Teaching composing in secondary school: a case study analysis

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This article reports a case study of an experienced teacher of composing working with secondary school students in a large urban centre in Ontario, Canada. Results suggest authentic assignments connect student composing to the 'real world', and so have meaning and life beyond the music classroom. Teachers can facilitate the development of theoretical music knowledge by supporting and enhancing the experiential learning that students accomplish on their own, through composing. Offering suggestions for change to compositions-in-progress, and cultivating a classroom ethos where students exchange this service amongst themselves, serves to enhance composing potential. By helping students infuse their work with personal knowledge, experiences, and interests, teachers can increase students' meaningful involvement in classroom composing.

Background

As more and more teachers strive to incorporate composing into their music programs, the academic community has been seeking to learn what classroom composing entails. Research in this area has flourished over the past 15 years. Findings illuminate many aspects of structuring learning in this context that contribute to the effective nurturing of student composition. For instance, development of the teacher's own practical composing experience provides that teacher with a knowledgeable vantage point from which to guide students (Berkley, 2001; Gould, 2006; Odam, 2000). Similarly, teachers are better positioned to support student composing when they possess an understanding of creative processes (Fautley, 2005b; Younker & Smith, 1996). Conceptualising composing as problem solving allows teachers to help students identify strategies for solving these problems (Berkley, 2004; Burnard & Younker, 2004; Gould, 2006). Teachers can also provide students with specific tools to further assist the solving of compositional problems – composing tools such as procedural knowledge of traditional notation (Berkley, 2001), or of composing software (Airy & Parr, 2001; Nilsson & Folkestad, 2005; Paterson & Odam, 2000). Teachers must also take into account the structuring and managing of the physical and social learning environment – for example, by ensuring students have access to MIDI work stations (Paterson & Odam, 2000), and by fostering supportive environments for students to learn from and work collaboratively with their classmates (Fautley, 2005a; Rusinek, 2007). In order to engage students, composing tasks must be designed with a careful balance of freedoms and constraints (Odam 2000; Wiggins, 1999). Motivation for

task completion is enhanced when the teacher provides opportunities for showcasing and sharing student compositions (Berkley, 2001; Fautley, 2005a; Odam, 2000; Pitts, 2005), and by facilitating students' ownership, autonomy, and authority (Berkley, 2001). Teachers can guide students through the composing process by encouraging students to talk about their composing (Major, 2007), by sequencing steps for the student to follow to see the process through (Berkley, 2001), and by offering suggestions for revision (Berkley, 2004; Fautley, 2004; Reese, 2003; Webster, 2002, 2003).

While this literature has contributed significantly to a developing understanding of teaching composing, it is an outline that still leaves many blanks to be filled in – what teaching composing actually *looks* like remains foggy for many educators. My intention with this study is to fill in some of the gaps by providing a detailed picture of one particular educator's teaching-composing knowledge and practices.

Researchers have rarely sought to directly access the complex web of knowledge that teachers bring to classroom composing. Although some researchers have rich experience of teaching composing themselves (Carbon, 1986; Kaschub, 1997; Miller, 2004; Reese, 1994, 2001; Upitis, 1992; Webster, 2002, 2003; Wiggins, 1999, 2003, 2006), and have described understandings accumulated through practice, the analysis of such teacher knowledge is not systematic or adequate. Experienced classroom music educators possess a rich store of teaching-composing knowledge that has not been thoroughly explored or represented. Researchers need to ask: What do *teachers* know about teaching composing?

The goal of this in-depth qualitative case study was to render explicit the personal knowledge that informs the teaching-composing practices of one experienced teacher of composing – Jesse.

Introducing Jesse

The drive to Jesse's school is long, passing through this large Canadian city's peripheral ugliness – very wide roads (four lanes plus), giant intersections, big box stores, industrial parks, car dealerships, drive-through fast food outlets. There are very few trees. I turn off the main road and pass a complex of tall, menacing apartment towers looming over frightened patches of grass, blocking out the sun. Further from the main road, however, the apartment towers give way to modest single-family homes, detached, with green lawns and sunken living rooms. The school itself sits amidst the curvy labyrinthine streets of a 1960s subdivision.

