

12-2016

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Gilbert, Danni, "Curious, Collaborative Creativity: Applying Student-Centered Principles to Performing Ensembles" (2016). *Faculty Publications: School of Music*. 72.

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Published in *Music Educators Journal* 103:2 (December 2016), pp. 27–34; doi: 10.1177/0027432116677553
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Published online December 19, 2016.

Curious, Collaborative Creativity: Applying Student-Centered Principles to Performing Ensembles

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Abstract

This article explores a comprehensive, student-centered alternative to traditional ensemble instruction with the goal of promoting better opportunities for musical independence and lifelong musicianship. Developed by Caron Collins from the Crane School of Music at the State University of New York–Potsdam, the Curious, Collaborative Creativity (CCC) concept fosters student-centered learning and the promotion of 21st-century skills by encouraging students to select, arrange, and compose the repertoire to be studied; to work together in teams to equally contribute to the learning/understanding of music; and to share their work through informances to engage and enlighten community members. Examples from a current ensemble practicing CCC ideas illustrate the implementation of the model and provide suggestions for music educators.

Keywords: band, Curious Collaborative Creativity, ensemble, motivation, student-centered, 21st-century skills

Not everyone has the same skill set, but everyone needs to be given the opportunity to use what they have and try that out.

—Alex, member of the Doane Tiger Pep Band

Performing ensembles traditionally have strong underpinnings in teacher-centered instruction connected to competitive and high-stakes concerts. Results typically produce musicians who depend on ensemble directors and possess in only limited quantity the

knowledge and skills necessary to perform beyond ensemble experiences. Educational reform and changes in policies, such as the 2014 National Core Arts Standards and the framework promoted by the Partnership for 21st Century Learning, bring the focus to the process of student learning rather than the product. This fundamental shift impels us as music educators to rethink the ways in which we prepare our students and showcase their work.

Although a growing number of ensemble directors have felt the pressure to foster creative activities for their students (e.g., improvisation, composition, and arranging), limiting conditions such as lack of classroom time, the director's own perceived lack of creative accomplishment, and performance expectations imposed by community members make implementation of these activities complicated, if not impossible.¹ However, it is critical for teachers to work toward overcoming these challenges to move from teacher-centered instruction in which "students are regarded as passive receptors of knowledge" toward student-centered approaches in which "learners explore ideas related to their own insights."² While we could always use more rehearsal time, we can start to make positive changes toward a more creative classroom by placing the responsibility to be imaginative in the hands of our students and rethinking the design of performances.

There seems to be a growing disconnect between our own preparatory experiences and the expectations of the students facing us on the other side of the podium.³ Our tried-and-true teaching materials may be leaving students uninterested and disappointed in school music.⁴ How can we change, adapt, and be flexible to meet the demands of our students? How can we get to know our students better? Not the students described in textbooks, but *our* students sitting in the chairs in front of us? Do students' expectations about performing in an ensemble match what we are offering them?

A number of solutions to these concerns were presented to me when I began to shift to a student-centered, or flipped, learning environment. In this type of atmosphere, students make more decisions about their learning, such as the opportunity to select repertoire, provide self- and peer assessments, and design lesson goals.⁵ Students also assume more enriched responsibilities and learn in more active, hands-on ways than in traditional settings.⁶ In student-centered instruction, learning is tailored to meet the needs and interests of students, making it much more profound.⁷

Developed by Caron Collins from the Crane School of Music at the State University of New York–Potsdam, the Curious, Collaborative Creativity (CCC) concept for ensemble learning offers solutions to the limitations of traditional models, encouraging student-centered participation. CCC fosters *curiosity* by guiding students to determine their own musical interests and select the repertoire to be studied and performed. Musicians are placed into teams that *collaboratively* share the responsibilities of instruction, leadership, artistic enhancements, performances, research, and outreach. Finally, musicians are provided with opportunities to develop *creativity* by designing their own presentations or "informances" rather than formal performances.⁸ With CCC tactics, principles of comprehensive musicianship are flipped to encourage a student-centered environment, leading to deeper and more meaningful musical experiences.⁹ This article illustrates the three-step, customizable CCC concept; offers examples from an ensemble actively engaged in exploring CCC; and provides suggestions for music educators who wish to adapt the ideas to fit their ensembles.

