

## *Reading Across the Curriculum: An Opportunity to Improve Music Education*

by Patrick M. Jones

### **Introduction**

When I attended the Air National Guard's officer training school, we were taught to embrace each challenge not as a problem but as an opportunity to excel. The faculty presented us with several new "challenges" each day. We would no sooner have begun addressing a challenge when they would put further impediments in our way, thus making us have to readjust our strategies and reassign responsibilities within the team. We learned to live by mottos like "this is not a problem, just another opportunity to excel" and "if you can't go through it [an obstacle], go over, under, or around." We learned that there are many vantage points from which to view a situation, many ways to frame a problem, many approaches to accomplishing an objective and that one's attitude made all the difference.

Being a music teacher in today's schools and preparing teachers to enter them requires the same skills and attitude. It seems that new challenges appear each year with the potential to wreak havoc on music education. Block scheduling, standardized testing, inclusion, advanced placement classes, school choice, the creative economy, the International Baccalaureate Diploma and national and state standards for music, among others, have altered the educational landscape in ways that challenge the traditional model for school music programs in the USA, which is based on the assumptions of neighborhood schools enrolling middle class students with no learning disabilities who



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speaking English and come from traditional nuclear families with stay-at-home moms.<sup>1</sup> The current situation is nothing like that and requires us to rethink school music curricula in order to meet the musical needs of a greater variety of students with varying abilities from more diverse backgrounds. In addition to the scenario having changed, so have our objectives as a profession. The old model was content with music appreciation for the masses while predominantly focusing on developing the technical skills of a minority of students participating in elective large ensembles. Today, however, we are committed to the development of each individual student's musicianship as articulated in voluntary national and mandatory state standards.<sup>2</sup> Obtaining our current objectives in today's scenario is not a problem, just another opportunity to excel!

In addition, the pressure of standardized testing has caused schools to redefine the role of teachers within the larger school curriculum. One of the current initiatives is teaching Reading, English and Language Arts (RELA) across the curriculum. Viewed as a problem, this will take away from music instructional time; but seen as an opportunity, this provides a catalyst for us to rethink what we do and to address one of the six areas PMEA has identified we need to address for the improvement of music education: "connect music curricula and offerings to other curricular areas and the wider community."<sup>3</sup> The challenge before us is to teach RELA in the music classroom while maintaining and im-

proving the integrity of music learning. This article is an attempt to identify ways we can do that.

### **RELA Standards**

I was recently asked to analyze and address the Reading, English and Language Arts (RELA) standards of the Council Rock School District in suburban Philadelphia. Such standards are not universal. Music teachers need to address the specific standards embraced by their districts. Therefore, I use the Council Rock RELA standards merely for a model of how music teachers can address such standards with musical integrity and in ways that can improve the musical learning and musicianship of our students.

The Council Rock RELA Standards require students to assume six interrelated scholarly roles: reader, writer, listener, speaker, viewer and researcher. These roles are defined exclusively from a verbal-linguistic perspective. The challenge for the music teacher is to address them in musically valid ways. Thus, while instruction in music can easily fulfill them verbal-linguistically, the discipline of music, by its unique aural/tonal nature, extends these roles beyond the verbal-linguistic level to the non-verbal musical one.

Each of the six RELA roles is listed below with a summary of the school district's standard written in the format of a behavioral objective. Immediately following each standard I have listed "Music Applications." These are ways we can meet the standards verbal-linguistically in the music curriculum. Following them are listed what I've labeled "Music Extensions." These are unique ways instruction in music can

*(continued on page 26)*

*PMEA News*

*(continued from page 18)*

move beyond the verbal-linguistic level to meeting the standards in ways that can only be accomplished through music learning.

#### I. Reader/Reading –

A. RELA: Students will be able to read thoughtfully, independently, and critically; thinking critically about the text; identifying whether and how the writer accomplished his or her goal and what choices he or she made to affect the reader.

B. MUSIC APPLICATION: Music students read and analyze texts/lyrics, biographies, histories, articles, encyclopedia entries, performance reviews/critiques, CD liner notes and program notes.

C. MUSIC EXTENSION: Beyond verbal-linguistic applications music students read musical notation, which is only accomplished in music classes. Musical notation is an advanced graphic representation of sounds and sound combinations that embody cultural-musical expressions. Music students also analyze the musical settings of text to determine how the composer utilized musical elements to interpret the text musically.

#### II. Writer/Writing –

A. RELA: Students will be able to write verbal/linguistic text to entertain, persuade, explain, show knowledge, reflect on experience, experiment and examine.

B. MUSIC APPLICATION: Music students write lyrics to their own songs/compositions, analyses of songs/compositions, program notes, performance reviews/critiques, research papers on musical topics, journal entries and portfolio & project critiques and reflections.