I pull into the school parking lot around 8:40. Jesse is outside smoking with a caretaker, on the sidewalk near the school's delivery entrance. He introduces me, and the three of us chat about house renovations and plumbing adventures, soaking up the last few moments of early morning sunshine before the school day begins.

Jesse invites me in through the custodian's entrance, past the door to the boiler room.

Various teachers greet Jesse warmly as we pass the main office, with: 'Welcome back!' and 'How was the trip?' Jesse recently chaperoned 43 arts students on a four-day excursion to New York City. Apparently, it was a great success. Jesse stops to tell a story to a couple of teachers drinking coffee by the mail slots:

'I bought silk socks at Macy's – three pairs for 10 bucks. What a deal! I took them up to the counter and said to the girl: 'Hey – these socks have holes in them!'

'They do?' She goes.

'Sure!' I say. 'How else are you going to get your feet into them?'

Jesse has shoulder-length wavy hair, glasses and a russet beard. He is in his 50s, soft-spoken, highly personable, and a jokester. He has been teaching composing for over 20 years as part of the music program he runs at this public secondary school (enrolment 1400 students) in Toronto, Canada.

We slip into Jesse's classroom just in time for the morning exercises, broadcast over the school's public address system. He proudly draws my attention to the recording of *O Canada*. 'That's student-created – with the computer. Not bad!' He seeks my attention again for the final few bars, which feature an unexpected and clever extension to the usual cadence. Jesse smiles proudly and nods his head in appreciation, happy to show off his student's ingenuity.

Methods

A case study is 'an exploration of a 'bounded system' or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collections involving multiple sources of information rich in context' (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). In this study, the teacher-participant constituted the 'bounded system' or case. As Stake (1995) points out: 'For the most part, cases in educational research are people and programs' (p. 1). I worked intensely with my participant over a period of 4 weeks, accomplishing detailed, in-depth data collection through interviews, observation of classroom practice, writing field notes and gathering material. In order to elicit multiple sources of information I interviewed not only the teacher and primary participant, Jesse, but also his students and principal. I also observed Jesse's classroom practice. To ensure the information gathered was rich in context, I wrote copious, detailed field notes describing the characters, setting, environment and nuances of the teaching circumstances.

I began collecting data with a preliminary semi-structured interview in which I asked Jesse about his knowledge, experiences and practices of teaching composing. Subsequently, I spent 8 days over a 3-week period in Jesse's school.

Context: music education in Ontario, Canada

The Ontario secondary curriculum document provided by the provincial Ministry of Education and Training outlines learning expectations for students who choose to take music in grades 9 to 12 (age 14–18). The expectations are divided between three areas – theory, creation and analysis. The creation area is further divided between performing and arranging/composing. Although the document requires students to compose in all grades, the reality is that most secondary school programs are heavily dominated by performance. Ontario music students are rarely provided meaningful opportunities to compose.

Context: the students

Jesse's music program is an anomaly. As well as classes focusing on band and choral performance, Jesse runs senior classes dedicated to composing. When I spent time in the school, two of these composing classes were in session. Each class contained a mixture of

students in grades 11 and 12, and both had a few more male than female students. Ages ranged from 16–19. There were 25 and 26 students enrolled in the classes. It was rare that all students were present; generally about 15 turned up for each class.

Jesse told me more than once that a high proportion of his students are usually unsuccessful in an academic environment.

> I have very few… advanced students; the 'at-risk' kids come into this class.
> There are kids here that don't do well in other courses. They mouth off to teachers…
> If they were in a math class, they'd be hanging from the rafters.

In his composing classroom, however, Jesse sees something else. He sees the students engaged and successful. He sees them thriving in an environment where they are comfortable and capable:

> This is the first year I've had so much ethnic diversity, and so many at-risk kids. But it works. They come in here, and they get right down to work. And often there's very little I can help them with. They know the stuff, or they figure it out very quickly. And they're doing some advanced things. They're using key commands … I talk about this stuff, and of course it doesn't happen over night, but watch them work, and you see they're pretty comfortable. I'll mention something, show them once how it works …

Context: classroom composing snapshot

Students work singly or in groups of two and three at computer/MIDI keyboard workstations. They use E-Mac computers and the composing/arranging software 'Garage Band'. Jesse's composing program is largely project-based; students work independently, while Jesse offers assistance and periodically takes advantage of teachable moments, asking the students to take the earphones off and listen up.