Encouraging Curiosity via Repertoire Selection

In the first step of CCC, Curiosity, teachers get to know their students. At the beginning of the school year—or earlier, if possible—teachers collect information from students about their strengths, talents, and interests. Student selection of repertoire to be studied through a democratic process is of vital importance.¹⁰ Using a democratic approach to the ensemble gives both the teacher and the students the chance to explore the possibilities as well as the challenges of the music together, promoting an open exchange of ideas.¹¹ This usually results in a wide array of genres and styles selected, benefiting the classroom by promoting diversity and supporting a variety of multicultural offerings. The younger or more musically inexperienced the student, the more guidance will be necessary from the educator to ensure that the repertoire selected appropriately matches the skill level of the group. For beginners, I recommend providing a list of repertoire from which students can choose. More advanced musicians may need less help in this area.

Once student input is gathered on the repertoire to be covered, the instructor distributes a questionnaire to students to obtain information on how each student would like to contribute to learning the music chosen. Are students interested in conducting, teaching, or composing? Do students have strengths in areas outside of music, such as artistic, athletic, or theatrical skills that could be used to enhance the music studied? After analysis of the questionnaires, students are placed into teams to facilitate learning and the achievement of goals. The exact function of each team is based on the objectives designed for the music selected by the students.¹²

A few months before the school year begins, students enrolled in the Doane Tiger Pep Band, which I direct, are given a questionnaire (see Figure 1) to help determine their musical interests, choose new repertoire to be ordered, and develop goals for the season. In 2015, results of the questionnaire centered around three focal points that would serve as our objectives—on which all major decisions would be made: (1) build on tradition, (2) focus on students, and (3) engage stakeholders. Students requested to perform more tiger-themed pieces (our school mascot is Thomas Tiger), so we ordered Katy Perry's song "Roar" and Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger." Also, since one of our home games happened to be on Halloween, students requested Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain* and themes from the movies *Batman* and *Jaws*. While I expected students to primarily choose pop tunes, they also chose to include arrangements of traditional, classical pieces such as the overture from Rossini's *William Tell*, Holst's "Mars ('The Bringer of War')," Verdi's *Requiem*, and Bach's "Toccatina and Fugue."

Figure 1. Questionnaire Distributed to the Doane Tiger Pep Band

Doane Tiger Pep Band: Student Questionnaire 2016

Please fill out the following questionnaire and return it to the instructor. Use additional paper for responses, if necessary.

Questionnaires are due by Friday, August 5, 12:00 midnight.

Your name:

Grade/Year:

Major:

Instrument:

1. I am interested in participating in the following team(s):
 Leadership Instructional Research Creating
 Outreach Informance & Enhancement Service Other: _____
2. Why are you interested in the team(s) indicated above?
3. If you are interested in the Leadership and/or Instructional Teams, briefly describe your conducting experience.
4. Describe your past involvement in: community/school service, musical honors & accomplishments, leadership positions previously held, or any other information about yourself that may be of interest.
5. What would you suggest doing to improve the band? Are there any goals you would like to see achieved by the band this year?
6. What new pieces of music do you suggest adding or creating to our repertoire and why?
7. What current pieces of music in our repertoire, if any, do you suggest removing and why?
8. What is your "dream job" and why?
9. What nonmusical strengths, talents, or interests do you have? How might these be incorporated into our informances?

