Music: a bridge to literacy[1]

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Music is an important part of every culture, though its function in each society may vary. All cultures contain language and music (Chenoweth 1979), and for centuries oral societies have used music as a powerful means of communication (King 1989). Music is a potent memory aid and instructional vehicle. Through music's repetition and poetry, individuals can retain information without its being written. This paper explores some ideas and approaches for using indigenous music to initiate and facilitate literacy instruction.

1. Music for memorization

As a music therapist for over 11 years, I have seen music used as an effective tool for teaching seemingly unteachable skills. My husband, also a music therapist, and I were asked to work with a 12-year-old mentally handicapped child referred to us by doctors in Philadelphia. They, along with her teachers, sought creative ways to teach her to tie her shoes and perform several other basic life skills after working diligently with her for over two years without success. I composed a song with step-by-step instructions for shoe tying, which the child quickly learned. In three months she could perfectly tie her own shoes, and shortly thereafter she was tying everyone else's shoes (Seaman 1988)!

Many other children, as well as adults with whom we have worked, learned complex skills through this method. In contrast to learning by rote, music provides an easy, as well as enjoyable means for learning, retaining, and integrating ideas and concepts.

Research confirms what music therapists have practiced since the early 1950s, and what oral societies have used for generations. Music combined with lyrics is the most effective verbal tool for accurately retaining and recalling information. In a study of long-term memory, Hyman and Rubin (1990) tested the ability of individuals to recall a Beatles tune when the subjects were presented with the title and the first line of the song. Their findings show that not only were the lyrics memorable for many individuals, but the meaning of the song was accessible as well.

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A study by Morrongiello and Roes (1990) of adults' and children's abilities to retain new songs revealed that children showed better memory for words than for the tunes. Adults showed good memory for both song components, though word retention was the stronger of the two. Nonetheless, the study showed that music is a powerful memory device.

Songs are even more retainable when the music and lyrics are familiar. Baugh and Baugh (1965) researched the effect of four types of music on the learning of nonsense syllables. Their results clearly show that the more familiar the music, the more retainable are the lyrics. For 50 college students studied, rock-and-roll was the most effective music style for learning the material, demonstrating 80 percent accuracy for recall of nonsense syllables.

2. Music for literacy

Programs, such as "Hooked on Phonics" and "Sing Spell Read and Write," help adults and children learn to read, spell, and write through music. These are phonics-based approaches set to music. Students sing the phonic sounds in story songs or in repetitive songs, like "B is for ball and broom and bike."

The McCrackens' (1972, 1986) whole-word learning approach encourages the use of songs and poems to help learners associate written with spoken (or sung) words. Evans and Clynes (1986) found that children retain more story content when it is sung, rather than spoken.

Learning takes place when the activity is (1) receptor-oriented, (2) context-oriented, (3) repetitive, and (4) participatory (Wilson 1992). Indigenous music embraces all four of these learning components. Not only are the words in the people's spoken language, but the music is also in their traditional music system. Their music may sound different to our Western ears, and it may not stir the emotion in our spirit that our familiar, traditional tunes do, but their music stirs their hearts and has more meaning for them.

Effective instruction must begin at the level of the student; the material must be developed and presented based on the receptor's current knowledge. Secondly, the context of the material must be based on the receptor's frame of reference. When material is presented in a language and form that is familiar to the learner, it is receptor-oriented and context-oriented. Stevick (1976) contends that material presented to the learner must have personal significance for memory retention to take place. The more emotional connections the individual has with the reading material, the more rapidly embedded it becomes.

Repetition and participation both focus on the learners' need for interaction and experience with the material because exposure to subject matter alone is not enough for retention to occur. The learner participates by listening, repeating, and memorizing. Memorization by rote is not as effective. Long-term retention occurs through repeated experience and interaction with the material (Wilson 1992).

If the music is truly indigenous, it is a powerful receptor-oriented tool because it matches the individual's own cultural environment. It is context-oriented because the lyrics are from the people's own language and in their poetic form. Our Western, rhyming approaches are usually inappropriate! Music is an excellent tool for repetition, since most people enjoy singing songs

over and over. Music is also participatory, which is a key factor in the music of oral societies. In some cultures, stories are told with music interspersed throughout, so the listeners can participate in the storytelling directly (Klem 1982). Oral societies have used their music to pass on information for several generations. For them, this method of retaining and recalling information is a common and highly effective tool.