Data collection and analysis

The preliminary interview with Jesse was followed by a school-based data-gathering stage which had three primary purposes: (1) to inform questions for ongoing interviews and discussion, (2) to provide evidence to support the participant's words – validity, or triangulation of the data (by observing examples of the teaching and learning practices and situations Jesse described) and (3) to gain a sense of Jesse's specific and particular teaching context.

At the heart of the data were Jesse's words. I encouraged him to share personal knowledge through anecdotes and stories, using my own stories of composing and teaching as models and triggers to elicit the stories that constituted and represented his own cache of personal knowledge. Jesse told stories about himself and about his teaching experiences. As Munby *et al.* (2001) point out: '[T]eachers often express and exchange their knowledge in the narrative mode of anecdotes and stories' (p. 877). Through Jesse's stories, I was able to access his personal knowledge of teaching composing.

Next in importance were the field notes that I created to paint a picture of Jesse's teaching practices and the context within which they occurred. These field notes were not mere descriptions of settings, characters and events, but a fiction-like narration of my

observations. This text was richly informed and shaped throughout by my ongoing dialogue with Jesse, as I sought to understand *his* perceptions of the teaching context.

Following the fieldwork I transcribed all interviews and audio-recorded classroom dialogue. I also transcribed and edited my field notes. I emailed transcriptions to the participants (Jesse and his principal), to verify their accuracy; I asked them to make deletions, additions and suggestions as they saw fit. When the files were returned to me, I made the minor modifications suggested.

Data analysis involved reading and re-reading the transcripts many times in order to identify themes and code the data accordingly. The sorting of the themes, subthemes and associated text blocks followed. This process revealed and illuminated significant aspects of Jesse's personal knowledge of teaching composing. When my analysis was complete, I sent it to Jesse and asked him to verify my interpretation and description of his teaching-composing knowledge. I incorporated Jesse's few suggestions into my revisions.

Themes

Authentic assignments

Jesse knows that his students need to be able to make the connection between their work in the classroom and what happens beyond school. Jesse's interview transcripts are littered with the expression 'real world':

> It's like it's done in the real world . . .
> Then they use what they are hearing in the real world . . .
> Because it happens in the real world . . .

Jesse strives to connect the work his students do in the classroom to the world outside. As an active professional composer for film and television he has a strong sense of what a 'real-world' composing task entails, and strives to imbue the tasks he sets for his students with the same authenticity. He designs 'authentic' assignments – composing briefs that closely replicate Jesse's experience of real-world music industry commissions:

> The assignment is just like it would be in the real world – I say: 'Give me a minute of music', or four bars, or 16 clicks. So when we do flash animation, they have to do a sting. So somebody falls down. It could be the timpani, or it could be just a crash sound, or a sound they make up.

One such assignment requires students to use computer software and MIDI instruments to compose a soundtrack for a short flash animation video. Jesse provides each group of students at a workstation with the digital video file, and demonstrates how to link it with the composing software (Garage Band). He offers few guidelines, other than to explain that the soundtrack they create must synchronise with the video. In particular, it must have a 'sting' – a sound to enhance the short video story's central moment of action.

> Bernardo works alone at his workstation at the back of the class on his assignment – a soundtrack for the 8-second video *Daddy at the Park*. (A scantily clad woman walks by and takes a father's attention away from his swinging child. The man follows her with

his eyes, forgetting all about the swing . . . and the backswing promptly smacks him in the head.)

Bernardo is intently concentrating on a piano track. He answers my questions without taking his eyes from the screen: 'It is a very simple sound followed by a few funny sounds.' He obviously wants to get back to work. He tells me he's been working on the piece for 3 days.

'Is it fun?' I ask.

'Yeah – I love this class.' He slips the headphones on and hunches over close into the monitor. He remains in this position, or minor variations thereof, working steadily for the rest of the class.

Jesse also taps into the authentic assignment possibilities he has recognised in the school's practice of beginning each day with a public address broadcast of the national anthem. Jesse commissions students to arrange and record *O Canada*. He provides them with a lead sheet (notation of the song's melody and chords). He explains they must input the melody into the computer and then create an arrangement around the melody, orchestrating the piece for whichever MIDI instruments and accompaniment patterns they deem appropriate.