Notes

Senior Student Ben's Story

I have been in band all four years. My senior year, we got a new director who used a student-centered approach. I served on the Leadership Team and conducted pieces at rehearsals and informances. The student leadership part of it was a great way to allow students to connect with each other. The director is still involved, but is more in the background. Before, there was more being talked to, and talked at, and instruction given from the director leading it. But when we flipped the class, band became more fun. We can add to the atmosphere at informances in more of a relaxed setting, being a community of band students getting together and performing. I think the student-centered approach definitely helped lighten the mood in the band. In previous years, there was a lot of tension,

but flipping the class helped us get through the season together. There is more student input. We wrote our own arrangements to perform at informances. We were able to change the flip folder and buy or create music that we wanted.

Promoting Collaboration via Student-Centered Teamwork

In ensemble settings, group cooperation can be a more beneficial learning technique than is individual instruction.¹³ During the second step of CCC, Collaboration, teams of musicians are formed, based on the questionnaire results obtained in the Curious phase, in order to share the responsibilities of learning, teaching, and performing the music selected.¹⁴ The teacher serves as the facilitator to help students make connections to the music, while students work together in project teams within the full ensemble. All aspects of the organization are shared equally among participants.¹⁵ While these teams can function in any way imagined by the group, it might be helpful to begin first with three basic teams: the Creating Team, Performing Team, and Responding Team (see Table 1 for possible team names and responsibilities). In addition to being functional, these teams also align with the three Artistic Processes associated with the 2014 Music Standards.

Team Names	Team Function
Creating	Arrange, compose, improvise new music to be studied and performed
Performing; Informance; Enhancement	Rehearse, instruct, interpret musical selections Serve as liaison between ensemble and other student groups, teams (e.g., cheer, dance, athletics, theater) Design materials to visually enhance musical presentation Bring all teams together to showcase work at informances
Responding	Analyze, evaluate, or enhance repertoire by incorporating written word, visual displays and artwork, videos, dance, or other means appropriate to selected works
Connecting; Research; Outreach	Illustrate relationships between repertoire and other disciplines Find innovative ways to teach or rehearse material Involve community members and stakeholders Generate publicity for ensemble through social media and networking Promote social awareness
Leadership; Conducting; Instructional	Conduct and lead ensemble during rehearsals and/or informances Teach musical concepts or performance skills to students in full ensemble or small groups
Service	Contribute to nonmusical needs of ensemble (e.g., music library, uniforms, equipment, instrument inventory)

Students in the Creating Team can lead efforts in arranging, composing, or improvising music to be studied. Students who contribute to the ensemble by composing new material “view their colleagues to be collaborators in artistic expression, co-interpreters who are actively engaged in creative exploration.”¹⁶ Composition projects may enable a student-

centered learning environment and can reinforce conceptual understanding for students.¹⁷ Although many music educators may consider composing and arranging to be too advanced or time-consuming for younger musicians, I have had much success in giving students of all ages and ability levels such opportunities. In fact, among the beginning through collegiate-level students I have taught, I have found the beginners to be among the most creative and willing of students! The key is to tailor the parameters of the project to meet the students where they are. For example, students with a basic musical vocabulary and skill set may be tasked with creating an arrangement of a familiar tune using the first five pitches of the B \flat concert scale and rhythms no more advanced than quarter notes. Accomplished high school or collegiate students, in contrast, would be expected to create at a more sophisticated level befitting their abilities. For instance, students in my collegiate ensemble have written complicated drum cadences as well as an arrangement of Lacuna's *Malagueña*.

Members of the Performing Team may help with rehearsing, instructing, or interpreting musical selections. For more advanced ensembles, students may lead small groups in sectionals or conduct entire pieces. Younger students may work in pairs to review a musical concept with the ensemble or provide their own explanations of musical events based on their own experiences and backgrounds. Finally, the Responding Team can analyze, evaluate, or enhance repertoire by incorporating written word, visual displays and artwork, videos, dance, or other means appropriate to the selected works. Ideally, all students should experience participating in all of the teams at least once during the school year as the schedule allows.

