Background and Motivation

**Too Many Songs About Fortnite and Unicorns**

Have you ever heard *Old Town Roads*? I have. At the same time I haven't. I first heard it embodied in my student's Spring song writing project. A significant portion of my 4th and 5th grade music students wrote a song that began and ended with “I got the horses in the back.” I have also heard songs about unicorns, and songs that consist of “I’m the best at Fortnite.” In all cases, I recognize students reached a creative block and didn't know where to go next.

In February of 2019 I had two song writing units - one with my 2nd and 3rd graders and another with my 4th and 5th graders. In 2nd and 3rd grade we had clear goals of writing new verses for *This Little Light of Mine*. Lyrics needed to be about something we cared about. I primed their thinking with topics like family, friends, things you love, etc. We brainstormed and made up parts of our song and had a lot of success as a class. Sometimes, a student would suggest something off topic; their favorite video game or TV show. I told them I understood that they think it is important, but I'm looking for something different. I want something that matches the context of the song. When the third graders broke into groups, the off topic and ‘less meaningful’ ideas for lyrics caused problems. Several groups derailed into arguments because one or two students really wanted to write about Minecraft and others wanted to write about their dog. The majority of the groups wrote something meaningful and on topic. Why was there such a variety of results?

My 4th and 5th grade project was far less successful, and I know why. There was too little structure. We didn’t write a song together. We didn’t brainstorm together. They were released with a vague goal. That’s when the Fortnite and copying existing works rolled in.

**Get In and Independent**

I am not surprised when students try to write lyrics about video games, or borrow lyrics from a song they’ve heard online. They are connecting their home culture to the project I have given. They are showing me what they know about songwriting. I am baffled by students who get the opportunity to be creative and shut down. They sit down, won’t work with their musical instrument, and by the end of the class they leave a blank nameless paper on the floor. Even when I devote time to chat with them and give them questions to think about, the result is the same. These students are the ones who need the most support and structure. They won't show anything they know about songwriting, music, or themselves.
Hammond talks about transforming dependent learners into independent learners. My students who complete a song with little help are independent. They don’t need a lot of structure because they have many tools - confidence, creativity, engagement, a passion for music, etc. My dependent learners may lack all of those tools, despise writing, or may not trust me. I wonder how many students love music but do not love music class because it isn’t their music. I hope to break through some of my dependent and unengaged learner’s creative blights.

Dependant learners rely on the teacher doing most of the cognitive lifting and often require lots of scaffolding to get through activities (Hammond p14-15). My goal is to create a support structure that simultaneously enhances and focuses the work of an independent/creative learner, and fully supports students that need a lot of structure to get through an activity.

What I Created and Why
I created 5 resources: A Lesson Outline, two questionnaires, and two ‘mad lib’ fill in the blank worksheets.

The Lesson Outline
This lesson outline aims to put a class on a successful route to songwriting. I want to emulate the structure that helped so many 2nd and 3rd grade students create topical and meaningful songs. This lesson plan grounds itself with modelling the entire creative process, giving students a variety of choices, and provides for opportunities to reflect on their growth in the end.

Most of the time I look at a song or rap writing project from the musical standards and goals. I want to create a different creative space for students to work within; the lyrics and the questions that motivate them are the learning experience. When I focus on “use these chords” or “write a melody” too many students end up lost. If there’s no tool to help guide all my learners through the songwriting process, I will continue to have blank pages on the floor.

We will complete a song together - from beginning to end - using Music About Us. At each step, students can choose how they want to work on the song - on their own, with a partner, in a small group, or in a teacher led group. We have regular check ins throughout the project. By the end, whether we’ve written 11 different songs or 1, we can perform them as a class and see what we generated. Each student has seen the model and worked through it; now they can bring their own creativity and ideas to the next part of the project.

The Questions and the Mad Libs
The next step is getting them working through the songwriting process with a different prompt using Music About My Family. This sheet is designed to direct them to a very specific subject matter, while also helping them express things they notice and that are important to them. Since we have done the entire process together, there is a far higher likelihood they will do their best to make it through the project on their own.

If a student completes the questions and the mad lib, and never sings or performs, they are successful. This is something I learned in camp. The boy who stormed through his sewing
project learned what he needed to because he still had to stop at each step and ask for help from an elder or a peer. Even though his bag he sewed was chaotic, it was a big step for him - he had seen the steps modelled and accomplished his own version, and learned a lot in the process. As a teacher, I need to accept the student who completes the questions and prompts and is ‘done.’ They are at a different stage in the learning process than the students who write and perform a more complex and complete song.

The MadLibs strive to get more students to a finished product; their own song. I tried to represent more than one style of songwriting within the MadLib. I also put in plenty of blank spaces so students can write their own line in the song if they are confident of their ideas. This flexibility is important - it can help a creative student hone and polish an idea while getting a dependent learner organizing their ideas and creating something meaningful in the process.

I decided the MadLib partnered with *Music About My Family* should be more structured - it tells students what questions to draw answers from. I decided this because I thought of it as a tool to create the chorus of a song. I chose to draw from answers about what makes the family member special and important. It’s the way better version of a love song! I know I have students who would then keep going, and write other verses and lyrics about all the ideas they came up with they haven’t used yet. I also know a less adventurous student will be able to understand they completed something that is authentically believable as a song made from their ideas.