Another element in successful literacy is motivation. If motivation is lacking, literacy never really catches on. Successful learners acquire skills to meet their felt needs (Ewert 1990). Use of literature that people want to read increases motivation. The usual motives for literacy are extrinsic, based on literacy's usefulness. This extrinsic motive does not necessarily stimulate the students' enjoyment of learning, especially if the felt need for literacy is fairly low. Music, on the other hand, offers intrinsic motivation because it is a valued part of oral cultures (Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

3. Music for literacy programs

Klem (1982) in his book *Oral Communication of the Scripture* questions whether oral societies need literacy at all. He cites examples of where literacy has only encouraged elitist separation within societies because the privileged who can read begin to control many aspects of the community. This can break down the natural balance of the society. Many oral societies view written communication as being impersonal, so they favor more personal oral communication. As a culture's motivation toward literacy grows, however, music can be a useful bridge for easing a culture from oral means of communication to written means.

Music and its associated artifacts are a vital part of the Mbore (Papua New Guinea) people's lives. David and Alice Parrish, of Pioneer Bible Translators, wrote a primer in Mbore, but many of the elders in the community had difficulty identifying drawings in the primer. For example, a drawing of a hand could not be recognized and, thus, the word associated with the drawing could not be read. This problem was eased when the Parrishes discovered that the Mbore had symbols engraved on their musical instruments that were quickly identifiable by the elders. When these symbols were incorporated into the primer, learning became easier. The traditional symbols aided in making the primer uniquely theirs, and this ownership helped stimulate a desire to read.

Dawn and Steven Clark in Papua New Guinea developed a primer based on a traditional Sio folk song about a turtle. The text of the song is presented, accompanied by pictures drawn by a village artist. Al and Cheryl Jensen in Brazil wrote a primer for the Waiapi that incorporates many of their traditional folk songs with corresponding pictures. This book also serves as a historical document for the community.

New indigenous songs can also facilitate literacy learning. Pat Ham utilized the skills of Tom Avery, an ethnomusicologist, to encourage indigenous hymnody as well as to develop literacy among the Apinaye in Brazil. Avery analyzed the Apinaye music and composed 18 songs in their music and language. The printed songs were incorporated into the literacy program and individuals' reading skills greatly improved because of this approach (Boring 1993).

Klem's (1982) research with the Yoruba in Africa offers some insight into music's ability to aid in memorization of content, as well as to deepen understanding of meaning. Klem requested new indigenous tunes for Scriptures from some Yoruba composers. The composers used a variety of Yoruba music styles, and Klem made recordings and written texts of each song. Klem then presented combinations of the material to three different groups of readers. One group received only the lyrics, another only the music, and the other both written and oral materials. The group given both written and oral materials demonstrated the highest retention and understanding of the material. Klem states,

> The use of appropriate oral methods of communication would not inhibit the growth of literacy but would actually prepare more of the people to readily accept it (Klem 1982:178).

Burke (1976) approached literacy in Iran through broadcasting. He developed a basic radio program to teach, maintain, and improve literacy skills. He used participatory techniques, especially music, throughout the program to involve the students and to maintain interest. Phonetic sounds, as well as words, were presented or reviewed through indigenous tunes. The songs, which were played approximately every five minutes, also taught concepts of health, hygiene, agriculture, nutrition, and the literacy topic of the day.

Mary Stringer in Papua New Guinea encouraged teachers to use a song every week to go with the literacy theme for the week. They made up songs about rats, frogs, women, houses, and other themes. These were very popular (personal communication).

4. Music for your literacy program?

Music can enhance any literacy program. It can both ease the learning process and make the experience more enjoyable. Indigenous music is the key element, as the familiarity and emotional connections associated with a people's own music motivates people to read and helps them to retain the material.

It is important to encourage people's use of their music by showing that you value their songs and the special events in which they use them. One must know the language well, or have access to the knowledge, because song texts must parallel the spoken form of the language as closely as possible. Two areas of caution should be noted:

1. Archaic language is sometimes used in traditional songs. These are probably not appropriate for literacy work.

2. Some cultures create songs spontaneously. These are not always as useful as traditional pieces, which tend to be familiar and predictable.