For directors of young ensembles or those with limited experience applying student-centered techniques, divvying student responsibilities among Creating, Performing, and Responding Teams is a helpful place to start. Because the three teams also align with the National Standards, they may be beneficial for educators when supporting lesson plans and curricula with the standards (for ideas on implementing the standards in your classroom, see <http://www.nafme.org/my-classroom/standards/> or <http://www.nationalartsstandards.org/>).

After analyzing results of the questionnaire, students in the Doane Tiger Pep Band were placed into seven teams, which included (1) Leadership, (2) Instructional, (3) Research, (4) Creating, (5) Outreach, (6) Informance & Enhancement, and (7) Service. The Leadership Team comprised our drum majors, or student conductors, who were in charge of leading the full band in rehearsals and performances. Members of the Instructional Team served as section leaders, students who were tasked with teaching performance skills to small groups of homogeneous instruments during rehearsals. Our Research Team involved students who found new teaching, rehearsal, or performance strategies and shared them with members of the Instructional Team to be used in rehearsals. Students in the Creating Team generated arrangements and compositions of music to be performed. Our Outreach Team was responsible for publicity and community involvement. These students uploaded YouTube videos of our informances (see links at end of article), created and maintained a Facebook page for the band (<https://www.facebook.com/DoanePepBand/>), reached out to alumni and local musicians to join us for informances, and networked with community members to promote the group. The Informance & Enhancement Team, or "Roar-meisters"

as the students dubbed them, ensured that all teams came together at the informances to best showcase their work. Students developed cheers to call out in the stands to engage audience members, served as liaisons between the band and the spirit team at football games, and even designed flags and banners to visually enhance our presentation. Finally, the Service Team consisted of students who managed our equipment, instrument inventory, uniforms, and music library.

Sophomore Band Member Alisia's Story

I do like using a student-centered approach. It puts a lot more responsibility on the students. I think, at first, it threw us all off, because it was different than what we had done before. But I think it helped me be able to learn something from my peers, instead of just the director. I learned a lot from other students. I could find different ideas to put into my own practice because now I eventually want to be a music teacher. I learned a lot, and I'm glad I did it. During the year, it got a little rough and rocky at times. But there was open communication, and it was good to see how people can work together. It was good to see how it all gets organized. As a teacher, I would want to involve my students in everything. I think it's important for teachers to let go of some responsibilities, like selecting music, just to let the students have at it and see what they can do. Teachers are there to teach students not to fail. I learned to accept people's skill levels, and that's how I'm adjusting my thinking.

Showcasing Student Creativity via Informances

In the third and final step of CCC, Creativity, ensembles share the culmination of their efforts by facilitating "informances" to demonstrate the processes of teaching and learning, inform stakeholders, and involve the audience in the music-making experience.¹⁸ An infomance can be described as a "demonstration of our regular classroom procedures" where audience members become aware of what students can accomplish in a more relaxed, authentic, and spontaneous atmosphere.¹⁹ As an alternative to traditional concerts or programs, informances emphasize the learning process and help to communicate the educational objectives of the ensemble to community members.²⁰ Serving as fantastic advocacy tools, informances educate communities of the value of the learning process on a daily basis.²¹

To successfully increase audience understanding and appreciation for the program, informances should have an introduction, demonstration, and participation component.²² In addition to describing the curriculum as well as demonstrating classroom activities, rehearsal procedures, and assessment practices, informances should encourage the audience to participate along with the students in the music-making so they have a grasp of the learning process.²³ By bringing music *to* the audience rather than performing music *for* the audience, as is done in the traditional format, students can teach community members about the value and worth of music.²⁴