C. MUSIC EXTENSION: Beyond verbal-linguistic applications, music students learn to write musical notation, which is only accomplished in music classes. Musical notation is an advanced graphic representation of sounds and sound combinations that embody cultural-musical expressions. Music students learn to write musical notation to arrange and compose pieces in various musical forms and genres from a variety of world cultures. They write songs manipulating musical elements to express their own texts and/or those of other authors.

#### III. Listener/Listening –

A. RELA: Students will be able to listen actively; adjusting for purpose and audience, being aware that listening actually helps one listen better.

B. MUSIC APPLICATION: Music students listen critically to lyrics and how composers and songwriters portray them musically. Analyses of text settings cause music students to analyze not only the verbal content meaning of the text, but also the affective expression brought to the text by various composers.

C. MUSIC EXTENSION: Beyond verbal-linguistic applications, music students learn to listen musically. They listen critically for errors in musical notation or performances and in order to analyze, compare, contrast and critique compositions and performances. They learn to listen critically to tonal organization and inflections embodied in the musical practices and genres of various cultures and style periods from around the globe.

#### IV. Speaker/Speaking –

A. RELA: Students will be able to use spoken language to share information with others or to persuade them, adjusting tone and language depending on the audience.

B. MUSIC APPLICATION: Music students make oral presentations on musical topics, orally critique musical performances and compositions and narrate public performances.

C. MUSIC EXTENSION: Beyond verbal-linguistic applications, music students learn to make oral/aural presentations musically both with and without text. They present texts/lyrics used in songs/compositions with musically appropriate and culturally informed interpretations. They also learn non-verbal tonal/aural expression through performing music.

#### V. Viewer/Viewing –

A. RELA: Students will be able to be aware of how media shapes opinions and emotions, being able to identify intended messages and being aware of persuasive techniques.

B. MUSIC APPLICATION: Music students analyze how music is used in advertising/merchandising through electronic media, and also in live situations such as stores/malls, office buildings, hotels, restaurants, theme parks and theatrical productions. They also analyze how music is used in motivational and mood altering ways such as sacred and secular ceremonies, sporting events, work songs and in healing and music therapy.

C. MUSIC EXTENSION: Beyond verbal-linguistic applications, music students arrange and compose music to shape opinions and emotions. They arrange and compose music and use existing sound samples in electronic and live formats to target various demographic segments of the population and/or portray various emotions. They compose and select repertoire for use in various settings such as school assemblies and sporting events that create ambience and promote intended opinions and emotions among attendees.

*(continued on page 28)*

(continued from page 26)

## VI. Researcher/Researching –

A. RELA: Students will be able to locate, evaluate, and use information accurately and effectively. They will create products that communicate their conclusions to their audience.

B. MUSIC APPLICATION: Music students write research reports on musical topics and program notes for performances, which require them to conduct research.

C. MUSIC EXTENSION: Beyond verbal-linguistic applications, music students arrange and compose music based on certain historical models or various cultural genres. Such pieces require extensive research into the style periods, genres and cultures in order to create authentically accurate products. Such research includes textual and historical documents and analysis of written and recorded examples that both inform and serve as models.

## Closing

What I have outlined above are ways to musically address what are presented as non-musical mandates. The RELA standards provided an outside perspective to evaluate what we do and envision something we've perhaps not previously considered. The music curriculum that would offer the opportunities outlined above would be extremely challenging, interesting and musically educational. Its graduates would be equipped to make and use music to improve their lives in meaningful ways.

The new expectations of teachers and the current frenzy over test scores provide a catalyst for us to recast music education in ways more musically challenging and rewarding that can meet the musical needs of all students and address non-musical concerns of our districts. It would be myopic to view this as a problem instead of an opportunity and foolish not to take advantage of it. As in all

movements of enduring value, change will not happen on a grand scale. It will happen through the daily actions of thousands of music teachers making a difference in their own classrooms. Therefore, I encourage you to use your summer curriculum design time to develop music curricula that are more comprehensive, more rigorous, more musical and that reach more students than we have ever imagined before.

<sup>1</sup> It is not that all schools are like that. The US has always had a variety of schools and educational challenges such as non-English speakers, poorer schools, remote rural schools etc. However, the traditional model for school music and the recognition system for music teachers in the US is based on the kind of school I described and most music teacher education programs are designed to produce teachers for that model.

<sup>2</sup> Academic Standards for the Arts and Humanities, 22 Pa. Code, Chapter 4, Appendix D, (11 January 2003); *National Standards for Arts Education: What Every Young American Should Know and Be Able to Do in the Arts*, (Reston, VA: Music Educators National Conference, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> For comprehensive discussion of these 6 areas and the larger discussion with PMEA see: Patrick M. Jones, "Design Your Own PMEA Conference: A Guide to Meeting Your Professional Development Needs," *PMEA News*, Spring - March 2006; Patrick M. Jones, "Moving Forward with Focus," *PMEA News*, Winter - December 2005; and Patrick M. Jones, "P.M.E.A. Toward the Future: Serving the Musical Needs of All Pennsylvanians in a Changing World Environment," *PMEA News*, Fall - September 2005.

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