These recordings are then broadcast to a captive school-wide early morning audience. Jesse's students are thereby provided a tangible purpose for their music – a concrete goal to help them focus their composing. For Jesse, the strong potential for meaningful dissemination of the students' compositions – followed by recognition of their efforts from teachers and peers all over the school – renders the assignment authentic.

Theory with practice

Music theory is not something students traditionally enjoy. Jesse, however, knows that music theory is, potentially, a very useful tool for composing. In order to engage students in learning music theory, he connects the theory to practice:

I believe that we should do things in tandem – you know, your theory and your practice you should do together – it's not 'today we're doing theory' . . . there's always a discussion around it, from the practice to the theoretical. Usually the practice first.

By introducing theoretical concepts in this manner – or rather, by allowing them to emerge – Jesse ensures that the concepts he addresses are relevant. Jesse seizes 'teachable moments' to articulate and render explicit theoretical concepts that the students have, often unwittingly, discovered:

Jesse: 'You hear this note? That's the tonal centre. But you chose a note that's not in the key of the tonal centre.' (He plays the riff the student has used in his composition, accenting the out-of-key pitch – a flattened fifth.) 'Cool.'

Recognising in this student's work the compositional technique of employing a pitch outside the established tonality, Jesse seizes the opportunity to point out how this colourful gesture

was achieved – to render the student's practical implicit knowledge *explicit*. Jesse avoids the disconnectedness that tends to make theory in any realm so difficult (and boring) to learn, by saving the explanation of theoretical concepts until students stumble across them. Jesse encourages students to compose by exploring the timbres, rhythms, melodies and harmonies the computer software makes available to them. When he notices the employment of a noteworthy compositional gesture, Jesse helps illuminate what is going on musically by deconstructing and analysing the combination of elements that have been brought into play.

> Jesse plugs a group's computer into the big speakers. 'Ladies and gentlemen, I need your ears.' He plays the composition and then leads a discussion from the board:
> There was only one thing I was going to suggest, then in the second half – lo and behold – you started playing these notes: [Jesse picks out the chord progression on the piano, with the smoothly ascending melody notes on top connecting the chords] … and that ties it all together! For those of you who read music … [He notates the progression on the board, with the melody notes on top – three triads: Amin, Dmin/A and G.] There is nothing wrong with this progression – the Beatles did it! But it's [particularly] good when you have it connect smoothly – voice leading. And you did it! Your ears sometimes are the best judges. And you found it.

In this instance, Jesse's goal was to bring to the class's attention the benefits of connecting harmonic progressions with smooth voice leading. In the first half of the group's excerpt the chord progression was voiced in such a way that it sounded jagged, and disconnected with itself. The students rectified the problem in the second half of the excerpt and Jesse chose to help them (and the rest of the class) explicitly understand how they had done it. Through musical exploration, students develop a partial, aural knowledge of musical concepts on their own. Through deconstruction and analysis, Jesse helps students to understand the concept, in addition, from a theoretical perspective.

Of course, there are many theoretical music concepts that students discover and explore on their own, without Jesse ever rendering them explicit. He explained: 'The course is not designed for me to teach harmony. So it's basically trial and error.' Jesse intends students to figure out the musical knowledge they need on their own, heuristically. Students develop theoretical understanding through their own composing practice. For instance, one afternoon I asked a student, Eve, if I could listen to her composition-in-progress. She plugged my headphones into her computer and played a light-hearted pop-rock influenced instrumental. It reminded me of *Flashdance*. Eve told me she built the tracks (there were five different instrumental parts) one by one, starting with the rhythm/drum-kit track. Then she added a piano melody, then a bass line, then a guitar harmony, and finally an 80s new wave synthesizer counter-melody. Each instrumental track was constructed with repeated one or two-bar loops that Eve had created by recording what she played on the MIDI keyboard. I asked Eve how she knew which pitches would work with her melody. She told me she just 'messed around', improvising along with existing tracks until she found musical lines that fit. In other words, Eve was building theoretical music knowledge on her own, through trial and error, as she composed.

