

# Music and Keyboard in the Classroom

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**In March 2004**, the Australian Government announced a **National Review of School Music Education**. The publication the following year addressed the following:

- Factors that affect the quality and status of the teaching of music in Australian schools
- Examples of best practice of teaching and learning of music both in Australian schools and schools overseas
- Key recommendations, principles and priorities for enhancing school music education

I have responded to this report by designing a specific general music curriculum designed for middle school students. As the national report states '*...the majority of students learn music as part of a general education*'. We need to provide for this body of students. I have road-tested this course to over 200 students at my present school, and the results have been impressive.

*Music and Keyboard in the Classroom* consists of two student books and a teacher manual. 60 lessons based on practical activity in a keyboard laboratory setting integrate theoretical knowledge, listening and analysis, creative exploration, musical problem solving and group work. A continual theme running through the books is the development of emotional and social learning, the development of intrinsic motivation, and genuine musical encounter.

According to the national review, some of the issues in music education include:

- Curriculum articulation
- A basis in practical activity

- The need for creativity
- Progression and individual learning
- Group work and collaborative learning
- Enjoyable learning and student motivation

How does *Music and Keyboard in the Classroom* address these key elements and concerns?

## 1. Curriculum articulation

- There is a need for clear syllabus style curriculum documents in music.
- There is a need to address the importance of a sequential and balanced curriculum.
- The perennial challenge of music education lies in developing, implementing and sustaining a music curriculum that effectively engages students with the full range of benefits which could be derived from being involved in music.

*Music and Keyboard in the Classroom* includes a 50-page teacher manual that specifically outlines the pedagogy and philosophy behind this curriculum model. It is clear and simple to understand.

Lessons have been designed in a constructivist context and learning complexity is gradual and sequential.

Follow up research on a sample of 100 children indicate a high level of engagement with this course. 89% of students were happy with their rate of improvement. 91% of students thought the learning difficulty level was right for them.

A full range of benefits is derived from this course. From the same research sample, 73% reported an improvement in concentration, 70% in ability to work alone, and 67% working in groups.

## 2. A basis in practical activity

- A high proportion of music in schools appears to be listening to or responding to music. Effective music programmes involve active

engagement in music making. The best way to learn music is to play music.

- The prevailing characteristic of the successful music programmes at virtually all site schools was its basis in practical classroom activities which developed the learning of musical knowledge and skills through integrated performance, listening and creative activities.
- Schools need to provide performance opportunities for students as performers.

*Music and Keyboard in the Classroom* is based on a practical musical experience in the keyboard lab. Students have one keyboard each with headphones. No experience is necessary and it caters for multi-level learning.

The course deliberately includes only the necessary body of theoretical knowledge to achieve the practical/musical outcome. Listening and analysis activity is directed around the music being played.

There are suggestions in the teacher manual how to engage all students in performance to each other and outside audiences. This can be integrated with assessment.

### **3. The need for creativity**

- Australian music curriculum documents under-represent creativity in music in favour of music as a re-creative activity. A strong element of creativity should be encouraged.

*Music and Keyboard in the Classroom* includes a number of creative activities and these can be used as a guideline for the teacher to devise more. This is evident in Book 2, 'Getting Creative'.

Such activities include

- improvisation exercises in small groups
- story making and music
- aural based call and response
- finding missing notes in popular tunes

### **4. Progression and individual learning**

- Progression from the junior to the secondary phase of music education is problematic, with transitions from different environments and different styles of teaching.

- The role of individualised learning in the classroom is an issue.
- The emphasis on high ability in relation to others may undermine student motivation especially in students with low perception of their ability.

New students bring a range of experience levels to our classrooms. One of the hallmarks in this course design is that fact that students require no background to begin the course, but if they have prior skill, they can quickly tune in to a level appropriate for them. In this way, all students are suitably engaged. It is made clear to students that assessment is based on progress and improvement

## 5. **Group work and collaborative learning**

- Wiggins (2001) proposes a problem-based approach to musical learning which involves teachers and students as collaborative partners in problem solving.
- In addition to co-operative group work there is a need to provide continual challenges for students.
- Group teaching of instruments does require different pedagogy and practice.

Students are collaborative partners in this learning model. In fact, self-assessment is a major theme and outcome from the course. Students can get 'teacher status' and have the responsibility to assess other students. This has been one of the most successful features of the course. The teacher manual explains this process fully.

Group work is a feature, particularly in Book 2. Students play rounds, duets, drum kit parts and accompany each other. This is *real* group work, where each part is vital.

Continual challenges are present through the lesson structure. As the teacher manual states, an important ingredient of enjoyment is increasing complexity through continual constructivist challenge.

This course has been tested with class sizes up to 21 students in years 6 -10. It is easy to teach, easy to manage and very enjoyable for the teacher. The manual explains how.

## 6. Enjoyable learning and student motivation

- Successful music programs have a very strong emphasis on enjoyable music learning experiences.
- Students seem to be less motivated if subjects are not enjoyable and have failed to demonstrate their relevance.
- Active learning, personal discovery and the immediate use of and application of music concepts, skills and information enable children to become increasingly responsible for their own musical learning.
- Motivation and discipline challenges posed by adolescents are some of the non-musical issues music teachers have to deal with in addition to planning and managing learning.

The teacher manual discusses 'enjoyment' as one of the essential factors for successful learning. In the student survey referred to above, 72% of students reported an increase in interest in music, and 45% said they now considered learning an instrument.

Students are not often 'told' how to play an exercise. Personal discovery is the more common methodology employed. Through the learning of self evaluation and meta-cognition, students 'learn how to learn'.

A course which fosters a high level of personal engagement at an individual level, and is achievement based and enjoyable, will increase motivation and reduce discipline problems. Planning and managing is less of an issue because each book should last at least an academic year. The work has been done for the teacher.

## Every Australian school is capable of supporting effective learning in music

This course is not expensive to deliver. Modern keyboards have never been better value and have tremendous versatility and appeal. They are under-utilised in general music education.

Computers are not required for this course.

*Music and Keyboard in the Classroom* is a unique course maximising keyboard potential within the time constraints of a general music curriculum.

Why keyboards? The national review found that 90% of year 6/7 boys want to play an instrument connected to technology. The headphones also provide a manageable 'sound free' environment for teacher sanity. Recorders and tuned percussion lose favour as students get older.

For more details about *Music and Keyboard in the Classroom* including orders and pricing, contact Michael Griffin.

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