

## **The Blues: An Interdisciplinary Project**

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### **OVERVIEW**

This project was created at two high schools where I was a music educator and administrator to respond to the students' desire for creative musical activities in an educational setting. As a veteran music teacher, my search to find a way to channel the students' enthusiasm and excitement about music resulted in *The Blues: An Interdisciplinary Project*, an immersion of music into other subject areas.

The blues was selected because students listen to music directly influenced by the blues outside the classroom, because the participating teachers expressed an interest in exploring instructional strategies to integrate the blues into the curriculum, and because, as a classically trained musician, I had had minimal exposure to the blues until I met the late blues musician Paul Butterfield, whom I credit with shifting my musical orientation and giving me a richer life in music. This project is in honor of his musicianship.

### **METHOD**

Teachers from two high schools in Dutchess County, New York, were guided through the process of developing interdisciplinary units of study, immersing the blues into the curricula of the following subject areas: American history, business math, communications/technology, economics, English language arts, health education, and music.

Informal discussion and formal interviews at the beginning of the project with the teachers assessed the participants' prior knowledge of interdisciplinary curricula. The results were that the majority of the teachers, fifteen out of seventeen, had either minimal or no experience designing curricula. Two participants had prior experience writing a curriculum for an interdisciplinary project. All of the participants said that they would benefit from any resources that could be made available for them to use as a guide in creating their units of study for the interdisciplinary project. None of the participants had written a curriculum with a musical genre as the organizing center or concept around which the other subject areas' lesson plans were designed.

### **Interdisciplinary Instructional Models and Essential Questions**

The teachers received the following interdisciplinary instructional models to use as a resource, *Interdisciplinary Curriculum: Design and Implementation* by Jacobs (Ed.) (1989), *Interdisciplinary Concept Model* by Jacobs and Borland (1986) and an adaptation of the *Curriculum and Assessment Design Process* developed by Martin-Kniep, Cunningham and Fiege (1998) with a variety of options for constructing interdisciplinary units of study.

At the first planning session at each high school the teachers were asked to consider the following essential questions:

1. What do you want your students to know as a result of your unit of study?
2. How will you facilitate your students' understanding of music as a form of expression?
3. How will your interdisciplinary design immerse the blues into the curriculum?
4. In what way/s will you assess your students' understanding of the connections to be made between music and the other disciplines of knowledge?

In addition, the teachers were asked to consider the following questions as they go through the design process:

1. What are the challenges for teachers in designing and implementing an interdisciplinary curricular design at the secondary level?

2. How can a high school replicate a similar interdisciplinary project into its existing program? What are the practical adjustments that are necessary such as providing common planning time for teacher preparation, and designating a facilitator to assist teachers through the design process?
3. In what way/s has this instructional model maintained the integrity of the schools' music education programs?

