

INTEGRATING LANGUAGE AND TECHNOLOGY IN MUSIC

Working with music technology is exciting in itself and can really engage students, but as GAVIN McLEAN explains, there are further challenges: using it to support a language-based approach to songwriting and build a rich learning environment.

Using a language-based approach to songwriting in the classroom has been a developing process for me over the last few years. After ten years of working with adults and secondary-age students in music, media and technology areas, I am now adapting the method to suit learners in primary years. Giving students the skills to develop multiple forms of literacy and grow towards being self-regulating learners is an area that offers a wide range of possibilities for teachers using music technology.

With computers now so powerful, the age of loop-based production tools has arrived! I have for many years used MIDI as a main tool. Products like Sony's ACID have revolutionised my songwriting classes by giving students the opportunity to combine their ideas based in MIDI with all the amazing sounds in ACID that can make their songs sound so much more professional.

The intuitive process and the sheer fluidity of this software means that we can get good results very quickly, even with students having short attention spans! With the addition of products like Sony's Vegas Video and Vegas Movie Studio, students can expand from songwriting into experimentation with video and visual media.

This new computer power has presented us with the opportunity to start working in the area of media literacy, demystifying the songwriting and music production process. Through producing a high quality product, students can suddenly see behind their role as a passive consumer and user of music products. They can gain an insight into how the music they hear on the radio was created using a variety of equipment and software. This takes time and a great deal of skill to do well. Their production skills and sense of 'what sounds good' can develop considerably over time. So, where do we start? For many years I have used the Ausmusic Songwriting Module 10.1 as the foundation of the songwriting method. I have found this one of the best modules and it has become my songwriting bible. I teach a method, because young songwriters need to be coached to produce. They can be very attached to their early attempts at writing a song. It is quite difficult sometimes to get them to let go and start a new one. This method frees them up to produce more songs and also gives them a structure by which to work.

Since this is a language-based approach, we always begin with a title. First, however, we discuss what makes music 'good'. It is important to set in place in the classroom that the understanding that taste is subjective. Further, it is important that students don't judge each others' taste in music. We discuss what features we like about our favourite songs. These could be the beat, the lyrics, the chorus and so on—we are starting to use the language of songwriting. Some students will naturally question this process, and say 'Why can't I start with a beat?' The answer is that experienced songwriters start in all sorts of different ways, and they may not use this way in the future, but as a group exercise to get started this method is excellent.

A way to attack this is to use titles, headlines, catchphrases and slogans as a starting point. A pile of magazines and lots of paper and pencils are useful here. A process of elimination narrows the options. The list can be kept in the students' portfolio as a starting point for their next song! Word association can be a useful tool to understand the power of words to create an idea. We finally realise that the title is important, for its ability to convey the meaning of the song.

Once we have a title, we move on to the 'angle'. This is one sentence about what the song is about. It takes quite a bit of work to get the students to be able to do this, but it is important because it is the angle that sets the context of the song and keeps us on track when we start writing lyrics. The idea of the 'obvious' and 'not obvious' angle is important here and gives us the wonderful opportunity to introduce metaphor and simile!

Students can create a scrapbook of ideas and images from magazines. We talk with them about how some songs can tell stories and some are just about attitudes or emotions. Use examples: the title Blue Turtle could be about a turtle swimming in the sea, or it could be about a sad person who hides in his or her 'shell.'

Notice that we haven't been near a computer yet? It's really important to get our students writing, drawing, manipulating images and ideas, and thinking about the language, before jumping onto the computers. A discussion on style is useful here too. This can be seen as 'the way we do something'.

We want them to first create their chorus. This is almost a non-linear approach because the chorus usually, but not always, comes after the verses in a song. However, through listening to some contemporary popular music we soon discover together that the chorus contains this thing called the 'vocal hook'—a repeated pattern of music with a phrase that 'gets into your head'. It doesn't take our street-savvy young people long to realise its purpose. After all, a contemporary pop song is just a three-minute advertisement for the artists' CD, isn't it? Are we touching on some media literacy issues here?

The method then takes us to the structure of the chorus. The essence of a good contemporary popular song is simplicity. We aim to have a four-line chorus with the title in the first and third lines, and the second and fourth lines usually different. Once we have this chorus working we can look at phrasing. Yes kids, on to the computers!

We need to build a 'groove'. This usually will be drums and bass to start with, since the rhythm section provides the foundation. Discuss down beats and count bars. This is where ACID is great because its loops can be opened up in a window and examined in detail. Ask the student where the beat is and to count it out. The downbeat will help us to count bars. The challenge is to fit the chorus over the groove. If they can hum a tune that's great, but just being able to speak their lyrics (like a poem) over the beat is enough at this stage.

Once we have the chorus structured we flesh it out to include chords. This might be the first time we introduce theory with our music students; or they can use ACID loops to put in piano, synthesiser or strings. As they gain in confidence the vocal 'hook' will start to appear. We are after a two- or three-note melody that repeats.

Once the chorus is in place, catchy and working, we can then start on the verses. These are different each time, whereas the chorus repeats. I work on a four-line chorus and a four- or eight-line verse, depending upon the length of the sentences. Here we can start counting bars and talking about structure and repeating patterns.

The music technology helps here because we can start cutting and pasting whole sections of the music on the computer. Once we have the structure of the chorus and built some verses, we can introduce the idea of arrangements: things like introductions, breakdowns and middle eights. Suddenly we are using a whole new language.

Using this method creates valuable connections for students between language, technology and their own musical creativity. Their songs begin to take on a life of their own. Our students are now streaming their music to the Web in partnership with Schools Television. We also have our own school radio station: students are able to hear their original music on air right next to commercially released music. Our next phase?—to build a 'blue screen' and start experimenting with music video!

THE WRITER, GAVIN MCLEAN

Gavin McLean is the Coordinator of The Da Vinci Centre at Wooranna Park Primary School in Dandenong North, near Melbourne. The Da Vinci Centre is a specialised IT, science and technology integration centre, soon to become part of the SoundHouse Alliance. Here students are given the opportunity to explore 'passion projects', which includes songwriting and exploring digital media. The school has launched its own radio station and is exploring a new partnership with Schools Television.

Gavin was formerly creative technology coordinator at Wellington High School in New Zealand, teaching digital media, film and television studies. He set up a student radio station as a Young Enterprise Scheme, which won two national awards in Communication and Technology. He is an award-winning sound designer and composer of music for film and television.

E-CONTACTS:

The writer, Gavin McLean: <mclean.gavin.j@edumail.vic.gov.au>

Ausmusic: www.ausmusic.org.au

Tel: 03 9696 2422

Schools Television: www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/schoolstv

This site gives information about schools television applicable in Victoria, and some available for SA and TAS. For Western Australia the service can be found at: www.dlgrd.wa.gov.au/westlink

Sonic Foundry—sold its desktop software technologies to Sony Pictures Digital on July 31, 2003. This includes Sound Forge, Vegas, ACID and many other multimedia production products.

—New Website: <http://mediasoftware.sonypictures.com> (then click 'Products').

SoundHouse Alliance: www.soundhouse.com.au

Wooranna Park PS Radio Station:

Tune to the Webcast on the school website: www.woorannaparkps.vic.edu.au

(Direct transmission on 87.5 FM is limited

to a radius of 200m!)