In the Doane Tiger Pep Band, all seven teams worked together to present their work as informances. Student conductors led the ensemble in performing original works composed

and arranged by band members as well as pieces selected by the group. Everyone was dressed in uniforms designed and chosen by students. The presentations included banners, flags, cheers, and movements created by students. Our routines were planned to blend the boundaries between performers and the community. Rather than presenting material on a stage with audience members seated below us, students were integrated among the audience to encourage them to participate in singing, dancing, and cheering. We often performed alongside other members of the community. For instance, one informance was devoted to welcoming alumni band members to perform with us while another informance invited local area musicians to participate within our group. In addition, the band worked together with students in the dance and cheer teams to enhance the music. Throughout informances, student musicians passed out school-themed candy and stickers to children in the audience. Before, during, and after the musical presentations in informances, band members visited with audience members, speaking to them about what we were performing and leading them toward a deeper understanding of our program. By transforming the traditional concert setting into a participatory experience that includes everyone in attendance, we are able to educate and inform stakeholders, inspire community involvement, equally value the contributions of all students, and encourage greater participation across the range of abilities.²⁵

Junior Band Member Robert's Story

With the student-centered ensemble, there was student input in ordering new pieces and arranging pieces to update our repertoire. I was able to arrange drum cadences for the percussion section and help make decisions about when and where we would perform them. It took a couple of hours to write, but we rehearsed them and played them at informances. I was able to teach the percussion section, but could gather input from other students in the section throughout rehearsals. It felt like I actually had to do something for once. It wasn't just an easy pass. I felt wanted and important. The students didn't always see eye-to-eye. It was a constant learning process, trying to work together and communicate. There were times it wasn't smooth, but we had to learn to work it out together. Using the flipped classroom, it was the first time in band where I actually felt I had to work. As the year went on, I became more comfortable in my role, on my team. I felt that our section trusted each other. We were all colleagues. There wasn't as much of the feeling of one leader giving directions to everyone. It wasn't completely different from what we had done in the past. Really the biggest thing that I noticed right away was that it was going to be more focused on what WE, the students, were doing. Up to that point, my job as a section leader was just to pass along the order from the chain of command. But now, there are more opportunities for us to do what we want. Sometimes in rehearsals, things just didn't work. So then, our director would step in to help us fix the problem together. We all worked together to solve problems. It was very interesting because, for most of my band career it was, "All right, let's warm-up," and the director took off. But this time, our director gave a stack of music to the Leadership Team and kind of walked off to one side. Once we knew what we were

doing, she kind of took herself out of the picture. We still knew she was there, we still appreciated her, and we still absolutely made fun of her every day! It wasn't frightening at all, it was just different. It was kind of fun because we got to see things other students were doing. I felt like I was actually in a leadership position instead of just relaying a message. It helped me feel like I was important and I was valued in the ensemble.

Implementing the CCC Approach

When deciding to use CCC, it is important that ensemble directors keep an open mind to the possibilities that may emerge, employ strong organizational skills and communication, and be mindful of the space, facilities, and resources that are available. CCC is not intended to be a one-size-fits-all method; rather, there can be as many different ways to apply the plan as there are ensembles that are willing to try it. Even ensembles that incorporate the approach two years in a row may come up with two distinctly separate outcomes. This effect is inherent in the design—you will always have ensembles with a different mixture of students who have new ideas and interests, are eager to make a variety of choices, and are motivated by a fluctuating array of factors. Teachers must also keep an open mind about their own role in this method as a facilitator or guide.²⁶ To nurture student decision making and influence, educators must be willing to share control of the classroom.²⁷ Using a collaborative, student-centered approach to rehearsals may actually strengthen the relationships between students and faculty.²⁸ Although the innate instability of the CCC model may seem worrisome to directors who are comforted by control and predictability, change is a necessary component of student-centered learning. This guides students toward more understanding, ownership, enjoyment, and independence in their music making.