### **Case Study 1: New York State Alternative High School**

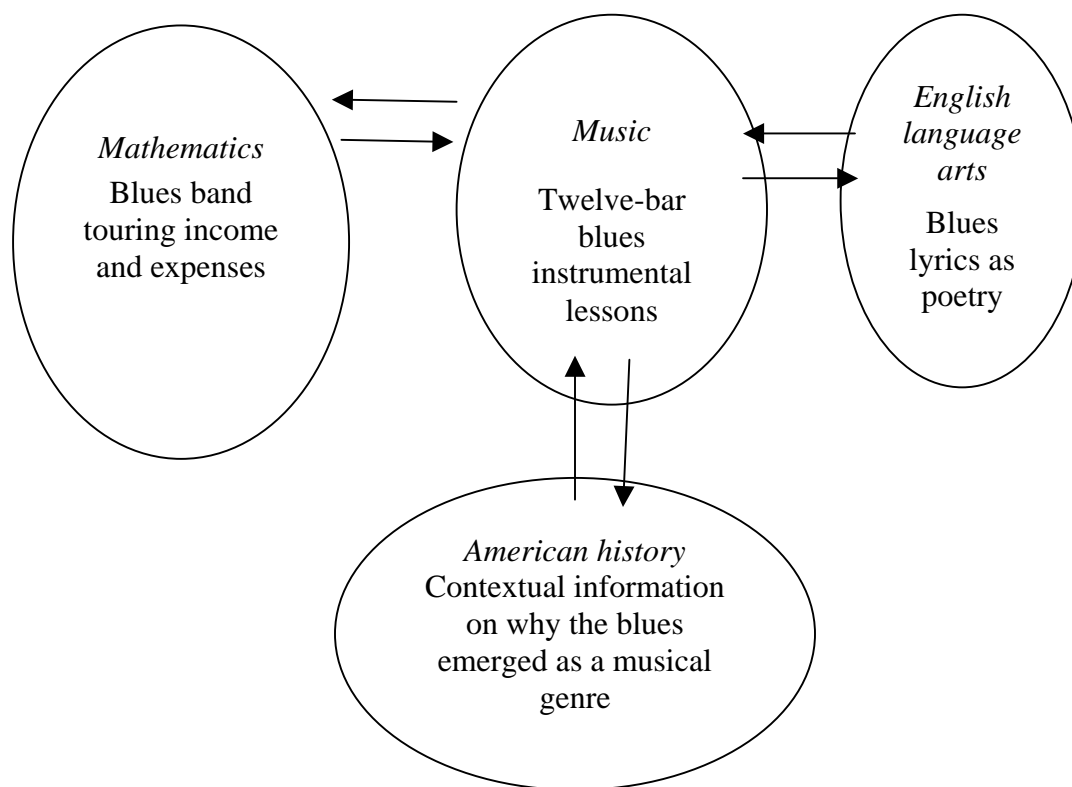
The administrators of an alternative high school (Grades 9-12) serving students classified emotionally disabled agreed to pilot the project. At this point in time, the school did not offer their students any music courses. All musical experiences were held as after-school activities. The high school's visual arts classes fulfilled state requirements for arts instruction at the commencement level.

Meetings with the high school administrators and members of the high school faculty expressed their enthusiasm for expanding the informal after-school instrumental lessons and participating in *The Blues: An Interdisciplinary Project* to further the students' musical experience in an educational setting. Funds were allocated to hire a part-time music teacher and to purchase instruments.

Figure 1 shows the participating subject areas for the interdisciplinary units of study at the alternative high school.

Figure 1

#### **The Alternative High School Curricular Design**



In preparation for this project at the beginning of the school year, the alternative high school music teachers began a series of lessons- the basics in playing guitar, bass, and drums. When the blues project began in the winter, instruction focused on the 12-bar blues chord progression and students continued to practice their instruments after the blues unit of study ended to keep up their musical skills and practice for their performances in the end-of-year Arts Showcase.

