Music Education and 21st Century Skills

What are these skills, and why is music essential to their development?

THE CONNECTION between music education and the acquisition of other skills is increasingly evident to those in the teaching profession. The link between the two has become central to the conversation around evolving arts standards. Relevant to this, you may have heard mention of “21st Century Skills.” But what are they and how does music education fit in to their pedagogy and acquisition?

“When you think of 21st Century Skills, you think of the four Cs,” says Johanna J. Siebert, director of fine arts for the Webster Central School District in Western New York. “And when you think about what music classes do, they have strong ties to all of these.” Siebert walks Teaching Music through the quartet of “C” skills:

• COMMUNICATION: “Music is a language; it has different emotions and effects. It’s the undercurrent for film for just this reason.”

• CREATIVITY: “This is huge. Think about the creativity music provides in the range of composing. Often, music is re-creating something that’s already been composed, but with that also comes the ability to create.”

• CRITICAL THINKING: “Think about all the things a student does simultaneously when he or she is performing a piece of music—all the things that fire off in a split second, and continue to happen, whether you are playing an instrument or singing. You are studying the notes, translating the meaning, watching the rest of the ensemble or the audience.”

While the connection between 21st-century skills and music education is certainly salient, Siebert cautions educators not to stray from the music. “I would worry if people were teaching music just to teach those 21st-century skills. Then we would be in service to another area. If we are teaching music content well, and at a high level, we are attaching ourselves to those skills,” she says. “But we should never lose sight of why we teach. My goal is for students to leave high school still wanting to make music, whatever level they are.”

The link between music and new millennial skills also crops up frequently in discussions of new core arts standards. “These are the underpinnings of the new standards. It’s what the business world says it needs, and colleges look to us for to provide it,” Siebert says. Students who apply to college in fields outside of music often send samples of their musical work as part of their applications, she notes. “Colleges are looking for [connections to] music even outside the music field.”

How can classroom teachers continue to teach music well and organically infuse larger life skills? “The biggest thing we can do, and it’s not always easy, is to keep whatever we are teaching student-centered. Students should have choice whenever possible, a voice in the school music program,” Siebert says. “Making choices and having a chance for self-reflection is so important. We talk about ‘failing forward.’ If we’re never given the chance to fail, how can we learn?”

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