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Classroom Guitar and Students with Visual Impairments: A Positive Approach to Music Learning and Artistry

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In 2011, a collaborative effort began between the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI) and Austin Classical Guitar (ACG), a local 501(c) nonprofit music organization. The idea behind this collaboration was to start a small guitar program that would provide TSBVI students with quality classroom guitar instruction. At that time, ACG was providing guitar instruction to over 40 schools in the Central Texas area. These classes met all the state fine arts requirements and were available for credit hours as music classes during the regular school day. In addition to easing the financial burden of paying for guitar instruction, school districts that collaborated with ACG also received access to quality instruction from experts in the field of music as well as access to their guitar curriculum. The curriculum, which is called GuitarCurriculum.com (GCC) and is available at a website of the same name, produced positive results for students all over the United States, Europe, South America, and other parts of the world (Marcum & Hinsley, 2004). TSBVI and ACG agreed that the small ensemble of

Table 1
GCC level-one objectives.

Theory and fundamental skills	Technical skills
Identify parts of guitar	Sit in proper playing position including right and left hand placement
Identify staff lines and space	Play single right hand free stroke with P, I, and M “fixed finger” position
Identify time signature	Play music involving the left hand
Read open strings	
Read rest and notes (half, quarter, and eighth)	
Identify sixteenth notes	
Identify right-hand fingers by letter: P (thumb), I (index), and M (middle)	
Identify left-hand fingers by number	

Note: The right-hand letter names—P, I, and M—are European in origin and are used throughout GCC and all other guitar repertoire publications.

approximately five students with visual impairments and no additional disabilities would receive music instruction for one hour, four days a week, during the 2011–2012 school year. In addition, the instructor and TSBVI students would have access to the ACG classroom guitar curriculum free of charge.

DEVELOPING GCC

School districts often look to guitar education as an opportunity to teach music to students who are not involved in the more traditional musical ensembles like band, choir, or orchestra. It was on this premise that ACG developed a quality, cost-effective, guitar curriculum that could be accessible to students of all abilities and socioeconomic statuses while also meeting U.S. national and state standards for classroom music curricula. GCC, which was launched in 2004, was designed to provide music educators with no prior guitar training with access to classroom guitar arrangements, video training, and direct consultation from expert music teachers in the field of guitar study and music education. GCC consists of nine levels of musical development. Each level consists of standard and original compositions, audio files of the arrangements, corresponding music theory, and written assignments. GCC is not a special instructional

method or curriculum for students with visual impairments, but is, rather, a best practices approach to classroom guitar education.

The 2011–2012 pilot project was a success. Both parties agreed to continue the guitar program, and GCC was selected for further review by TSBVI’s music educator. The goal of this paper is to share how TSBVI students achieved the level-one objectives of GCC with minimal accommodations and no curricular modifications in the first semester of the 2012–2013 school year. The level-one objectives were selected for review because they are considered by ACG, the largest classical guitar organization in the United States, to be the foundation on which all future guitar skills are built. Although all students’ needs and abilities are different, a quality guitar education requires that all students demonstrate having learned the fundamental theoretical skills (see Table 1) before advancing to a higher level of guitar performance. The following report describes the first four weeks of classroom guitar instruction during the 2012–2013 school year.

TEACHING GUITAR IN A CLASSROOM SETTING

Making music from the start

A common mistake made by music teachers, including teachers of visually impaired stu-

dents, is to bombard novice music students with information about the rudiments of music while ignoring expressiveness, tone quality, and how to convey things to a listener (Duke & Byo, 2011). Observers might hear a teacher giving a mathematical explanation of rhythm or presenting a mnemonic device to memorize all the different pitches: “The lines on the musical staff are E, G, B, D, F, or try to remember Every Good Boy Does Fine.” Detailed introductory information may make students aware of how much they do not know. To avoid this situation, TSBVI students were provided with a musical repertoire that was appropriate for their level of musicianship and revealed to them the skills present at all levels of musicianship. The musical repertoire from GCC allowed the students to make music together while avoiding meaningless lectures about the rudiments of music. These skills were addressed and refined every day in class.