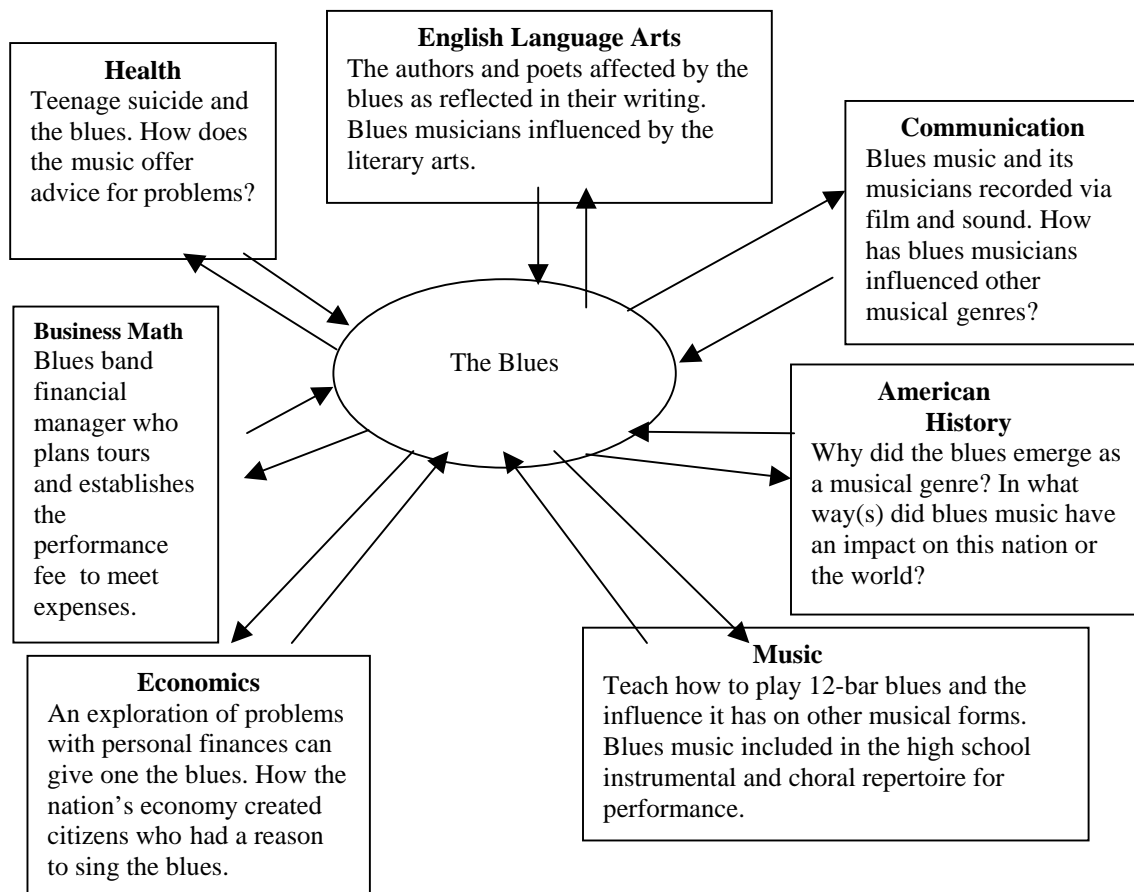
### Case Study 2: New York State Senior High School

Special education and general education teachers were excited about participating in the design of an interdisciplinary curriculum project integrating the blues into the required curricula. The music teacher said, “this is the first time anyone has asked us to participate in a project like this, and I’ve been here almost 30 years.” An English teacher stated, “The students walk around here listening to music at all times. Why not capitalize on that and use music to get them interested in their subjects?”

Figure 2 shows the participating subject areas for the senior high school units of study.

Figure 2

#### The Senior High School Curricular Design



## **RESULTS**

### **Unit of Study Implementation**

The alternative high school teachers and the senior high communications teacher implemented their units of study during the course of this design project.

The communications/technology teacher began implementing the unit of study immediately after the interdisciplinary design workshops. In serving as assistant principal concurrent with facilitating this project, I had the opportunity to hold formal and informal meetings with the communications teacher throughout the implementation of the unit. He found that he needed more time than anticipated to complete his unit of study. This was due to the postproduction work and time needed to create a CD and DVD, along with posting the blues performance on the Web site.

1. The following participants created units of study integrating the blues into their subject area:
  - (a) All five English language arts teachers
  - (b) All four social studies teachers

- (c) The communications/technology teacher
- (d) Three of the four music teachers
- (e) Both mathematics teachers

The health education teacher did not meet the criteria for an interdisciplinary unit of study. The health unit focused on someone getting the blues as a result of illness. Although the teacher distributed a chapter from *Blues People: Negro Music in America* by Leroi Jones, the connection between the chapter and the material covered in class was inconsequential as an instructional strategy to deepen student understanding of how the blues as a state of mind has been expressed through music.

In addition, although one of the alternative high school teachers fulfilled the music lessons of teaching the musical skills and techniques necessary to learn how to play the blues, there wasn't any connection made to the units of study being presented in the other subject areas participating in the project. Therefore, this unit of study did not result in an interdisciplinary unit.