**What Next? Conclusions**

The best trajectory I can imagine from this lesson plan is more of my students will complete a songwriting project. Once they have completed a clear and measurable product, they may be more likely to engage a more open and creative songwriting project. Perhaps they will engage with a more abstract composition project like writing a recorder melody, or creating rhythm patterns on drums.
Writing Songs and Raps about Family

Lesson Outline

Goal: To write music about our class and our family. We are putting priority on our class culture and our families, and using that to generate ideas for a song or rap.

Goal: To give clear structure to the creative process of writing, brainstorming, and refining a song or rap. Using questions, discussion, reflection, and other scaffolding to create a personal song or rap.

Part 1: Model
As a class, construct a song or rap. Using a variety of discussion strategies, have students think through answers to questions for the Music About Us. Strategies include turn and talk, think to yourself, and share out in class/small groups.

Allow many answers for each question. When it comes to the questions about feelings, it is okay to take the variety of feelings students may have about their class. Students who express things outside of ‘fun, friendship, and excited’ have equally valid feelings.

Part 2: Brainstorming
Give students time to break into small groups, pairs, work on their own, or with me to brainstorm more based off of our answers for Music About Us. Students can select from a variety of tools to brainstorm: T Chart, Mind Map, Drawing/Storyboard, conversation, etc.

At the end of brainstorming, give students an opportunity to share their work. Add these ideas to the existing ideas generated in the questionnaire.

Part 3: Filter and Fill In The Blanks
Use the Music About Us Mad Lib to fill in the blanks. Ideally, complete ALL of the mad libs so students can see how many ideas we generate.

Create the final song. There are many ways to approach this, and it is important that the students drive what is used from the Mad Libs. Examples include: Voting on which lines to use, small groups/individuals construct their own song from the Mad Lib, print the Mad Lib and have the students cut it into strips so they can arrange ideas around, etc.

Either way, the resulting song(s) can be performed as a class.

Part 4: Reflection
Take time to reflect in turn and talk, group discussion, written assessment, etc.
Part 5: Apply Individually

Repeat parts 1 - 4, but having the students work through *Music About My Family*. Take all the same steps, and make sure students engage in each part of the process.

Part 6: Extensions

For classes that are older, or have taken on song and rap writing projects before, it is fair to extend this songwriting activity. Some students will chew through *Music About My Family* and have their Mad Lib completed in one or two class times. For these students, making the *MAMF Mad Lib* a chorus and then assigning them to write verses is a great extension. This gives them a chance to explore song form.

Tools Included

- *Music About Us*
- *Music About My Family*
- *Music About Us Mad Lib*
- *Music About My Family Mad Lib (Chorus and Verse)*

Questions and Answers!

**Q:** How do they write melodies, chords, and rhythms!?  
**A:** The idea is to make thinking about our classroom and families musically. Melody, chord, rhythm, and all that other musical stuff only gets in the way. Yes, there should be some expectations of what musical devices and composition techniques students can use, but the goal of this song/rap writing lesson is to get all students creating a personalized set of song lyrics.
Music About My Family

Name: _________________________

Circle one. I want to write a song or rap about __________________________.

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<td>Mom</td>
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<td>Dad</td>
<td>Papa</td>
<td>Uncle</td>
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<td>Aunt</td>
<td>Grandma</td>
<td>Grandpa</td>
<td>Baby</td>
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1. What do they look like?

2. What do they like to do?

3. Where do they live?

4. What do they say? How would you describe the sound of their voice?

5. How do they make you feel?

6. What makes them special?
Music About Us

We are going to write a song about us!

We are ________________________________________________________

1. What do we look like?

2. What do we do?

3. Where do we live?

4. What do we say? How would you describe the sound of our voices?

5. How do we make you feel?

6. What makes us special?
Music About My Family - Chorus Mad Lib

1. The first line of my chorus! Finish one of the following sentences using my answers from question 6

   a. They ___________________________ and that makes them special

   b. I know they are special because ________________________________

   c. They ___________________ (3x) Yeah they amazing!

   d. ______________________________________________________________

2. The next line of my chorus! Finish one of the following sentences using my answers from question 5

   a. I feel __________ , __________ , __________ (list three things or repeat one thing 3x)

   b. _______________________________ is how _________________ makes me feel

   c. ______________________________________________________________

3. The third line of my chorus. Repeat line one!

   ______________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________

4. The last line of my chorus. I want to remind my fans who I'm singing/rapping about.

   a. Yeah, that's my ______________

   b. __________ , __________ , __________ ! (Their name, 3x)

   c. I'm so grateful for my ______________

   d. ______________________________________________________________
## Music about Us - Mad Lib

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>The first line of our song!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>We ______________________ and that makes us special</td>
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<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>We are __________ because ______________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>They _______________ (3x) Yeah they amazing!</td>
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<td>d.</td>
<td>________________________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The next line of my chorus!</td>
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<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>We feel ___________, ___________, ___________ (list three things or repeat one thing 3x)</td>
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<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>______________________________ is how music makes me feel</td>
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<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>_______________________________________________</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>The third line of our song. Repeat line one!</td>
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<td>________________________________________________</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>The last line of my chorus. We want to remind our fans who we are singing and rapping about.</td>
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<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>Yeah, we are _________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>___________ , ___________ , ___________! (Something about us 3x)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>Our class is ________________________________</td>
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<td>d.</td>
<td>_______________________________________________</td>
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