Learn a song the first day. By following the level-one guidelines of GCC, students learned how to hold the guitar correctly and the proper right-hand setup in the first 15 minutes of the first day. The right-hand setup is the most crucial part of starting to play the guitar because that is how tones are produced. The right hand is placed in the “fixed-finger position” in which the thumb (P), index (I), and middle (M) finger of the right hand are placed on strings 1 through 3 of the guitar. Students’ immediate focus is on playing open strings with technically correct free strokes and a bell-like tone. A *bell-like tone* refers to the production of a clear sound that does not include string snaps or nail clicks. Until students can demonstrate beautiful sounds on open strings, there is no reason for them to attempt a more difficult repertoire consisting of multiple notes. The class met daily, and students had multiple opportunities to demonstrate the skills correctly every time they touched the guitar.

The ultimate goals of the first day of class were to play expressively as a group and learn a song. After the initial right-hand setup was complete, students began to learn their first song. A limited musical context was taught by rote on the first day, which allowed students to demonstrate most of the level-one objectives of GCC immediately. The ensemble was split into three sections, much like a choir, and the students were taught to play a song that consisted of two or three notes for each section. They were taught to play this song with musical dynamics consisting of changes in volume and tempo. The “rote before note” approach used with TSBVI students is a technique commonly used by expert music educators in public schools.

Teaching literacy on the guitar

The knowledge and skills that are required for independent musicianship are not related to vision. One of the many skills guitarists possess is music literacy. While rote learning, improvisation, and composition have their place in the music classroom, they do not replace music literacy. Most conversations regarding music and students with visual impairments lead to a discussion about music literacy and braille music notation (Taesch, 1994). However, having students identify all the notes is not the place to begin guitar instruction. This information rarely transfers to the instrument when it is learned out of context. Students will not be able to apply their literacy skills on the guitar until they have opportunities to read and perform on the guitar in a musical context. The objective for TSBVI students was to learn music literacy through expressive music-making on the guitar. The approach used was identical to the demonstrated success of this approach with sighted students (Brenner, 2015).

Daily reading exercises

The level-one objectives are usually achieved within the first four to six weeks of instruction



Figure 1. Level 1 daily reading exercises. These exercises are given to students in braille music notation or in enlarged print. Students perform a few of the reading exercises every day with good tone.

for a class that meets daily. During this time, students learn to read quarter and eighth notes and learn the pitches of the open strings on the guitar. To reinforce the fixed-finger position from level one of GCC, excerpts consisting of open strings one through three on the guitar were given to students every day. Additional notes using the left hand were added in level two to complete scales in the first position. On the advice of other music educators who were teachers of visually impaired students, students who read braille were given a modified braille music format that consisted primarily of pitch, rhythm, rest, octave designations, and repeat signs. Musical directives with multiple braille cells such as time signatures and key signatures were omitted from the score to avoid strain on students' working memory. This allowed TSBVI students to focus on reading and playing with a clear tone and with expressive dynamics as a group.

Reading exercises (see Figure 1) were introduced to students in the second week of class. Students read a couple of excerpts daily either in braille or large print, or on an iPad while playing with good tone. Students read, memorized, and played the four-measure reading excerpts in braille music or enlarged print daily. Until they could read and perform these simple excerpts on open strings, they did not play a melody with several notes.

Around the third or fourth week of instruction, a new level-one piece of music was introduced that allowed students to apply the technical and literacy skills of the daily read-

ing exercises in an expressive ensemble context. The piece was broken into three parts, similar to those for a choir. The focus was on playing together with great dynamic contrast while incorporating music literacy and following dynamic markings in the music such as *piano* (soft) and *forte* (loud, strong).