Step 1: Assess music's function in the community

Awareness of how music functions in the culture is important.

Some questions to ask are:

- When is music used?
- What values and motivations are expressed through music?
- Who sings or participates in the music making?

These questions are all related and help us to understand some options for the use of music in a literacy program.

- When?

This question should explore the domains in which music is used. Is it used to teach? For storytelling? For daily news reports? Is it only used during times of mourning? Alcohol consumption? Celebrations? Calling spirits?

Choose the songs and their texts carefully. Often songs used in different domains are from different song categories (for example, drinking songs, rights of passage songs, and story songs). Be sure to use songs from appropriate song categories for the age, gender, and status of the students.

- What?

It is also important to know what values and motivations are expressed through the songs used for literacy. Songs expressing values different from one's own are not necessarily inappropriate; however, songs portraying values that conflict with one's own should be sifted through carefully. This can be a very subjective decision. Listening to others in the community and seeing how they perceive the song may be helpful. If a particular song is valued for its historical content, teaching, humor, or story line, it could be useful. Sometimes songs may have a double entendre.

Values and motivations are also connected to the method by which a song is composed. Are songs given to composers by spirits? Through dreams? Through birds? If composition is always associated with magic or mysticism, music's use with literacy may be counterproductive. It is important to know the community's response to a song and what a song means to a community before using it.

- Who?

Knowing who is involved in the music making is very important. If the community has specific singers who always sing certain songs, it may be difficult to have literacy groups sing, unless they are the chosen few. In some cultures, individuals have their own song, which is sung at the same time that everyone else's song is sung. This could make literacy through music challenging, but not impossible.

It is important to know who the musicians, singers, and especially composers are in the community. Are they respected? If certain composers are not respected, choosing them to compose some literacy songs could be inappropriate. There are times, however, when including them may actually raise their respectability in other's eyes. This inclusion could be true of musicians and singers, too. If those who make music are not respected, it is possible that the music may not be respected either. In this case, music might not be a viable tool for literacy. Often, however, an outsider's interest in the music of a culture increases the people's music esteem.

Step 2: Incorporate music into the literacy program

After assessing music's function within the community, you may begin to develop an approach to incorporate it into the literacy program. This second step involves determining:

1. Which music styles are most appropriate for literacy?

2. Which song categories should be used?

3. Which composers or compositions should be used?

These are not questions answered by the specialist alone. For acceptance of a literacy innovation, it must (1) involve the community members and (2) function within the community's framework (Stringer and Faraclas 1987).

Begin by working through the existing authority structure and gain the support of individuals who can influence others. These may be musicians, elders, or teachers already present in the community.

Watch for the ways music is used in the community and seek to find parallel ways to use it with literacy. If a particular culture uses call and response songs (where a leader sings a line and then the singers respond to him in the next line), these songs could be great tools for teaching literacy. The teacher could sing a line, and students may repeat the line or sing another line in response. Written material could be used to cue students.

Almost anything can be described or discussed through music. Composers in the community should know what is appropriate. Test the songs with small groups of people first before presenting the songs to the whole community.

Step 3: Use the music in a literacy program

Community involvement in the music-for-literacy approach will enhance the program's effectiveness. After thoroughly following Step 1 and Step 2:

1. Use indigenous music as much as possible (including composers and musicians)

2. Use the song categories appropriate for the community

3. Use the music in a way that parallels community traditions.

These suggestions are hardly exhaustive. They offer only a small foundation of ideas and approaches to selecting appropriate music within a culture. Knowing one's limitations is also important. Those with doubts about appropriate approaches or songs should consult an ethnomusicologist. If there are no known or identified composers in the community, most ethnomusicologists can analyze and compose in the indigenous music system.

5. Conclusion

This paper only skims the surface of a huge ocean of potential uses for music in literacy. Continued research in this area could be of great value to the communities in which music and literacy are used together. Oral societies embrace their music if its value is encouraged, and music is a vital element for communication in every oral society. Incorporating their music into our work offers them a meaningful connection to the exploration of a new communication medium—literacy.

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