Diagnose and fix

Listen, make a diagnosis, and fix the problem. This is a pattern of action very familiar to anyone whose business it is to make something better – health-care professionals, police officers, mechanics, parents . . . and of course, music teachers. In Jesse's classroom, this is a strategy both he and his students employ regularly to move the composing process forward.

> I really like a lot of what the students do, I just try and make it a little more focused or . . . Often times they'll call me over to listen, and I'll mute one of the tracks and say, 'Better or worse?'

> Jesse: 'I'm just going to ask you a question.' He fiddles at the group's computer, tweaking their arrangement, bringing in a guitar track a little earlier. 'What do you think? Better?' 'Nawww . . . well . . . *maybe*.' Jesse continues to move things around within the arrangement of their composition, showing different possibilities. 'That's where it should be.' He offers the students the option of saving both their original versions and his slightly altered one.

In the above exchange Jesse was suggesting that the guitar track in the composition was slightly out of sync. Significant in this vignette is that Jesse gives the students the option of saving both his edited version of the composition and their original. As he diagnoses and fixes, Jesse keeps in mind that what he considers a 'fix' might not be viewed in the same light by the students – beauty is in the ear of the beholder! In Jesse's 'Better or worse?' scenarios, he provides the students with the opportunity to decide if the fix is successful:

> 'It works – needs to be quantized. Now your harmony is louder than the melody, so you want to pull down that volume.' He changes volumes in the arrangement of the composition. 'Let's hear what the result is. Better or worse? Better? Good.'

Often the diagnose-and-fix occurs publicly, so that the entire class can benefit. Jesse plugs a group's computers into the big speakers, or simply asks students to unplug their earphones (to engage the computer's on-board speakers) and turn up the volume. By extrapolating from the discussion and applying Jesse's comments, ideas and suggestions to their own work, the rest of the students can be guided, too.

> 'Anybody else want to share? Please . . . we learn so much.'
> There are no takers. Jesse wanders around the classroom some more, then hones in on the rapper group, and asks if he can have a listen.
> He likes what he hears. 'All right!'
> Jesse takes off the phones and begins searching for the cable to hook them up. He eventually finds it on the floor beneath a large student backpack and hands one end to Jason. 'Hold that in place. It's not stereo, Jason, but it'll work.'
> Jesse (to the class): 'All right. Listen up. Listen and we'll make comments.' The composition plays through the big speakers. Piano, strings, and drum kit, minor key, mellow, a laid-back, restrained feeling. Layers are added as the composition progresses – effective.
> He asks the class: 'Did you hear a rhythm track? Yes. Did you hear a melody? Yes. You can sing it in your head, can't you? Do you hear any harmony? Yeah. What's the most important one of the three do you think? Melody, right. Is that what you heard

the most? No! So, the drums are very interesting, aren't they? Very interesting to listen to. And that's why you made them louder. But I think the listener – and the listener's always right – the listener wants to hear the melody.'

He diagrams on the blackboard the volumes appropriate for melody, harmony and rhythm within the mix. A few surreptitious conversations break out when his back is turned. 'Come on – these are pearls. Listen up. And they're free!'

This brief lesson in mixing, offered in response to the work of a particular group, was opened up to the whole class, so they would all learn from Jesse's 'pearls' of wisdom. The public forum also enables Jesse to solicit input and editing advice from other students in the class.

We all kind of work together. Because of the situation in this classroom – two or three people working together at a computer – you might as well have 25 people working together! We're a team. So we all talk about other people's compositions. How could we have made this better? What about if we try it without this track? What do you think, guys?

Jesse frequently invites students to discuss and assess their classmates' compositions. Jesse draws students in, valuing their input as they contribute knowledge from their own musical worlds:

Jesse: 'What do you think? Hands up.'

Students offer a variety of comments and suggestions: 'I like it . . . it sounds like chill-out music . . . the drums are really loud . . .'

Jesse encourages the group to play another composition through the big speakers. The piece is fast and powerful, the rhythm infectious. Kyle leaps to his feet and catapults towards the group's workstation to check it out. 'That's a bitch beat! That's a sick beat!'

Jason gets up and goes over, too. He advises (confident in his recognised role as class expert): 'Yo – turn up the strings a bit.'

Jesse to me: 'It's amazing how they edit each other's work. And they say the right things, too. I couldn't do this. [Create this kind of music.] The simplicity. It's brilliant. I couldn't do it.'

