

WHO AM I? INVESTIGATING IDENTITY OF GRADE 9 BOYS THROUGH REFLECTIONS OF MUSIC AND CREATION

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Abstract

Over the course of teaching music composition units, I have found that music students normally produce works that develop strong musical foundations such as harmonic, melodic and rhythmic concepts; however, these works rarely represent personal aspects of their identity. This action research project investigated the effects of including identity as a key component of the composition criteria. In an attempt to promote self-reflection in my Grade 9 students and help them recognize how music can tell a personal story, they worked through a two-phase approach that required (1) a curation of a music playlist and (2) the creation of a Mash-up composition. Throughout the process, they reflected on how their music selections connected to their identity. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected and thematically analyzed. Findings suggest that students have various states of awareness concerning their relationship with music and also have mixed feelings about how music reflects their identity. Incorporating an identity focus to a composition unit produced engaged students who took great pride and care with their technical and musical choices. In addition, the personalization of music composition lessons enhanced the student teacher relationship. This study highlights the need for music students to engage in music units that capture their personal stories. It also suggests a need for greater study into the practice and significance of music listening in the lives of boys.

Glossary

- **Curation:** The process of collecting and evaluating a selection of songs with the intent of public presentation. It highlights the essence of the need to capture its historical value and connection to the student.
- **Mash-up:** The Mash-up performance/composition technique requires artist to manipulate existing sounds to articulate aspects composition such rhythm, form and texture.
- **Garage Band:** Garage Band is a digital audio application that was released by Apple in 2004. It allows users the freedom to investigate various music creation possibilities.

Introduction

Composition is a key component of the music program at the Grade 9 level at Upper Canada College. At this grade level students often struggle with how to manage theoretical concepts that are key to a successful original work even though they possess a vast understanding of music through listening via personal devices, gaming and other activities. Most often a final piece reflects a mathematical or theoretical approach that satisfies a well-developed rubric. It does not, however, reflect their personality due to many constraints such as a lack of composition technique or the barrier of the curriculum itself. Fine Arts students, on the other hand, do not experience this level of restraint or frustration because they can reflect their uniqueness through various mediums and curricular exercises.

I hoped to refocus the music composition process by having a similar fine art approach that would allow my music students to evaluate themselves through the exploration of their creativity. Consequently, I developed the following research question: *How can opportunities to make personal connections with music impact Grade 9 boys' understanding of self and their musical compositions?* In order to liberate the boys from the aforementioned composition restraints and allow them the freedom to investigate music at a more personal level. In many ways they would become musical DJs through the process of music selection and the manipulation of various segments of their curated music. Activities such as creating playlists that included songs with personal significance and using a contemporary "Mash-up" technique in Garage Band would bring the freedom to choose and manipulate sound to express their musical artistic intent. Beyond the technical aspects, I was curious to see if this intervention would help each boy to incorporate the many facets of individuality and storytelling into the composition.

Action research methodology provided an appropriate approach to this study due to its ability to include aspects of reflection and guided development with the hope that it would "improve [my] professional judgement and to give insight into better, more effective means of achieving desirable educational outcomes" (Mertler, 2017, pg. 13). My need to see how important and effective incorporating identity into the compositional process was supported by personal reflections on students' work, collected student reflections, and reflection of current research. All of these reflective actions are key components of action research.

Literature Review

The literature included in this review addresses areas of music education theories, gendered identities and identification theories, and technology specific to boys. This action research involved boys in a problem-based learning process that engaged key areas of motivation that Power (2008) describes as encouraging “exploration, discovery and investigation” (p.99) in hopes of successfully engaging boys in the learning process.

Music Education Framework

Music education researchers have worked extensively to address various aspects of musical development, an immense field of study that provides a framework for effective music education (Funk, 1981). Howard Gardner’s relationship with research on musical perception raises a number of key points of interest. His use of the term Gestalt Perception, “the ability to discern and recognize identities among patterns or objects, even when they appear in different contexts or guises....” (as cited by Funk, 1981, p.66), offers support for the identification of various “identities” as students engage in personal musical connections. Jean Piaget’s (1969) concept of perceptual development is a convincing theory that recognizes the notion of building meaning through coordinating “several encounters”, which produces a learning experience that relies on a multi-nodal connection of music development, informing musical awareness. Piaget further develops this stance by favouring operational over perceptual thought, which Wohlhill later contests, suggesting that “when dealing with judgements of identity or difference among discrete categories of stimuli-as in recognising and discriminating, theme and variation-perception may well approach the reliability of operational thinking” (as cited by Funk, 1981, p. 48). By establishing a two-phase experience, my research is in effect exploring the various points of contact that are clearly supported by educational research.

