



CREATING MUSICAL PLAYLISTS FOR THE CLASSROOM

"Music is the shorthand of emotion. Emotions, which let themselves be described in words with such difficulty, are directly conveyed to man in music, and in that is its power and significance."

—Leo Tolstoy

OVERVIEW

Students identify how different types of music make them feel, and create a music playlist for various moods and emotions. Then they reflect on how a shared listening of music leads to an experience of awe and helps them feel more connected to themselves and each other.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To help students cultivate emotional awareness
- To cultivate a sense of belonging and connection among students by experiencing synchrony through music
- To build a positive classroom climate

TIME REQUIRED

- 15-30 minutes

LEVEL

- PreK/Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School

MATERIALS

- Access to the following videos (choose one based on developmental appropriateness of your students):
 - "[Victory](#)"—an awe-inducing orchestral arrangement by Thomas Bergersen (video not required)

- [“Baraye”](#)—A song of cross-border solidarity for human rights performed by Coldplay and Golshifteh Farahani (video required)
- [“Imagine”](#)—John Lennon’s song of cross-border peace performed by musicians from around the world, produced by “Playing for Change” (video required)
- [“Pak Sar Zameen and Jana Gana Mana”](#)—Pakistani and Indian musicians collaborate and sing each other’s national anthems as a sign of deep respect. (video required)
- Online or offline access to music streaming websites, apps, or devices
- Journal and writing instruments

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Listen to music performed by unlikely collaborators from different parts of the world, and experience a sense of awe
- Reflect on how music brings people together (even those who are from different cultures), and reflect on the universal emotional experiences that music arouses or helps express
- Select a few emotions, and create a music playlist that resonates with those emotional experiences
- Listen to the playlist with songs curated by peers based on the same emotions, experience synchrony, and foster connection with each other
- Notice how their feelings, moods, and emotions alter in response to a collective listening experience of music

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence
- Curiosity
- Creativity
- Perspective

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Non-judgment
- Open Awareness

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Many people experience an “[awe](#)” moment when they participate in a musical experience with others.
- Can you think of a time when you were listening to music with others, and it led you to experience an “awe” moment? How did that emotion feel in your body and mood? In what way did it lead to a heightened connection to your own emotional experience as well as to others? Did it alter your sense of meaning and motivation in any way?

INSTRUCTIONS

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- Questions to ask yourself before doing this activity with students are: What is the emotional climate in the classroom right now? Are my students tired, agitated, anxious, energized, or something else? What steps can I take to gently acknowledge their current emotional experience and also invite them to engage with music with resonance in a deeply meaningful way, through this exercise?
- Once students begin the activity, remember that there are no right or wrong responses; students’ responses may differ based on their worldview, culture, mood, intensity of emotion, depth of mindful engagement, or general affinity for music.
- As a teacher, consider how you may practice bringing an open awareness as you hear students’ responses to the activity, while also being on the lookout for any potential concerning responses or music suggestions such as those related to violence, trauma, discrimination, etc., that may make the classroom climate unsafe for others. Consider how you might respond to a student that gives such a response to ensure their well-being and classroom safety.

PART 1: DEEP LISTENING AND PRESENCE (15 MINUTES)

- Introduce the session by asking students: *Have you ever listened to a piece of music and found yourself deeply moved by it? Perhaps you experienced a sense of awe or wonderment. Perhaps you felt more connected to yourself or those around you or even to the musicians performing the song. Think back to a recent time where you experienced that. What emotions did it evoke? Did you experience any body sensations?*
- Consider sharing about a time that you experienced musical awe, and describe in detail for students what that experience felt like in your body sensations, mood, emotion awareness, connection to yourself and others, and motivation and meaning. Then, invite a few students to share out with the class their recent experience of musical awe.

- Then, introduce the activity by saying: *Today, we are going to listen to a song together. I invite us to bring our full presence to the song. I invite you to be silent, and deeply listen to the song. We should try to minimize distractions, so clear your desks, take a few deep breaths in, and get comfortable in your seats.*
- Once students have heard/ watched the song, ask them this:
 - *What was listening to this music like for you? Were you left feeling a sense of awe or wonderment? If yes, did you notice any bodily sensations that you may have experienced? Were there any changes in your breathing rate, heart rate, perhaps goosebumps or an unconscious tapping of your fingers?*
 - *What feelings came up for you while listening to this music, and what is your mood now? Were there any memories that came up?*
 - *How do you think music brings people together, even those that are from different cultures? What may be the emotional experiences of these people that led to them coming together?*
 - *What was it like for you to listen to this song, with your classmates? Does it evoke any emotions because you are sharing this intentional musical experience with your peers?*
 - *Do you feel more motivated towards a cause that benefits humanity? If yes, think about why you feel this way now.*
- Give students an opportunity to pair-share, and then take a few responses from the class.

PART 2: CRAFTING A CLASS PLAYLIST (15 MINUTES)

- Pick one of the following prompts for students to work on:
 - Music that energizes you
 - Music that calms you
 - Music that helps you focus
 - Music that helps you feel and deal with challenging emotions (sadness/ nostalgia/ fear/ etc)
- Tell students that they will now be crafting a playlist of music that resonates with the selected prompt.
- To model the activity, share a curated list of songs that you like for the selected prompt.
- Ask students to now take a few minutes to remember songs for the selected prompt and to add them to a “class playlist”. This playlist could be made on any of the online streaming apps (such as YouTube, Spotify, etc.) or could be written down, downloaded at a later time, and brought to class the next day in a USB drive.
- When possible, replicate the “deep listening and presence” exercise with the playlist that students have created, by playing the songs on the playlist, and reflecting on the questions given in the exercise. Additional reflection questions could be:
 - Did anything surprise you while listening to the playlist?
 - Did it leave you with a greater sense of belonging or connectedness to yourself or others involved in those situations? If yes, in what way and why?
 - What did you discover about each other that you didn’t know before?
 - Did hearing other students’ selected songs deepen your understanding of the selected prompt and how it shows up for you versus others? Are there more commonalities or differences between you and your peers? In what way?
 - Did hearing these songs motivate you in any way? If so, how?
- Take the last five minutes to invite students to share some of their responses to the questions.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- To what degree were students left with a sense of awe, enhanced emotion awareness, or greater belonging and connectedness with themselves and each other?
- What other steps could you take to use music to facilitate a positive classroom climate?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

A [study](#) conducted with 3rd and 4th grade Canadian students found that students who participated in group music training (versus a control group) developed higher levels of sympathy and had enhanced pro-social skills. The training centered on learning to [play the ukulele](#), with direct instruction to “help their neighbor.”

Another longitudinal [study](#) conducted with British students ages 8-11 found that participating in musical games, such as improvising rhythm as a group, over the course of nine months are beneficial for developing empathy and understanding in children, and can improve social and emotional abilities.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

One of the sources of [awe](#) for people across the world is music. Scientists have [found](#) that when we experience music that deeply impacts us, the brain’s dopamine pathway is activated which allows the mind to experience awe, wonder, and exploration—important keys to learning.

Furthermore, music can also help foster a sense of belonging among students because we find [resonance](#) in the sounds of our culture, and begin to appreciate our individual identity as a part of a larger group, place, or collective identity.

Listening to music with peers can also [foster students’ connection](#) with each other by eliciting synchrony not only with the music but also between individuals participating in the same musical experience. Additionally, music improves students’ social-emotional skills by enhancing their [ability to recognize, understand, and regulate emotions](#), and by cultivating their empathy for others—an important skill for [reducing bullying](#).