





Share the Joy of Learning Through Discovery

By Angela Leonhardt

As you enter the music room, you're greeted by a variety of instruments scattered about and the lively chatter of students engaged in animated discussions. Your attention is drawn to one group, where a student enthusiastically proposes, "It's almost there, but let's add *this* to the end—I think it will be better," before demonstrating on one of the instruments. After hearing the short melodic idea, others in the group agree and exchange spirited high-fives. Excitedly, they signal the teacher to come listen to their new composition. To an outsider passing by, this might appear chaotic, but what's truly happening is a dynamic process of learning through doing.

One of the founding members of the American Orff-Schulwerk Association, Arnold E. Burkart, said, "It's not what you tell students about music that counts, it's what you have them do with it." As music teachers who plan lessons and programs throughout the school year, it's easy for *us* to be the one engaged in the doing while we work to explain concepts to our students. What if, instead, we focused on empowering our students to be more independent in developing their understanding and skills?

Project-based learning is one way we can help our students move toward independent mastery, through problem-solving, engagement with authentic tasks, active participation, and interaction that increases student agency. When they have agency, students

are afforded the capacity to initiate and carry out their own musical ideas.

Considering this idea of *agency* brings back memories of my early educational psychology classes when I learned about Jerome Bruner, whose research revealed that students know best what they *discover for themselves*. He encouraged educators to have students engage with objects around them to construct knowledge based on previous experiences. And while that doesn't negate the value of memorization of concepts or performance of music directly from a score, it does encourage us to expand our students' experiences to include discovery and creativity, through activities such as composition and improvisation.

IMPLEMENTING PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

The idea of project-based learning activities might raise concerns about classroom management, limited time, or even a lack of experience in guiding students through a longer project. While those are valid concerns, I believe you will find that empowering student agency is beneficial enough to invest in overcoming the challenges. What I offer here is a summary of a process I utilize and a sample project. I hope it might encourage deeper exploration of the possibilities that come with project-based learning in your classroom.

When I design a project for my students, I start with the goal or

musical concept I want them to interact with. The musical concept is the foundation. It could be a rhythmic, melodic, or movement concept. From here, I outline the steps or the scaffolding my students will need to reach the goal. I work backward to break the steps into manageable pieces for each classroom session (these projects typically do not take up an entire class period). For 2–6 weeks, depending on the project's scope, we may work on the project for 20–25 minutes in a 50-minute class period.

FRUIT COMPOSITION PROJECT

My goal with this project is to have students manipulate and practice sixteenth-note patterns. We have previously labeled these patterns, decoded them in song material, and read them through rhythmic exercises. As a mode for differentiation for more advanced students who may need an extra challenge, I often have them perform their created rhythmic patterns in canon.

Some years, this project has been strictly rhythmic, with students performing on hand drums, Tubano drums, or other unpitched percussion instruments. In other years, with students at a different place or level in their musical journey, we took the rhythmic patterns a step further by transferring them to melodic notation via Orff instruments.

After students create their rhythmic patterns, they are given the option to set their instruments in C, G, F, or D pentatonic scales with a focus on a *do*-based or *la*-based tone set. While utilizing a pentatonic scale isn't essential, I have found that student composers are often more successful when they have a limited pitch set. The increased level of skill needed for the melodic concept

to be layered on top of the rhythmic concept is another area of differentiation.

Project Title: Fruit Composition

Musical Concepts: Advanced rhythmic patterns, canon

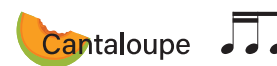
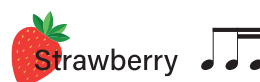
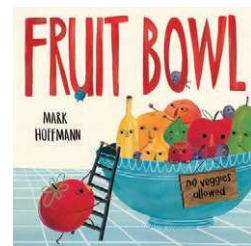
Group Size: 2–3 students

Goal: Students create a musical composition based on known fruits. Students will be able to perform their compositions with accurate rhythms. *Optional:* Students will be able to perform their composition in canon with a partner.

Project Outline:

Day 1

- Read *Fruit Bowl* by Mark Hoffman.
- Explore/manipulate fruit rhythms as a class:



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- Students take turns creating a four-beat rhythmic pattern at the board, followed by the class saying the pattern.
- Longer patterns are created until the A B sections are all filled in.
- Transfer rhythmic fruit patterns to body percussion (snap, pat, clap, stomp) to reinforce the *feel* of the pattern.
- *Optional:* Divide class in half and perform in canon. As a class, decide if it should be a 2-beat or 4-beat canon.

Day 2

- As a class, review fruit rhythms from the previous period.
- Transfer these rhythms to hand drums, Tubano drums, or other unpitched percussion instruments.

Day 3

- Review fruit rhythms from the last class. Pass out the project sheet to each group (for a sample project sheet, go to www.tmea.org/leonhardt2025)
- In partner groups, students create their own rhythmic fruit pattern. While I have students do this writing on their devices, it could just as easily be done on paper.
- Partner groups should be able to clap and say their pattern before they get their instruments.
- Groups practice performing their new composition.
- *Optional prompts:* Can you perform it in canon? Will it be a 2-beat or 4-beat canon?
- Student groups perform for the class.

Extensions of this activity could include decoding the fruit rhythms or playing another group's composition. If a group is moving quickly and is able, ask them to add movement to their performance: *How can you make it look interesting to watch as well as listen to?* Other guiding questions to ask the group as they are working include: *How will you start? Is someone going to count you off? Do you have some introductory music before your composition starts?* If students use small handheld unpitched percussion, encourage them to think about body facing or volume levels as they perform.

PROJECT CONSIDERATIONS

While it can be noisy in a classroom where students are working on these projects, that doesn't mean it is an out-of-control classroom. You will begin to discover the difference between on-task and off-task noise as you do more project-based learning in your classroom. That said, there are times when you may need to take a sound break. In those moments, have students talk through their piece or go through the motions without playing their instruments. You may also find it helpful to have headphones available for students who are more sensitive to sound.

Projects like these can take extra time, but I have found that the opportunity for students to create their own music and take ownership of their learning has outweighed that concern. Students often talk and engage in ways they wouldn't if we followed a lecture-style model for practicing various concepts.

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Students work in groups on an assignment to compose original compositions based on their names.

It also helps to finish each larger project with a reflection time. Ask students what worked well, what they liked most about the project, and what they would do differently. I have found students to be willing to offer their honest feedback, and their responses have helped me refine the process each time.

While you might hesitate to plan a project-based learning activity with your students, I encourage you to start small and give it a try—perhaps take some time this summer to consider what could be effective for your classroom. Initially, I struggled to find the right balance between being the teacher who acts as a facilitator and guide for my students and the teacher who simply delivers knowledge to them. However, through practice and experience, I've developed an approach that works well in my classroom. I now take great joy in watching my students learn as they discover through doing.



Angela Leonhardt teaches at Hidden Forest Elementary (North East ISD) in San Antonio. She also teaches Orff Schulwerk Pedagogy courses through AOSA.

REFERENCE

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