Following Jesse's lead, his students adopt the diagnose-and-fix editing strategy. They employ it when composing alone, and when working collaboratively within their groups:

Jason and Kyle, the rapper boys, are hard at work today. As they listen to their composition, their bouncing to the beat is interspersed with assessment and editing advice from Kyle: 'Mmmm!' and 'Yeah!' and 'Undo, undo!'

Sometimes students seek a diagnosis from a class member outside the group, a consultant 'hired' in to help out. I often observed such peer feedback and editing in Jesse's classes:

'There!' says Eve. 'Does that sound good?'
'Well, it's still not *quite* there . . .'
'We'll try it again. Thanks.' Arash, dismissed, goes back to his own station.

Eve and Zainab record the track again, and give it a listen.
'It doesn't sound right.'
'Yeah, it sounds really off.'
'Do you want to re-do it?'
'Yeah.'
They try again. Then listen.
'Too slow?
'Yeah. It might be.'

Ten minutes later, Eve and Zainab have got a track they are proud of. They call Arash over again to show off their most recent effort. He takes the proffered earphones and listens carefully.

'It's better than last time, but still not quite right – try quantizing it.'

Theme: Involving

I once had a professor who told me, 'One way to teach is to tell. A better way is to show. But the best way to teach . . . is to *involve*.' Jesse knows the value of richly involving students in their composing. As described above, Jesse involves students by eliciting and valuing their feedback in response to the compositions of their classroom colleagues. He also strives to involve students richly in their *own* composing, by encouraging and helping them to bring in aspects of their personal worlds.

Jesse: 'I have something to play for you today. It's a video clip of an interview with Richard T – he played piano with Paul Simon and many others. He plays a version of *Spinning Song* [a classical Royal Conservatory of Music endorsed piano piece] that I heard Phil playing in here yesterday.'

Richard T's version is rockin' gospel – a virtuosic and exciting arrangement of a classic piece of standard piano lesson repertoire.

With this presentation, Jesse was offering his students a model – a way to involve their own musical worlds in their composing. He was suggesting that students change a familiar piece of music to make it their own, as we saw the composer/performer do in the video. The presentation was particularly geared towards Phil, the student who Jesse had noticed playing the piece on his keyboard. Jesse was reaching out to Phil – letting him know that the piece of music he was working on in his extra-curricular piano lessons could form the basis for his next compositional effort. Phil could connect his own world to the composing classroom, by creating a unique and personal version of *Spinning Song*, as Richard T had done in the video example.

Jesse encourages students to make connections between their own worlds and the world of classroom composing. He knows such personal links allow students to be more intimately involved with their work, and that the work is therefore more meaningful for them:

I have students working here that are from the Middle East. They're doing an assignment that incorporates rhythms from the Middle East. For the most part I let them do what

they're comfortable doing, because they have an interest in it. And they'll do better work. I've found you have to let them work on what they are interested in.

So that he can help students compose the kind of music they are interested in, Jesse has put appropriate tools in place for students to create music that is relevant and meaningful to them. The software he makes available to the students allows them to access musical sounds that they are familiar with, and comfortable working with:

> These sounds in Garage Band [composing software] are the sounds they're hearing in their music – what they listen to on the radio. They're familiar with them; they know how to build with them.

Jesse's principal pointed out to me: 'Kids have always been connected to music, for generations and generations.' Unfortunately, traditional music education has often alienated students by forcing them to leave their own music outside the door of the school music classroom (Senyshyn, 2004). Jesse, in contrast, works hard to help his students make the connections between their own musical experience and understandings, and the music of the classroom. He actively invites students to bring in their own musical worlds, valuing their personal musical knowledge and interests. By doing so, Jesse personally involves students in their school music experience.

Jesse involves students further by encouraging them to go *beyond* reproducing and imitating the music they listen to, to compose something more personal. He encourages students to use their composing as a means of expressing their individuality—to produce compositions that represent unique self-expression.

> Because after a while – you know this stuff is so popular, and everyone's doing it – the stuff all sounds the same. 'So what can you bring to it?' And that's how I approach life – what can you contribute? What makes you different from someone else?

