

PATHWAYS INTO COMPOSING



Teachers enrolled in Teach Through Music (TTM) were asked to take ideas, experiences and learning from the programme – and beyond – into the classroom: to do something different and reflect on the outcomes.

Fran's action research was undertaken as part of the Teach Through Music Short Course LISTEN IMAGINE COMPOSE, delivered by a partnership of Sound and Music, Birmingham City University and Birmingham Contemporary Music Group.

The Short Course was led by Pam Burnard of Cambridge University

How do you overcome a lack of confidence in composing? Frances Robinson, Conisborough College, Lewisham

Fran's project set out to explore issues of identity and ownership in composing by pupils, exploring 'ways in' through improvisation and group creative projects.

She identified key barriers to address as:

- Lack of confidence in composing amongst pupils
- An 'I can't' attitude when asked to be creative
- Lack of routes into musical ideas for composition

She also aimed to tackle preconceptions amongst pupils of what a composer is, and how different that is from their perception of themselves.

Fran hoped to achieve improved confidence in composition amongst pupils and, as a result, to inspire a higher level of personal responsibility and ownership of their music making.

How do students perceive themselves?

Through the Listen Imagine Compose Short Course, Fran put herself in the shoes of her students and began developing musical ideas, building her understanding of what it takes to explore and be creative. She gained insights into different routes into composition and how groups can work together creatively within guidelines.

She questioned how it is that pupils see themselves as composers and musicians and also how they feel about composition overall.

"Students have such little confidence with the word composition. They don't see themselves as musicians – they think a composer is someone other than themselves"

– Fran Robinson

Action research

As part of her action research project, Fran's year 9 classes were given questionnaires and participated in a later focus group so that she could understand their experiences. Year 8 classes looked at starting points for a composition, improvisation techniques, and responses to already existing pieces of music and how these can be useful in pupils' own compositions. The focus for activities with both groups was initiating pupil choice, ownership and freedom.

Fresh approaches to teaching

Fran found a key difference she could make in her teaching was to go in without a plan, and without expectations of what was going to come out of the lesson. This is an unusual approach in a context in which it is often expected that schemes of work are prepared in advance, with resources needed and lesson objectives all predicted from the outset. Fran's approach opened up the potential for greater autonomy of learning to emerge within her class. She reinforced this by giving pupils choice in how they wanted to work and on what instruments. They also set their own targets week on week.

"I recorded things as they happened, much more often than usual." – Fran Robinson

Impact in students

Over the course of the project Fran saw students working together in new ways, sharing ideas and enjoying the process of being creative. A dramatic improvement in musicianship was apparent once pupils were given an opportunity to demonstrate this in ways appropriate to them and to further develop this over time. They had full ownership over the music they created as a class and different pupils came to the fore in different sections.

The students were in new territory with this project. They composed what they felt they could easily play and this could be further developed by Fran. Another area of development for the future will be to address how different students contribute and the balance between more proactive students and those who, although involved, were less assertive or engaged.

"Overall they enjoyed the freedom and the ensemble nature of the project, and found the experience motivating" – Fran Robinson

Conclusion

According to Fran: 'It has been positive from my perspective in that the focus shifted not towards outcomes and 'progress', but to student participation, ownership and process.'

Fran also noticed that not everyone made the same amount of progress and that gives food for thought as she prepares to improve the process next time. By focusing on 'process', in the form of 'in the moment' engagement, participation and pupil choice, Fran was able break down barriers such as a lack of confidence and an 'I can't' approach to composition.

"After initial skills are built up through this approach in years 7 and 8, KS4 can then hone and shape those skills so pupils are able to work within more clearly defined briefs with criteria, enabling them to access the GCSE curriculum with enthusiasm and confidence."

"Progress happened naturally and in different forms for different students." – Fran Robinson
