

GPOC Lesson Tips

With all of the changes that have impacted our educational system in response to COVID-19, it's important to take a step back from it all and think about what it really is that we provide to students. As music teachers, we are quick to be able to point out all of the positives that music can provide to students. Those are all still true. However, every music teacher knows that switching to an online or distance-based model of education means that business as usual no longer applies, and some things will need major modification. This means that our normal considerations and worldviews as music teachers will also need to come under the microscope for some adjustment.

Here are my 5 pieces of advice for navigating quarantine education.

1. Don't overwhelm
2. Provide engagement that is self-motivated
3. Avoid assessment
4. Consider their communities
5. Be thoughtful about your own music making and other ways kids can engage with music

First things first, we must acknowledge the reality of our situation. NO ONE would prefer to teach music remotely, and many parts of what make for a quality music education simply aren't possible from a remote set-up. The social emotional impact of having students hold hands and dance together is enormous, but it just can't be replicated without being in the same space. I wonder how effective it is for me to be leading Kindergarteners through a movement exploration... on video, asynchronously. I live in hope that my students are singing along with me at home, but I cringe at the bad singing technique that is going uncorrected. At least they are singing?

As teachers, we want to do all we can to help our students. I've struggled with wanting to "do more" for my kids, feeling guilty that what I've distance-offered them isn't enough. But in this time, we don't want to overwhelm our students. Technology can be confusing and difficult to manage, even in the best of times. Our students are at home, away from us, many hopefully getting support from their parents but many certainly aren't. Assuming students are able to consistently access our content with minimal frustration, an overwhelming amount of content can drive them away. Think about how it feels to be given another 300+ page book to read in a staff meeting, or starting a college class with a 600 page textbook. If we cram too much content in, we risk scaring students off. Simple is better.

Another important consideration is directions. Have you ever opened up a movement instruction manual, looked at the dance steps, and felt like you just read something written in a foreign language? I certainly have. Even as an intelligent adult, complicated directions can be overwhelming. Keep directions straightforward and simple, as much as possible. If you must have more complex instructions, include a "read-aloud" of those instructions, so that emerging readers aren't left out to dry; even competent readers might see a wall of text and lose interest quickly. Keep activities simple, straightforward, and easy to do.

Continuing on this line of thinking, if we want students to engage in music during this crisis, we have to present them with educational materials that they want to consume. This is intuitive, obvious, and also is the standard mode of operation for Orff teachers. Every lesson we teach is kid-focused and built on a basis of intrinsic motivation and play. However, during this time when classes seem "optional" at home, if we want students to continue to engage in music, we have to go beyond. Furthermore, music is not simply an academic subject as most others are. I don't know about you, but I've never turned to chemistry when I was needing to soothe my emotions. Our students are struggling emotionally through this time just as we are, and turning to comfort music is a really healthy strategy. So, lean into that. Make content that is **even-more** kid focused. While a "best-hits-of-the-year" lesson can feel like an end of the school year filler lesson, during this distance-learning time period it can be a huge comfort to reconnect to and sing through the songs you loved at school. The ideal scenario, in my mind at least, is that a student comes back and does the music lesson again and again because it is an escape for them.

Now obviously, music is obviously not just escapism. Music teachers are not here just to provide sing-alongs to make kids feel better. Good teaching involves assessing student growth, so we can be sure that our students are making the progress they need to be making. Assessment is important in a classroom. However, we are not in classrooms right now. It can seem attractive to assign an assessment because it will show you which students are keeping up with their schoolwork, and ensure students are doing their music lessons. You then know not only if a student understood the lesson, but if they even did it. I can't argue that this is true and the logic is solid, but I argue that it's not good practice during a pandemic.

In my district, elementary students are not being assessed, district wide. Rather, we are "just focusing on learning", while secondary students have a different scenario. Your district may be taking a different approach. My advice is to be cognizant about what the real purpose of an assessment is, during this time. Is this assessment necessary? Is it necessary *right* now? Or would it be better to wait

until we are back in person at the beginning of the fall school year? In my own teaching, I'm focused on just getting kids to continue being engaged in music during this time. Then at the beginning of the next school year, I'll get a "real" look at where they are in a proper assessment environment. I'm just not going to get useful, authentic data from a "make it work" online-learning pandemic assessment scenario.

Part of this decision is due to knowing my students, as any good teacher should. I know that a vast majority of my students live in poverty, many living in multigenerational households of 8-12 people, crammed into 1 or 2 bedroom apartments. I know that many of my students lack internet access. I know many of my students' parents have lost their jobs and are under considerable duress. About a third of my students have not yet logged into their Chromebooks at all since the Friday before Spring Break, according to my teacher dashboard of student activity. Even some of the other Specials teachers in my building, whose students attend our school, have admitted to me that they've not had their kids do any music lessons yet.

So then I have to ask myself, how do I best serve my students and families during this time? Is creating additional work and massive amounts of content going to help them? Probably not. Is going radio silent going to make them feel comfortable and a sense of routine? Also no. There is a middle ground that each individual teacher has to sort of find for themselves.

To pivot to the positive, here are some things that you CAN do that will help. The first is to be authentic and vulnerable with the people in your life. Stay in contact with your professional community in and out of the building. Be honest about how you are feeling and holding up. Second, extend that to your students. Have a Zoom "class time" where you simply play some Would You Rather games, or let kids do some show and tell. Bring your Art, PE, Computer Science, and Library teacher in too! Many teachers are making read-aloud, but Orff read-alouds are always more entertaining than a standard classroom presentation. Consider also the current trend of TikTok challenges, especially the dancing ones. Challenge your students to make their version of a TikTok or other viral dance. Encourage them to continue finding ways to connect with music.

When we return to school, whenever that will be, things will be different. That much is sure. I already know there are several procedures in my classroom that are incompatible with social distancing and will need to be adjusted. I know I'll need some new sanitizing routines in my room, especially involving hand drums, mallets, and other manipulatives. There's also some evidence that singing is a particularly high risk activity for spreading contagious droplets, even more so than coughing is. That could mean some really big changes to teaching choir and classroom

singing. I wish I had a more positive spin to put on this, but to be honest, I simply include this as an important piece of information to be aware of. Things could look quite different when we come back to school.

Time will tell what the long-term impacts of this quarantine are on our students, their education, and our models of how to run a music classroom. Until then, try to retain clarity about the time period we are in and how best to leverage your role as a music teacher for your students. Remembering the challenges that different families go through, and the emotions of students who are having to navigate distance, self-regulated learning for the first time. Keep your music content simple, understandable, straightforward, and engaging for kids. Return to the basics and the greatest hits to provide some comfort and familiarity too distant students. Consider access to information and resources, and the equity implications that may be present in the population you serve. Avoid complicated instructions that require a high degree of reading comprehension to understand the activity, and especially avoid a deluge of classwork that can scare kids off. Be mindful of district policy regarding assessment, but think clearly about how authentic any data you collect truly is.

Finally, remember to take care of yourself. It's been said many times, but it is worth repeating. Your worth as a teacher is absolutely not determined by how successful you are at online learning. This is not normal teaching or a normal time; this is crisis management. Pass that same generosity and grace on to your school community and families.