2. Instructional strategies promoting students experiencing blues music and furthered their knowledge of why this musical genre emerged.

- (a) All five English language arts teachers
- (b) Three out of four social studies teachers
- (c) The communications/technology teacher
- (d) All four music teachers
- (e) One of the two business math teachers

Three participants—health education, business math and social studies—did not meet the criteria because the historical events that contributed to the blues emerging as a musical genre were omitted from their units of study.

3. Blues music immersion into the classroom as an instructional tool.

- (a) All English language arts teachers
- (b) All social studies teachers
- (c) The communications/technology teacher
- (d) All music teachers
- (e) One of the two business math teachers

All of the teachers, except the health education teacher, created at least one lesson using music as an integral part of the content material thereby, creating an opportunity for the students to experience blues music.

4. Related educational resources and materials were included in the unit of study.

- (a) All five English language arts teachers
- (b) All social studies teachers
- (c) The communications/technology teacher
- (d) All four music teachers
- (e) One business math teacher \*
- (f) The health education teacher

The above listed participants included in their units of study a list of instructional materials and/or resources to distribute to their students over the course of the unit of study.

\* One business math teacher was diagnosed with cancer and could not fully participate in the project.

### **Related literature**

During the initial planning stage of the project, *Music Educators Journal* (March 2001) published a special focus issue on interdisciplinary curricula. This edition presented various viewpoints of the concept of interdisciplinary design and the implications for a school's music program when a music teacher is invited to participate in an interdisciplinary project. Music educators and researchers (Barrett, 2001; Berke, 2000; Ellis & Fouts, 2001; Snyder, 2001; Wiggins, 2001) inform the field of the potential impact an interdisciplinary curricular design may have on a music program. The authors expressed an interest in preserving instructional time for music education that might be reduced if music teachers are

involved in interdisciplinary projects. As noted by teachers at the senior and alternative high schools implementing this project, the senior high music teacher stated that this interdisciplinary project was the first time he had ever been invited to participate in a curriculum project. The alternative high school part-time music teachers/musicians viewed this project as an opportunity to offer more musical experiences to their students.

An example of the beneficial effect of an interdisciplinary design on instruction were apparent in the American history lessons presenting the contextual information necessary for the students to understand why and how the blues emerged as a musical genre. Beane (1995) and Pogonowski (2001), state that contextual information is essential to a comprehensive music education. An interdisciplinary curriculum may in effect, support the music educators' teaching practice as demonstrated by this project by integrating music into the other subject areas, created a venue for class exploration and discussion as to why this musical genre emerged. This project created the opportunity for the music teachers to devote classroom time to musical instruction and their students received important contextual information from the other collaborating subject areas.

### **PROJECT REFLECTIONS**

The participating teachers concurred that the effort required, Case (1994) to engage in designing interdisciplinary blues units of study was justified because the knowledge gained through the interdisciplinarity of the units of study offered students a deeper understanding of the content material under study.

The Blues: An Interdisciplinary Project was an opportunity to create an instructional model designed to aid in the creating and expanding of a school's music program as demonstrated by the interdisciplinary projects designed by the teachers of both case studies. The curricular design served as the catalyst to persuade the alternative high school administrators, Case Study 1 of the value in offering a credit-bearing music course for their students. As a result of this project, a general music course was scheduled for the upcoming school year, with its teacher recruited to participate in this project.

It is recommended that if there is an interest in replicating an interdisciplinary project such as this instructional model, it is important to invite teachers to participate who are creative thinkers with an interest in applying that asset to developing instructional activities. Teachers who are enthusiastic, willing to share their time with colleagues, and are seeking to employ creative teaching strategies are important characteristics for team participants.