Jesse encourages this involvement of students' personal interests by means of gentle suggestion, inviting a student to make use of a unique musical skill, or area of interest:

> At Jesse's request, Jason unplugs his earphones and plays his version of *O Canada* for the class.

> Jesse: 'Really nice!' As the class resumes work, he moves over to ask quietly, 'Would you be willing to rap *O Canada* to that?'

> One of the group of three girls pulls out an acoustic guitar and starts to practice *Stairway to Heaven*. (What would teenagers play if this song had never been released?) Jesse asks if she is going to use the guitar to input some live sound into her composition.

Jesse makes suggestions such as these to individuals with the goal of helping them to see a way to create compositions uniquely their own – to incorporate their idiosyncratic approaches, abilities or interests into their composing, and so be that much more personally involved in the work they produce. He asks students: 'So what can *you* bring to it?'

Discussion and implications for teaching

Analysis of Jesse's teaching of composing suggests valuable implications for any teachers seeking to support student composition. Although Jesse's program – with its dedicated focus on composing – is an anomaly in Ontario, many music teachers wish to incorporate at least a little composing into their programs. These teachers may be guided by the following aspects of Jesse's teaching-composing knowledge, which are applicable to a broad range of teaching circumstances.

Assignment design is key to the successful engagement of students in classroom composing. As Paterson and Odam (2000) indicate: 'A brief or commission gives an objective, a deadline and a framework on which to hang the work' (p. 9). Jesse engages students with commissions designed to connect classroom composing to the real world. Teachers can increase the meaningfulness of composing work by assigning tasks that are 'authentic' – assignments that closely mimic or that *are* real-world commissions. Students can be charged, for instance, with the creation of a film soundtrack, which they actually record, produce, incorporate within a movie file, burn to disc, and exhibit; or the arrangement of a functional piece of music (such as a national anthem) to be broadcast over the school's public address system. Authentic assignments are those that connect student composing to the 'real world', and so have meaning and life beyond the music classroom.

Theoretical music knowledge can provide students with shortcuts to reach compositional goals. Without knowledge of music theory students risk debilitating frustration as they fumble in the dark to create the music they want to hear. However, the learning of theory, divorced from practical application, is often tedious and meaningless. Rather than 'teaching' theory, educators can let students work out theoretical concepts on their own, *then* help students to understand and recognise their practical discoveries from a theoretical perspective. Berkley (2004) examined the teaching of composing as carried out by 14 teacher-participants. She characterised the scope and breadth of the teachers' practices from high definition teaching (communicating knowledge about theory techniques, rules and conventions) that promotes convergent thinking, to low definition 'freewheeling' teaching 'that promotes discovery, creativity, authority, ownership, trial and error learning, and divergent thinking' (p. 257). Jesse's knowledge of teaching composing results in practices that position him towards the 'low definition' side of this continuum. Although he does teach music theory, Jesse prefers to add to or elucidate understandings that students first develop on their own, through trial and error. Jesse provides theory *with* practice, believing students will learn the theory best if they can be shown how it applies to the work they are already carrying out. Providing theory with practice – supplying theoretical knowledge to complement the practical knowledge that students discover and develop on their own as they compose – can enrich student learning by meaningfully connecting teacher-provided with student-discovered knowledge.

Students are naturally inclined to revise their compositions (Folkestad *et al.*, 1997; Kratus, 1989; Younker & Smith, 1996). However, they need help and encouragement in the revision process in order to move forward and develop as composers (Berkley, 2001, 2004; Fautley, 2004; Mellor, 1999; Reese, 2003; Webster 2002, 2003). 'The teacher directs and guides students towards successful goals, enabling them to decide for themselves what works most effectively in the particular musical situation' (Berkley,

2001, p. 127). In Jesse's classroom, the 'diagnose and fix' technique figures prominently as a means of assessing compositions-in-progress and providing feedback. Jesse usually delivers suggestions verbally, both in one-on-one conference sessions and also within the forum of a whole-class discussion (in which case other students can extrapolate from the advice to inform their own composing). Younker (2003) explains the benefit of such interventions: 'As students begin to frame and solve musical problems through composing, the music educator can intercede by answering questions, describing student compositions, offering suggestions, and asking questions to motivate further thinking' (pp. 234–5). Classroom colleagues can also play a valuable role assessing works-in-progress and providing suggestions to their peers. In Jesse's words, 'Two or three heads are better than one'. By listening to student compositions and offering suggestions for change, and by cultivating a classroom ethos where students respectfully exchange this service with each other, teachers can play a valuable role in developing students' composing potential.