Gendered Identities and Identification Theories

Charles’ (2004) research provides two concepts, ideologies of musical practice and delineated meaning, which provide a framework that is important to consider as Grade 9 boys engage with their musical composition. Ideologies of musical practice identifies “gendered expectations in relationship to music [and] differences between girl’s and boy’s musical practice” (Charles, 2004, p. 267). The findings that exist within this concept provide conflicting attitudes between how students discuss and practice music making. Charles defines this contradiction as the

“discourse” male and female students have within their gendered groups. Interview responses identified that girls believed that (1) they liked music that is soft/slow (2) they preferred instruments such keyboard, guitar and lute (3) they had a preference to dancing (4) they played classical instruments; whereas boys believed they preferred loud and fast music and that they played popular music. This “discourse” highlights the dichotomy that speaks to how certain boys create the façade of masculinity during performance practice, which will be explored throughout the identity exercises of my research.

Victor Kvarnhall’s (2017) research into “identificatory” aspects of gendered listening highlights a listening trend that presents a complex relationship with music; he states, “in order for listening to have [a] function, the listener must perceive what the musician is doing as a feasible pursuit for her or himself” (p.32). Kvarnhall’s definition suggests that a ‘feasible pursuit’ places male listeners within performance relationship with the musician. This is a stark contrast to female experiences that produce what he classifies as “intimate” connections with the music itself. This relationship is further supported through identity research by De Ruyter and Conroy (2002) who present one concept of identity as “ideal identity” (p.512). Their findings suggest that in our path to developing various aspects of ourselves, we pursue “ideal images” that are “highly desirable and consequently aspires [one to] become like these images” (p.512). Out of this research arises the questions – Are boys aware of the experience of an ‘ideal image’ relationship with their music? and Are they able to have both intimate and functional relationships?

Cultural influences continue similar arguments concerning variations between male and female listening relationships with music. Investigating cultural impact of various listening groups, Abril and Flowers (2007) suggest “listeners approach music from their unique cultural purview and make judgments about it based on both musical and extra-musical elements” (p. 205). They further determine that language becomes one of the enabling factors in developing listening relationships with music due to its ability to create “significant positive correlations between the familiarity with a particular language and attitude toward the language in a spoken context” (p.206). Madsen and Geringer (2000/2001) explain that this language factor not only addresses interpretation but contributes to the ability of listeners to maintain a focused attention on the music that is vital to a “meaningful listening experience” (p.207). This dynamic has significant impact on students who are multi-lingual, as it presents a variation on factors that influence music decision-making throughout the research process.

Music Technology

The use of technology in music composition has produced varying success in music education. In this instance, the use of Garage Band as a vehicle for the final product is an appropriate platform because research suggests that students “work more effectively at their own pace and create musical compositions more closely related to their individual creative abilities” (Shibazaki et al., 2013, p. 351). In addition, boys feel greater engagement with the act of controlling and manipulating technology thus providing an added level to their development, as “judgment is made of their high level of technological skill rather than just their relatively lower level of musical skill” (Shibazaki et al., 2013, p. 351). The study of Shibazaki et al. demonstrates that “males talked more about computer music in relation to their life outside school and regarded their computer music as more authentic” (p.351). This level of authenticity speaks to varying levels of control over already produced media, a key component of the Mash-up final phase of my research study. How boys will interact with their musical material and the use of technology is an integral part of the research process.

Research Context

Founded in 1829, Upper Canada College is a private boys school located in Toronto, Canada. The 1,160 boys represent 25 countries across Senior Kindergarten to grade 12. As an IB World School, its mission is to deliver transformational learning that includes state of the art facilities while providing financial assistance to 20 per cent of its student population. Upper Canada College provides an IB music curriculum that address many musical education concepts from grades 7 to 12. Throughout their experiences, students experience a variety of composition possibilities that address traditional performing ensembles, electronic and film genres. Great care is taken to understand composition techniques that reflect an understanding of form, rhythm and meter, harmonic structures and style.

I specifically chose grade 9 students because they have developed a good foundation in composition, they are in various stages of adolescence, and they were part of my teaching allocation. The 14 students involved in the Action Research met three times a week for ninety-minuet classes. The start of the process involved a discussion of the scope of the research with clear of the understanding of consent forms that was communicated and sent to parents for

approval. My relationship with each student outside of class through various ensembles and House activities also provided opportunities for meaningful discussions and valuable reflections.