Two examples from the blues project, the alternative high school social studies teacher created a time-line aligning musical genres with historical events to illustrate how music may reflect the period in time when the music was written. Another example, the senior high school communications/technology teacher realized that this curricular project could fulfill three course assignments: recording a live performance, filming a performance, and conducting a formal interview to be taped for airing at a later date on the school's television station. Through the blues performance that took place at the senior high school, the communications/technology students were given the opportunity to take part in an exciting instructional experience. As well as the other participating teachers and their students experienced a live blues performance as one of the project's culminating activities.

One of the criteria for this project was to ensure that the participating music teachers' were able to optimize their classroom time on music instruction. By developing an interdisciplinary model with a musical genre as the organizing center of the curriculum and immersing the blues into the other subject areas, music was the focal concept for the project, thereby acknowledging and reinforcing the importance of music as an integral part of our schools' liberal arts education.

To determine if the objectives of this project were fulfilled, in conjunction with reviewing the effectiveness of the completed units of study, the questions posed to the teachers at the onset of the project were observed with the following findings:

## Project Findings

1. What are the challenges for teachers in designing and implementing an interdisciplinary curricular design at the secondary level?

Two challenges for the participants were to incorporate this project into the required curriculum as set forth by New York State and to prepare students for the standardized assessments, i.e., the New York State Regents. The senior high school teachers who had colleagues in their department were able to collaborate on their designs and shared resources and materials regularly through common planning times within the department. It was a challenge to schedule meeting times across departments since all participants were limited to two workshops. Alternative high school teachers were faced with students' behavioral issues and high student absenteeism. As a result, participants had to spend more class time reviewing material for those students who had missed class, and to designate more time for in-class projects (e.g., learning how to play 12-bar blues) than originally anticipated and allocated in their lesson plans.

2. How can a high school introduce this curricular design into its existing program? What are the practical adjustments that are necessary such as providing common planning time for teacher preparation, and designate a facilitator to assist teachers through the design process?

Prior to scheduling classes for the next school year, teachers interested in participating in this interdisciplinary design project were asked to include in their schedule common planning time to work in teams across grade levels or within a grade level. The opportunity for summer curricular work, as was the case at the senior high school, gave teachers the opportunity to develop curriculum without full-time teaching assignments. The summer schedule also made it easier for teachers to arrange common planning time with other participants.

Another consideration was the benefit to the project if the facilitator/curriculum coordinator had a prior history of working with the participants, and was a music educator with extensive experience designing interdisciplinary curricula.

3. In what way/s has this instructional model maintained the integrity of the schools' music education programs?

The premise of this project was that the instructional time of the music teachers participating in this project would be devoted to teaching musical skills and knowledge. All related subject matter (i.e., contextual information) would be taught by the content area specialist.

The alternative high school did not have a credit-bearing music course. As a result of this project, a certified part-time music teacher was hired for the credit-bearing course; musical instruments were purchased for the program; and a grant was awarded for professional blues musicians to establish a music residency for one semester at the alternative high school to teach the students how to compose and record blues music.

At the senior high school, the music teachers' programs and repertoire were expanded by introducing blues music into the performance repertoire; offering the music teachers an opportunity for the first time in many years to take part in curricular design with teachers from other disciplines; and receiving funding for a blues performance during school.

4. What samples of student work will be good means of assessment to determine the impact of this interdisciplinary curricular design on the teaching and learning of music and music education?

Three areas were highlighted for assessing student work:

1. Project-based learning. The participants were encouraged to create instructional activities to prepare their students for a culminating project that would serve as an assessment of their understanding of the unit of study's content material. One project was the business math class's application of the principles of accounting to planning and managing a performance tour for a blues band. Another example was the communications/technology class filming and recording a live blues performance, along with conducting and filming interviews with musicians in the school's television studio. In each case, students were asked to apply what they learned as a result of this interdisciplinary design. A student nicknamed "DJ" was assigned to create a set of blues music to play in class along with providing an oral report, with biographical information about the musicians whose music was playing.

2. Music performances. The teachers measured students' musical skills and music appreciation as a result of class instruction by having them play and record their in-class performances of the blues. Students taught their peers how to play 12-bar blues as a strategy to reinforce their own knowledge of the blues form.

