Why I Organized Learning

I looked around my classroom with amazement. Students were listening to music, rolling composer “dice,” playing music board games, filling out music worksheets, and composing on the computer. Each student was learning about a different composer from a different period, with great excitement. They were exploring new ideas in learning centers, and all my careful planning had paid off.

I had made several attempts to spice up learning about composers in my classroom. Most recently, I had students bring headphones and CD players to class to help them create and sing lyrics about composers’ lives using tunes from great works by the respective composer. The idea seemed like a good one, but some students were intimidated by the small-group singing and spent more time worrying about how they sounded and how to fit the words with the music than learning about composers. Although many of my students have always seemed to enjoy learning about composers, it was evident to

Melinda Devany teaches elementary general music and chorus at Hawk Hollow Elementary School, Bartlett, Illinois, and Hilltop Elementary School, Elgin, Illinois.
Centers in My Classroom

By Melinda Devany
me that some students needed a different approach. At the time, I was enrolled in a course about brain-based learning, which inspired me to develop learning centers. A unit about composers would be my first experience. (See A Sample Plan for Composer Centers on this page.)

I had noticed that classroom teachers often use learning centers successfully. I don’t know many music teachers who have implemented them, but many seem to have an interest. Perhaps music educators have overlooked learning centers because of whole-group curricular requirements, or perhaps centers are not often used because of sound conflicts in a limited space. Lack of materials or technology may also be a concern. Despite these obstacles, I believe incorporating learning centers into a music classroom is well worth the effort. Students have so many different learning styles, and learning centers are able to serve the diverse needs of students quite well.

What are learning centers? A learning center is an area that allows students to fulfill curricular goals by choosing from a variety of hands-on activities. There are no special rules about setting up learning centers; the way your centers are arranged depends on student needs, teacher preferences, and space limitations. Students can work alone or with other students. In my classroom, students usually work at learning centers with partners.

According to Linda Holliman in The Complete Guide to Classroom Centers (Huntington Beach, CA: Creative Teaching Press, 1996), there are a number of reasons to invest classroom learning time in centers, including the following:

**Time.** Students and teachers can interact more frequently when students are actively learning at centers, allowing a more personal learning experience for students. Additionally, more learning may occur more quickly.

**Individual student needs.** Student needs can be met with a variety of activities and grouping possibilities. Learning centers can also challenge students of all ability levels.

**Positive student behavior.** Learning becomes more meaningful to students when they are actively involved and have choices about their learning process.

**Self-concept growth.** Students will be successful, which will positively influence their own concept of who they are as learners and how likely they are to succeed. Newly discovered strengths will allow them to shine in the classroom.

**Opportunities.** In a classroom with centers, students gain practice and application skills, problem-solving and critical thinking skills, independent learning skills, and collaboration skills.

In his book Learning Centers: Getting Them Started, Keeping Them Going (New York: Scholastic, 1999), Michael F. Optiz recommends careful center management. Determine the amount of time students need to reasonably accomplish their goals at each learning center. Optiz also plans student groups thoughtfully, forming mixed-ability groups, like-ability groups, or interest groups.

Optiz suggests planning a rotation schedule and posting the schedule in several visible places around the classroom. Students are responsible for knowing when to move to the next center and where the next center is. Optiz also stresses organizing the classroom and creating a diagram of the desired setup to take into account work spaces, storage spaces, display spaces, traffic patterns, and permanent fixtures. (See Resources for Planning Learning Centers on p. 47.)

Some types of learning centers are becoming more common in music classrooms. Many schools now have MIDI labs that operate as centers, although in such a setting students don’t usually travel from one center to another on a set schedule. Centers with computer-based music programs can be used in a classroom with multiple computers. Listening centers can be established with headphones and CD players.

Centers can also be created without expensive equipment: students can make musical instruments, learn about composers, or study band and orchestra instruments. Linda Holliman

---

**A Sample Plan for Composer Centers**

- Set up eight centers: “What Does A Composer Do?” and the style periods you want to represent. I use Renaissance, Classical, Baroque, Romantic, Russian, Nationalist, Impressionist, and Twentieth Century.
- Make composer dice with portraits of six composers from each period pasted on a wooden block. Place one die at each center.
- Plan to have three learning levels per composer represented at each center. Include a variety of activities that will allow students to make their own decisions about which activities are engaging and challenging without being too difficult.
- If possible, provide a CD or tape of music by the composers featured at each center, a stereo or boom box, and headphones.
- For each center, create one activity per level for each composer. Activities could include card games, board games, puzzles to assemble, computer activities, map exploration of composers’ birthplaces, listening, and crossword puzzles.
- Create a traveling worksheet for students to carry with them to help you assess their learning at each center.
- Pair students, or create groups you believe will enhance learning for students.
- Create a schedule for students to follow when visiting centers.
- Map your room setup to create smooth traffic flow between centers if you plan for students to visit more than one center during your class period.
suggests creating centers for dramatic play, museums, inventing, and puzzles. Any of these types of centers can be used in the music classroom to accomplish national, state, and curricular goals. Be creative: a favorite center of mine is a music Clue board game I created that students use to learn about composers. Each character is an orchestra, the "weapons" are musical instruments, and the "places" are great pieces by famous composers. If you find a good book about a composer or an Internet biography, you can use the material to create a crossword puzzle about the subject (be sure to have the bio at the center so students won’t get too frustrated). There are sites on the Internet and computer programs that can help you design the puzzle.

How many centers should you incorporate into your classroom, and how many children should be in those centers? Your subject area and the number of main ideas within that area will help determine the number of centers. For example, if your centers focus on the instrument families, you would create a center for each family. If you would like students to travel in smaller groups, you may set up more than one of the same center so that groups at each center are not too large. Have fewer than five students per group so that all students feel they are contributing and learning. In my classroom, the largest number of centers I have attempted is eight. I use my one classroom computer, counter space, borrowed desks, and sometimes even the floor to set up the centers. With eight centers, visiting the centers takes more than one class period. If you plan to use the centers for only one class period, consider using a smaller number of centers.

Perhaps the most intimidating part of creating learning centers is assessing them. When creating an activity where students can work at several levels with choices at each level, how do you assess the different information that students have learned? My solution is to have a traveling worksheet that students carry from one center to another. Students are required to write a little about what they learned on their worksheet at each center they visit. If some of your centers have materials for students to take with them as they travel, create a binder for each student.

Students are motivated and gain new understanding from learning centers. They’ve been successful in my classroom, and I hope you will find your experience with them to be positive, too.

---

Fun musicals with terrific character building themes! It’s good for them!

from Michael and Jill Gallina

Get Up and Grow
An exciting and inspirational “Play in a Day.” Through seven bright songs, children learn some of the necessary social skills for success in life. Grades K-5

A Froggy Day in Lindentown
Through this lighthearted 30-minute musical, children learn that even bullies need to feel accepted and that music can be a unifying force. Grades: K-6

Bebop with Aesop! *NEW*
Aesop's unforgettable fables stimulate our imaginations and dramatize the many lessons and values that we can learn from the tales. Grades: 4-8

Lovin' Kindness
This musical is all about instilling kindness and consideration in relationships. Grades 4-9

To hear samples of these and other fine Gallina musicals, visit their web site at: www.gallinamusical.com

Available from retail music dealers or

Shawnee Press, Inc.
Member of the Music Sales Group
800-962-8584 • www.shawneepress.com

August 2005 47