all steps were on the board, I asked students if they wanted to make any changes, additions, or deletions. By connecting the rhythms to the trick-or-treating demonstration, students identified *ta* as sounding like knocking, *ti-ti* as sounding like running away, and *ta-a* as sounding like walking up to the house. I led the students through musical trick-or-treating with piano and drum, as well as with and without the following vocal prompts. The trick-or-treating demonstration had six steps:

Step 1: Put on your costume and grab your bag.

Step 2: Creep up to a door (*ta-a ta-a*).

Step 3: Knock on the door (*ta ta ta*)

Step 4: Say "Trick or Treat,"

Step 5: Say "Thank you,"

Step 6: Run away (*ti-ti ti-ti ti-ti ti-ti*)

Students were encouraged to build upon their own knowledge and drive the lesson because I asked them to decide the Halloween words that corresponded to the rhythms (*ta*, *ti-ti*, and *ta-a*) and to determine the steps in the trick-or-treating process; therefore, the students were able to build their own knowledge by being an active part of this activity. The musical goal of the lesson was to add rhythmic elements to the trick-or-treating process, and by doing so, allow the teacher to assess student's abilities to aurally differentiate between *ta*, *ti-ti*, and *ta-a*, as well as the corresponding words, movements, and actions. This lesson built upon students' understanding of Halloween and rhythm; as a result, students created new information based on previous knowledge.

Educational Implications

The goal of education should be to provide opportunities for students to build learning by connecting it with personal experience. Understanding cannot be handed to someone; it must be provoked through relevant activities. Therefore, activities should compel learners to access their experiences, knowledge, and beliefs. The teacher's goal in constructivist education is to encourage students and provide them with opportunities to gain more complex understandings. The constructivist-supported phi-

losophy of "teach the child, not the subject" motivates us, as educators, to focus on the children in our classrooms.

If the focus is solely on the subject matter, information may be less likely to be properly absorbed; however, if the focus is on our children, with an emphasis on music (or any subject), the children should create knowledge from experiencing the subject matter. For example, the lessons in which students shared a personal element, such as their favorite color, were focused on the children. By shifting the focus and the emphasis, the students were able to create their own knowledge about themselves (their favorites, what color they would be, what they like/dislike) and music (rhythm, solfège, movement) by exploring themselves while experiencing music.

Musical Implications

What does constructivist learning mean for elementary music educators? In my opinion, it means that through musical experiences, children are able to construct their own knowledge of what is being taught. For example, students can aurally identify quarter- and eighth-note rhythms in a song (and demonstrate this through written assessment) by experiencing the song, not simply singing it. Experiencing music, for children, is more than singing, playing, and moving; they need to be given the freedom to experience the song as they feel they need to.

By forming their own knowledge, built from experiences, students are able to advance in a variety of ways (for example, their creativity grows when they are encouraged to think and explore past the lesson). In addition, it means that students benefit greatly from playing an active role in their education. By focusing on the students' holistic experience (meaning a well-rounded whole experience rather than only a part of the whole, e.g., music separate from other subjects), the learning goal is centered on creating knowledge from experiences.

One goal of my study was to create a constructivist classroom environment that built a high level of trust and encouraged students to share their thoughts, ideas, questions, and observations. I felt that by establishing this learner-centered environment,

the students would feel comfortable exploring and sharing their learning processes (this can be applied to any subject and any methodology). After the conclusion of the study, I observed many noteworthy encounters with the same class of students. One student stated, while notating "Engine, Engine Number Nine" with rhythm hearts, that *ti-ti ti-ti ti-ti ta*, the rhythm of phrase one, is the same rhythm as phrase one of the song "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." That student made a very significant musical (rhythmic) connection entirely on her own, which illustrated independence. Learning, more specifically student-based learning, did not stop at the end of the constructivist-style lessons; students continued openly sharing how they were creating their own musical knowledge from their musical experiences.

Conclusion

I found that the students gained a stronger knowledge of musical skills, increased their participation, and enjoyed the activities more when lessons were focused on teaching for student learning instead of teaching for student knowledge. Student knowledge occurred automatically as a result of student learning. Reflecting back on the atmosphere of that class, in comparison with my other first-grade class, the students' energy for learning took off after their comfort level was expanded through collaborative activities. Students quickly started (and continued through the end of the year) sharing their musical discoveries and ideas, which in turn sparked other students' discoveries and ideas; learning was quickly built upon learning. To me as an educator, a new value was placed on student experiences and ultimately, students learning from their own experiences.

All in all, the goal of constructivism in the elementary music classroom is to provide students with as many opportunities to learn and create their own knowledge as possible. Our students learn only from the opportunities we create; therefore, we must strive to open their eyes through numerous musical journeys. Students must be motivated to learn to create lasting knowledge. How do we motivate students to learn? Through my findings, I have discovered that as educators, our role is to support and enhance the

learning process, as well as foster learning through experiences. Encouraging students to take an active role in the education process will allow them to form knowledge that will last throughout their lifetimes.

I would like to leave you with one final thought—a quotation from Kodály about the role of the teacher,

Teach music and singing at school in such a way that it is not a torture but a joy for the pupil; instill a thirst for finer music in him, a thirst which will last for a lifetime. Music must not be approached from its intellectual, rational side, nor should it be conveyed to the child as a system of algebraic symbols, or as the secret writing of a language with which he has no connection. The way should be paved for direct intuition. (Kodály, 1974, p. 120)

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