3. Written assignments. Students wrote reports about blues musicians, and conducted interviews with visiting musicians. In addition, they analyzed lyrics and relating them to the contextual information learned about the period of time in which the lyrics were written. Students developed a time-line correlating the life and musical career of musicians with events of that historic period.

A dialogue with district-level administrators at both sites was initiated through the implementation of this project about the value added to the secondary-level liberal arts education by integrating music with other subject areas. However, certain issues and concerns arose throughout this project need to be addressed before implementing another interdisciplinary project of a similar nature.

To the credit of the alternative high school administration, a music course was added to the course offerings for this project. Funds were allocated to purchase instruments. A part-time retired certified music teacher was hired to teach the music course. This participant's prior teaching career was devoted to conducting a high school chorus. With no prior experience teaching students who were classified emotionally disabled, classroom management became an issue for this teacher. The other teachers participating in the project felt that the music teacher was "turning the kids off" to music because of how he interacted with the students. In addition, since this was the first year that the alternative high school had a music class, the combination of a new course, a new curricular design, a teacher who did not have experience working with special needs students, and behavioral incidents hindered the teaching of lessons and the completion of the project's music component. In hindsight, the implementation of the unit of study may have been more effective if the newly-created music course had the benefit of being taught once without simultaneously attempting to implement the interdisciplinary curricular design.

The following year, the alternative high school music teacher was not invited to return. The administration decided that the music residency funded by a grant would suffice as a music course for the alternative high school students. The eight-week blues residency met once a week, for approximately two hours. Students received some instruction playing 12-bar blues chord progression on guitar, basic music composition, and recording techniques. The music course was replaced with this music residency.

In the senior high school, faculty and administration considered this interdisciplinary curriculum an innovative instructional strategy. They noted that more disciplines of knowledge participated in this curricular design than in any prior curricular project. A blues performance and interview with world-class musicians, *Little Sammy and the Levon Helm Band* were held during the school day for students and faculty. Future interdisciplinary projects were under consideration with the support of the district's deputy superintendent and director of administration. The district offered the participants stipends to write curricula and present workshops to the other faculty members. As for paying teachers to write curricula, the majority of participants would only work on this project for the number of hours for which they were being compensated. Therefore, when the participants calculated that they had fulfilled their eight-hour commitment, all work on this project ended. If revisions to a unit of study submitted by a participant were needed, the teacher may not have agreed to continue working on their unit, as was the case with the health education teacher. The teachers expressed an interest in continuing to develop their units of study if the district provided release time during the regular school day. The time allocated for the participants to continue developing interdisciplinary curricula has, to date, not been arranged by the district.

## DISCUSSION

In 1994, the New York State Learning Standards for Music were developed defining what knowledge was considered to be of importance and the expectations regarding what every child should know as a result of a comprehensive music education program in New York State. Since its inception, fulfilling the New York State Learning Standards has presented a challenge for many music educators in this state because insufficient instructional time is allocated to music education during the school year.

Given these time constraints, music departments and their teachers have to decide which elements of music education should be included in the scope and sequence of their music curriculum. The Blues: An Interdisciplinary Project is one example of an instructional model that provided lesson plans with a musical genre's contextual information, illustrating for students how music may have been impacted by prevailing cultural and societal ideas and modes, and conversely, how music may have influenced American culture. An exploration of music and cultural history may not be able to take place in the music classroom given the need to maintain performance rehearsal schedules in the time allotted for music each week. An interdisciplinary design, however, may facilitate fulfilling a multifaceted music curriculum, as outlined in the New York State Learning Standards.

Through the collaboration of teachers and school administrators, a vibrant and educative interdisciplinary project was designed and implemented. Ultimately, the success of this effort could be seen by observing the awe and undivided attention expressed on the faces of the members of the audience the afternoon of the culminating blues performance at the senior high school. We as educators can create relevant, meaningful, and practical applications of academic assignments to further our students' awareness of the world--their world.

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