The Action

I implemented a two-phase research construct during this action research project. Phase 1 was designed to have students present a curated playlist of ten songs that reflected their current identity. At the beginning stages of the research I had a number of class and individual discussions to clarify how identity could be reflected in music. Concepts that were identified included:

- Music as an association with a time, place thing, person
- Music as an associated feeling through tempo, rhythms, style and key

In Phase 2 of the study, students were tasked to produce a Mash-up style composition that was to represent their identity through the pieces they included in their curated list. This part of the process required a number of key steps that were addressed throughout a number of classes:

- A discussion on the software features of Garage Band
- What is a Mash-up?
- How do you manipulate various sound “clips” to produce musical textures?

Throughout both phases, reflection time was designed into each class so both teacher and student could observe the various dynamics that took place.

Data Collection

In order to support a mixed-methods research design that worked towards connecting the data to existing research (Mertler, 2017), I collected multiple data that included field notes, surveys, journal entries, interviews, and student playlists. In the survey and journal entries, the boys reflected on concepts that were raised in the research that spoke to issues of gender, multilingualism, relationship to various styles of music and the role of music composition software. Phase 2 of the research involved students producing a musical composition that used elements of the music collected in Phase 1. The continued use of field notes, journal entries,

interviews and surveys focused on the creative process and how it reflected and/or effectively captured their identity.

By implementing an exploratory mixed-methods design, I was able to collect data that incorporated various themes and addressed the narrative that informed the boys' decision making. This process "lends credibility to the instrument because its actual items stem from what the participants thought and shared" (Mertler, 2017, p. 107). In this research, the investigation into "identity" required an intimate connection to thoughts and discussions with each student. Structured interviews were open-ended and involved both individual and group interactions. This provided a wide range of qualitative data that enhanced the richness of the data collection (Mertler, 2017). The journal prompts required boys to reflect on a mixed-set of guided questions and open-ended entries. I also conducted surveys with a Likert-type scale system to gauge various levels of connection to the process

Data Analysis

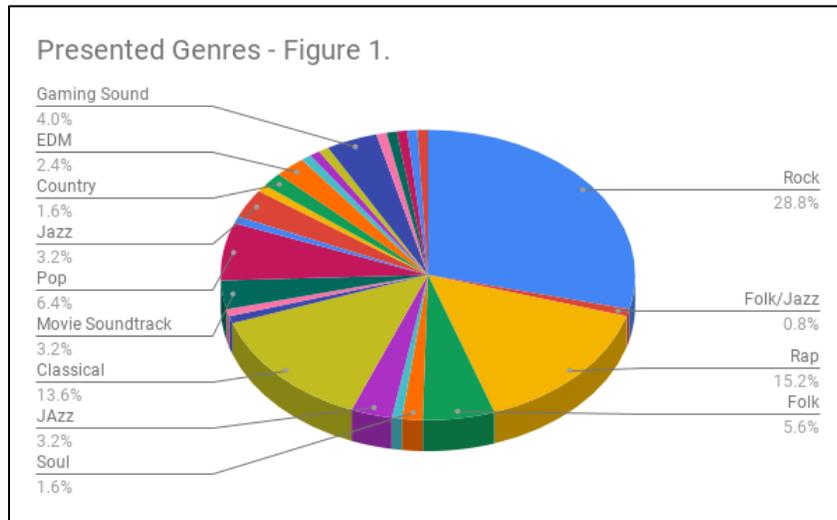
Quantitative data collected from questionnaires underwent an analysis process that used measures of tendency, dispersion and relationship categories (Mertler, 2017). This provided information that related to mean and median averages, possible modes and measurement of standard deviation.

The qualitative data I collected from observational notes, journals and interview transcripts followed a three-step inductive analysis that produced patterns and themes through a coding scheme (Mertler, 2017). As outlined by Mertler, a careful understanding and development of various narrative themes was collated. A description of the "main features or characteristics of the categories" was developed to obtain connections to my research question. In the final stage "relationships, similarities and contradictions" with current research was examined to further validate the research.

Discussion of Results

The curated playlists presented 140 songs in total that reflected 13 distinct genres (Figure 1) with 19 artists and a listening timeline of 241 years. What is surprising is that only 7 songs (.05%) were common between all participants.