Making the switch from a traditional ensemble to a CCC ensemble will require much advance and backward planning. The success of its implementation “depends on the teacher’s ability to see the road ahead.”²⁹ Although teachers relinquish some control of the learning atmosphere, they are by no means less busy! Much time is needed for behind-the-scenes work to mentor student conductors, coach student composers, and ensure that students have access to the materials they need to bring their ideas to life. Students are also tasked with doing more preparatory work outside of rehearsals so that time spent as an ensemble can be used for more active engagement.³⁰ There is a common misconception among directors that taking the time for students to participate creatively “wastes” rehearsal time and does not adequately prepare students for successful outcomes. However, allocating time in rehearsals for student contributions can benefit the ensemble and promote more advanced music-making.³¹ In addition, flipping the classroom to a student-centered approach may help directors reach goals more quickly than instruction solely delivered in traditional formats.³² Students also demonstrate stronger musical knowledge, increased participation, and a deeper level of enjoyment in the process.³³

Finally, directors interested in applying CCC should work with students to ensure they have the space, facilities, and resources necessary to carry out their ideas. If the informance is to dissolve the boundary between audience and performer, is an auditorium stage the most appropriate location? If not, what other facilities are available? Depending on the

situation, maybe it would be appropriate to hold the informance at an alternate venue such as a gym, community center, or outdoors. In order for students to feel comfortable creating, they will need to be given the tools necessary to create along with sufficient time to practice their skills. For instance, students are more likely to participate in composing and arranging if they have already developed an aural and written music vocabulary as well as experience in crafting notation.³⁴

A Director's Perspective—Sarah's Story

When I first started my career in music education, I was very teacher-centered. I would have panic attacks before concerts thinking, "Did I prepare everything they need to know?" The more I experimented with flipping ensembles into student-centered classes, the less I panicked. It's whatever the students have come up with—it's theirs. They have more ownership about what's happening. Performances are more fun and showcase what students have been able to do. It's less pressure for me! Going from a teacher-centered to a student-centered band, I think there was the impression from spectators that I wasn't really doing anything, because I wasn't really actively involved at informances. Maybe people thought I was phoning it in because students were handling it all? But there was SO much behind-the-scenes work and coaching, particularly with students who were conducting, teaching, and arranging. There was a lot of time spent getting the pieces in place so that when we had rehearsals or informances, everything would flow much more smoothly. Informances were the times I stepped aside to let the students shine. The outcome wasn't mine anymore, it was all the students'. The students are going to change every year, the situation will be different every year, so it's never going to be the same. That's just the nature of it. I can have my wish list of things to do differently next time, but so much of it is evolving and depends on who walks in the door and who is interested in sharing ideas. I'm glad I get to try new ideas! If I were to take a teacher-centered approach, and direct the band for every rehearsal and performance, they might be more musically accurate, but maybe not. I'm constantly amazed at what my students can do, what they know, and how well they hear when given the chance. I want students to make their own experiences. It's a learning process for them. I use my experiences to guide them to their own successes. I want it to be about the students and for the students, so we get what the students are willing to give.

A Learning Process

The Curious, Collaborative Creativity concept for performing ensembles provides an alternative to traditional methods because students can select and generate repertoire, contribute to the ensemble in ways that support their interests and strengths, and present their progress alongside community members through informances. Exactly how the three steps of the CCC model are carried out is dependent on the students and will vary according to their interests, skills, and needs. The teacher serves as a coach and facilitator, guiding students to make connections to the music. After I implemented CCC ideas with the Doane

Tiger Pep Band, while students seemed more engaged and invested in the learning process, they sometimes struggled with selecting and arranging repertoire appropriate to the ability level of the group. Recommendations for further application of the CCC approach include the need for continued guidance from directors with repertoire selection, composing and arranging techniques, and motivating students to fulfill their responsibilities throughout the term. Shifting to a student-centered learning environment through CCC promotes better opportunities for musical independence, community involvement, and lifelong musicianship.

Doane University Tiger Pep Band Images/Video Resources

Find pictures and video links of the ensemble's performances on the group's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/DoanePepBand/>

The ensemble also has performance, leadership, and instructional videos on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1i0rLn7TZc>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8tFEjFgQ-IE>
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Article Illustrations



