

Exploration Made Easy!

As a teacher, I've always wondered why classrooms do not look more like children's museums. Kids love to go to these museums, where they can tinker and explore at exhibits that look fun and inviting, but it is often a struggle for us in schools to get kids' attention. How can we adapt?

Music easily lends itself to this kind of hands-on learning. Sound is fun to play around with, and the materials in our classrooms are perfect for exploration. When learners have a chance to investigate a concept, they will remember it better. It is important that they are not being judged or tested at this time. If students are not self-conscious, they will be able to concentrate on the task at hand. The ultimate goal is to get children actively engaged in the material we are providing for them to learn.

This is the motivation behind Note Knacks. I wanted a teaching tool that allowed me to step back and let my students explore the music language without me having to be in front of the room the whole time. Children needed an opportunity to learn on their own and from each other, while a teacher is able to observe and see how students are understanding the information.

Note Knacks are notation block manipulatives that are proportional to their note value and are color coded so that if you say the color, you say the rhythm. They have a note on one side and its corresponding rest on the back to help learners make the sound/silence correlation. Note Knacks also fit into 2/4, 3/4 and 4/4 time signature frames to help organize each student's composition. With these tools, children are able to explore the techniques of composition. It is an opportunity to notice and ask questions about the fundamentals of music literacy. This is a conversation that benefits the learning process.

Allowing our students the freedom of exploration, however, requires that we give up a bit of control. Fundamentally, it is about trust. We have to trust our students to learn without our constant guidance and attention. The good news is that children will rise to the occasion; the bad news is that we have to step back and let them. This is hard. Schools in general are not in the business of giving control to their students, but if we start in our classrooms, perhaps the idea will catch on. This isn't to say that I am for giving your kids total control of your room; no good can come from that! Rather, I recommend giving them bits of control in a well thought out situation, so that kids get the idea that we trust them and eventually gain confidence. Trust is a quality that I think is lacking in these times.

We are lucky because we teach music, and improvisation is a fundamental part of our curricula. So give your students instruments and let them have some fun with it while in the context of a greater piece. We also have voice explorations in our arsenals that kids love to use. I encourage you to look into the activities that are the cornerstone of your curriculum and see where kids can have a little leeway to explore the wonderful ways in which we make sounds beautiful! Note Knacks can help in this process. The easy-to-use lesson plans give your students parameters, while still giving them enough space to experiment with sound.