Figure 1: Musical Genres Presented in Curation Component



These findings reflect a diversity of listening and connection to music that was also expressed through complex personal stories in journals, interviews, presentations, and questionnaires. The final compositions represented a complex set of realisations concerning how boys inter-related with music and technology when it came to reflecting their identity.

Through data analysis, a number of themes emerged related to how boys reflected on music selections and consequently gained a deeper understanding of self. These themes included identity and connections to communities, culture, and the transition to adulthood. A final theme involved challenges of incorporating identity into musical composition.

Identity and Connections to Communities

Connections to music based on community reflected a cross section of relationships that included school, friends, and families. Throughout school sporting events, music is a significant motivator for boys as they try to become their better competitive selves; boy A stated, "we play these songs before our game as a ritual in order to pump us up." This dynamic is further realised with the use of music as an ideal identity (De Ruyter & Conroy, 2002), when boys reported listening to music as support for overcoming adversity. Memes or a humorous connection to various common songs such as "All Star" by Smash Mouth was reported by 29% of the participants. These students enjoyed the humours and nostalgic connection to their younger past as they recollected various signifying aspects of the song.

The most significant impact of music on understanding one's self was its connection to family. Overall, 62% of boys reflected on the influence of family through singing and various family activities as an important reason for identifying with a particular song. In addition, 29% made strong references to uncles and fathers as key figures in the selection of music. The influences came as a direct borrowing of specific playlists or remembering singing or listening to specific songs. This strong reference to masculinity presents the only overt display of the "gendered discourse" outlined by Bridgette Charles (2009). Overall, results reflected mixed views on participant choices of music through a "masculine" lens. Throughout the post selection of songs questionnaire, boys commented that they were 50% undecided, 21.4% in agreement and 28.6 in disagreement in using a masculine lens as one of the filters in the selection of their playlists. In general, students believed that music to them "is not masculine or feminine."

Identity and Cultural Connections

Even though half of the boys identified as speaking a second language, this did not have an impact on the music selection or sustained listening habits. This finding does not support Abril and Flowers (2007) research on the possible impact of a second language on music selection. One Asian descent student reported that he intentionally does not listen to Chinese music since coming to Canada. This apparent dismissal of a cultural connection is addressed by Abril and Flowers (2007) who believe that "some [non-foreign] children respond to foreign-language songs with negative comments" but in contrast "Mexican immigrants ...were found to react positively to upon hearing Spanish-Language" (pg. 206). This disconnect with the literature addresses a transformational element in the lives of boys who speak a second language. Instead of finding identity by including one's original culture, this study found that boys focus on excluding music as a way of formalizing their identity.

Kvarnhall's (2017) study on "identificatory" elements of listening is reflected by 25% of the boys who associated their passion for certain songs with their knowledge of the band and/or the technical skills of rock guitar players and classical composers. Various students appreciated how knowing the struggles of their favorite guitar player helped them "deal with" hardships in their lives. This is unique factor in understanding identity through music. Boys are able to transfer or relocate their identity by involve themselves beyond the musical connection.

Identity and the Transition to Adulthood

The journey through adolescence was a cornerstone of the general narrative as the boys reflected on past and present states of development. Many described their adolescent story as longing and reminiscing about the past by reflecting on their family moments or amusing themselves through the discussion of various musical memes. One boy stated, “This was my mom’s favorite song. I listened to it a lot as a child... It reminds me of my childhood.” More than half of the boys created a stark division between past and current musical selections, reflecting a preoccupation to identifying with lyrics and musical styles that provide comfort to the stressful and emotionally charged aspects of their daily routines. In some cases almost half of the boys referenced music as means of seeking refuge and providing hope for their daily struggles. The most pronounced musical depiction of the adolescent journey was outlined by a student who pointedly described his choice of music as his past, present, and future self. The data clearly illustrated music as a road map and vehicle to the exploration and investigation of new ideas that reflect many adolescent tropes.

Challenges Incorporating Identity Into Music Composition

The use of curated playlists and the technical requirements of the final composition prompted many inquiries into personal identity and required boys to present themselves through the music they selected. The largest challenge was to make sense of the broad range of musical styles and develop strong technical understanding to manipulate various creative ideas. Shibazaki and Marshall’s (2013) study on differences in gender-based learning when using technology strongly supports the many areas of development in this section of the study. Many boys, over half, found that technical importance was key to the success of fully capturing their musical identity. This factor was so important that one boy commented that he could not “sleep due to poor technical control.” Another boy said, “...[technical control] is my strength in composition.” In many ways, boys who saw the technical challenge as part of self-expression would have further appreciated the final task the assessment rubric had counted technical marks higher. In contrast, 14% of the boys believed that the manipulation of each song was what mattered in their musical self-interpretation.