Occasionally teachers encounter difficulty in determining an appropriate balance between suggesting how a student should compose and leaving the student to find her own creative pathway (Odam, 2000; Webster, 2003). Gould (2006) identified this concern in her analysis of the teaching-composing work of Carol Matthews: 'Still, as a composer, one of the most difficult aspects of the process for Matthews is keeping a balance between students' ideas and her own' (p. 203). Odam (2000) responded to such apprehension by writing: 'Teachers who fear that they may influence too heavily or harm their pupils' creativity need have few fears' (p. 118). Odam implies that students benefit far more from having teachers' advice, and potentially less creative freedom, than they would from no advice and utter freedom.

To allow the student to maintain a strong sense of ownership over his or her piece, teachers can take measures to mitigate the controlling nature of their suggestions. For example, teachers can suggest not just one way to modify a composition, but a variety of options, including foregoing the advice altogether. That way, it is still the student's decisions that move the piece forward. Teachers can offer recommendations with the knowledge and acceptance that students may follow or ignore them.

Similarly, in order to maintain students' sense of ownership over their creative work, teachers can offer suggestions as questions. As Paynter (2000) points out: 'When anyone has tried putting sounds together and is pleased with the results, enough to remember them, the teacher can start to teach mainly by asking questions about what is presented' (p. 8). Questions provoke students to consider the present state of their composition in comparison with the way they want it to sound – feedback that, as Younker points out: 'allows students to think about what they are attempting to do musically' (2003, p. 241). Fautley (2004) found in his case studies of teaching composing that 'questions were the most common form of teacher utterance, with statements second' (p. 210). When a suggestion is couched as a question, the student is able to maintain a greater sense of ownership over the composition. I frequently observed Jesse making a change to a student's composition, giving the student the chance to audition the result, and then asking: 'Better or worse?' This provided the student the opportunity to accept or decline the suggested modification.

Of course, even a question can influence a student's composition, and so perhaps, make it less her own work. This balance between suggesting and staying quiet is at the core of all teaching in the arts, and perhaps more accurately, at the core of all teaching.

Negotiating this balance will always be a challenging aspect of teaching composing. However, it is a challenge teachers must not sidestep; student composers *deserve* formative feedback. Webster (2003) maintains: 'Certainly a teacher should not dominate the thinking process to a point that causes a child to become overly discouraged and hostile. But is there a balance between dictating creative content and guiding creative discovery? I believe there is, and that this balance is part of great teaching' (p. 243).

Through composing music, students are able to create something uniquely their own, and then share that personal expression with others. Composing can, when structured appropriately, provide opportunities for students to express themselves (Barrett, 2001, 2003; Berkley, 2004; Dogani, 2004; Gould, 2006; Odam, 2000; Stauffer, 1999, 2002, 2003; Upitis, 1992; Wiggins, 2003). The art that they produce, and own, is concrete, substantial, visible, audible and shareable; composing is an activity with rich potential for involving students on an intimate and meaningful level. However, as Burnard and Younker (2004) point out: 'The experience can only be meaningful if it is relevant to the student's world' (p. 60). To maximise that relevancy and enhance students' sense of personal involvement teachers can assist students in connecting their own worlds to the world of classroom composing. Teachers can encourage and help students, for example, to compose music influenced by their own musical listening or performing experiences. Furthermore, teachers can encourage students to bring their personal knowledge and interests into their composing. By drawing on their sociocultural milieu and personal experiences, young composers 'create music that is relevant and meaningful to them' (Stauffer, 2002, p. 301). Teachers can actively help students to make these connections and so enhance the meaningfulness of their musical creating. Jesse asks students: 'So what can *you* bring to it?' Personalising a composition may involve integrating a unique musical skill (e.g. adding a guitar or rap track), by drawing from an area of personal interest (e.g. horror movies or video games), or by invoking a personal experience. By helping students to infuse their work with personal knowledge, experiences and interests, teachers can increase students' involvement in – and therefore the richness of – the classroom composing experience.

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