DISCUSSION

In 2012–2013, five students with no prior guitar experience demonstrated all of the level-one GCC objectives (see Table 1) except for identifying 16th notes, which was postponed until those musical elements could be learned in a musical context at level two. By the end of the school year, the five students demonstrated the skills of level three and four of GCC, as well as showing a great deal of independence as evidenced by their community performances. These results were duplicated in the 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 school years. Following their first semester of instruction, these students performed for hundreds of peers, parents, and school administrators at the South Central Association of Schools for the Blind spring performance. Currently, the TSBVI program is in its fourth year. These repeated positive results suggest that access to a quality guitar curriculum with minimal accommodations is an effective means of providing students with visual impairments with the essential knowledge and skills on the guitar. Also, daily classroom instruction is more effective than individual instruction once a week.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Curriculum

Access to a quality music curriculum is paramount in order for students with visual impairments to develop musical and compensatory skills. A best practices approach requires music educators to make evidence-based music curricula accessible to students with visual impairments (Coleman, 2013). All curricula, including those for guitar, should meet state knowledge and skills requirements. By meeting these standards, students receive a fine arts credit for the class and music educators can teach several students daily. This method is a more cost-effective approach to guitar education than the individualized lessons students traditionally receive once a week after school.

Instruction based on transfer principles

The skills necessary to make guitar a part of students' adult lives require educators to base instruction on meaningful principles that promote independence. Jellison (2015) suggests that for music skills to be generalized, music instruction needs to be based on students learning skills deeply and thoroughly, receiving frequent opportunities to practice in multiple contexts, and being taught meaningful principles instead of rote facts. Providing such instruction requires music educators to select the skills that students need to know in advance and give them several ways to apply those skills.

Establishing a positive socioemotional climate

Much of the socioemotional climate involves the ways students perceive their classrooms, their teachers, and their classmates. Perhaps the quickest way to have all students regard music class positively is to have them play great music. This idea may appear simplistic initially; however, music teachers often present a lot of new information instead of engag-

ing students in playing beautiful music. Effective teaching requires that teachers engage students in active music-making for a majority of the instructional time. When students play expressively, they are more motivated to participate in music classes. Moss (2009) found that students with visual impairments were more motivated to participate in music when they experienced personal accomplishments and could identify themselves as musicians rather than as persons with disabilities. The learning environment is most positive when teachers can facilitate student success with feedback from multiple sources within the environment.

Individual accommodations

Effective music teaching requires educators to provide access to the general classroom guitar curriculum while providing quality instruction with accommodations only as necessary. Accommodations should be individualized and based on student needs.

Modified braille music format

Braille music notation is an effective way for visually impaired students to learn music literacy skills. Sequencing and applying the content of the braille music notation within the context of active music-making is the most effective way for music skills to transition beyond the classroom. A modified braille music format can be used with novice music students with visual impairments, and literacy demands can increase over time as each student progresses. This approach accommodates the working memory of braille readers (Cohen, Voss, Lepore, & Scherzer, 2010) by limiting the elements of braille music notation to pitch; octave designations; half-, quarter- and eighth-note rhythms and rest and dynamics; and by allowing the instruction to be very similar to that received by guitar students who read standard notation. If students cannot learn music literacy within a musical context, then the context is too difficult. Schools for

visually impaired students might also incorporate braille music literacy into their general music classes, allowing them to be ready to approach instrumental music later in their academic career.

Technology

Technology plays a prominent role in creating successful music experiences for students. Music educators should become proficient with music software like Dancing Dots to provide braille music materials to students on a regular basis. Other sources, such as iPads and Limelighter technology, can allow students with low vision to read standard music notation. Limelighter has recently upgraded their technology to allow students with low vision to read standard music notation in real time by having the music scroll at a pace that is selected by the reader.

CONCLUSION

Learning happens by association (Bargh, 2014; Duke, 2010; Kahneman, 2011). This concept suggests that students are much more likely to apply musical knowledge and skills in their adult lives when they pair musical outcomes with enjoyment, autonomy, and the personal satisfaction that comes from daily musical achievement. GCC is not a special way to teach students with visual impairments, it is a format that allows all students to learn, value, and appreciate music on the guitar. It is my hope that all students, including those with visual impairments, will experience the joy of playing the guitar and becoming lifelong learners of music.

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