The main focus of this research sought to clarify how creating a personally meaningful musical composition could help Year 9 boys understand self. The final questionnaire revealed a balanced split in realization. Half of the boys believed that their work captured their identity through elements of various textures produced along with detailed musical sound effects. Some reported

that the process of investigation and creation highlighted and reinforced their character traits of perseverance and determination. This dynamic is supported by Piaget's (1969) claim that students create greater meaning through coordination of "several encounters". Conversely, the remaining boys did not think that their final work was an accurate reflection of their identity. Some felt they were "unable to truly find the words or music to capture own identity, it represents mood and experiences." Reasons for this difference could reflect the difficulty certain boys had with managing their wide range of music selection and the concern that limited technical development kept them from producing an effective and fulfilling final project.

Conclusion

The study of the identity of boys through the lens of music curation and composition provides a unique and complex view of their lives. The overwhelming evidence of the eclectic scope of music listening coupled with vast historical musical periods suggests that boys are open minded and appreciative of diverse sets of musical values. The predictable representation of popular music culture in various listening lists is tempered by complexities of jazz solos, classical, and world music artistic explorations. Music represents fundamental markers in these boys' identities as was outlined by their consistent association of various songs with key moments in their childhood. Their state of wellbeing is highlighted through the retention of positive and negative associations with various aspects musical associations. The boys work through many social dynamics through music. Their ability to find aspects of self such as an imagined athlete, musician, or friend is enabled through their association to music. Music gives them permission to push beyond their current selves and allows them to investigate other possibilities.

Language and technology play a complex role in the personal boy story. Within the literature, second languages provide another mechanism for interaction with music. In this study, I found that participants who spoke another language took decisive steps to divorce themselves from their mother tongue as an act of assimilation into the English language. This level of variation requires greater study into how this interaction of music and language shape musical development in boys.

The correlation of technical mastery and personal worth was a constant theme that spoke loudly in this study. Many boys reflected on their frustration of not being able to fully master various techniques. This directly translated to a negative image of themselves and their final product. In

many ways this complex and at times obsessive relationship with technology contributes significantly to the working thesis of this study. It is clear that positioning identity in the center of the creative process provides greater involvement and dedication to the creative process.

The action research process addressed the concept of identity for the boys in my classroom and also gave them the ability to be heard as unique boy learners. All of my students appreciated the dynamic role of learning.

For future consideration I believe using identity as a guiding tool for musical compositions provides a powerful focus that supports both the development of musical elements and the understanding of identity. This approach is beneficial to both student and teacher as it (1) provides another lens for students to reflect on themselves via their musical connections and (2) bridges deeper student/teacher relationships. After many weeks of reflections, I can say that I better understand my students. The use of the Mash-up composition technique was effective but greater technical support will be needed for future projects. Students need to fully appreciate and understand editing techniques to fully grasp the demands of various musical challenges.

Greater research is needed with respect to how knowing and speaking multiple languages effects musical identity, specifically boys. The findings from this action research highlight possible correlations, but they were inconclusive. I believe it would be of value to look into a developing a language/music study that focuses on specifically on boys.

Reflection Statement

The action research process helped me step outside the conventions of music education and apply another pedagogical approach that I have been curious about for a number of years. The use of questionnaires was a source of musical assessment that I have not fully implemented in my teaching practice. For future classes I will continue to be vigilant with crafting good questions to help better inform the creative process. The final musical composition project was successful, but I believe it required greater technical preparation and development of timeline. Students who reflected the younger part of the adolescence were not fully ready to connect the technical complexities of the composition software with the mature understanding of their personal identity.

The process of incorporating action research in my teaching practice was a transformative experience. The role of teaching is to transform the lives of students through reflective practice coupled with nurturing, supportive, and meaningful relationships. This study continued many aspects of this ideal dynamic but it also allowed me to personally connect to my students in a very powerful way. The collection of their stories coupled with their discussions gave me the ability to address differentiated learning by way of understanding their uniqueness. I found that I was able to gain their trust and find a variety of ways to address their musical growth. Seeing me as a Learner/Teacher in the classroom significantly changed class dynamics. I find students to be much more engaged with greater inquiry types of questions.

The process of various data collections was a successful way to vary my assessment practices. I am now much more interested in the effectiveness of questionnaires and journal development.

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