

Reflective Journal Writing as an Alternative Assessment



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Reflective journal writing, alternative assessment, general music classroom, early adolescence, urban schools

Abstract

This article describes the use of reflective journal writing in an 8th grade, inner city general music classroom. Reflective journal writing entries replaced tests and quizzes. They provided the students with a guided opportunity to demonstrate their learning using their own words. Reflective journal writing created greater class participation (especially among lower-performing students), stronger academic achievement, and a better opportunity for students to connect with general music.

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Alternative Assessment

“The commotion about high-stake tests (proficiency, standardized tests, achievement tests), is so prominent in the media these days that it would be easy to forget that such tests are not the only – or even the primary – ways to assess student learning.”

~ Carol Damian (2000)



“Assess,” the root word of assessment, comes from the Latin word “assidere,” which means to sit beside, to observe, talk with, and learn from one another (Conrad, 1995). Traditionally, the word “assessment” has referred to the way teachers assign letter grades on tests and quizzes. Assessment has also been used as a way to discuss teaching effectiveness (Garfield, 1994). However, assessment is now taking on a new meaning. It should be a “dynamic process that continuously yields information about student progress toward the achievement of learning goals” (Garfield, 1994). In order for assessment to be considered authentic, it must focus on whether or not students can apply their learning to the appropriate situations (Conrad, 1995).

Methods used to measure student learning range from traditional standardized testing to a more organic, “authentic” approach to assessment. The current dispute in educational assessment stems from the debate between behaviorist and constructivist educators. Behaviorist theory originated from the work of Ivan Pavlov, John B. Watson and B.F. Skinner and focuses on “changes in behavior that result from stimulus-response associations made by the learner” (Standridge, 2002). The learners are active respondents in the learning process and should be given the opportunity to demonstrate their learning through observable and measurable behaviors (Ormrod, 1999). Standardized testing is one of the most obvious ways to observe and measure changes in behavior. Although they are easy to score and interpret, these tests imply that there is a separation between knowledge and the student (Worley, 2001). This method of assessment simply provides a way for assigning numerical scores to observable behaviors but does not reveal how the student learned or how they will be able to use their learning to solve problems (Garfield, 1994).

On the opposing side of the debate, constructivists argue that students cannot continue to merely acquire knowledge and demonstrate it through observable and measurable changes in behavior. Instead, students must “construct” the meaning of knowledge as they learn it. Constructivist theory is based mainly on the work of Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky and stresses that “learning involves an active process in which learners construct meaning by linking new ideas with their existing knowledge” (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002). Knowledge does not exist outside of the learner. According to Kant, “the mind provides the ‘categories’ of knowing, while the real world provides the content. Knowledge is thus always a construction of the mind’s interaction with the world and cannot be reduced to one or the other” (Elkind, 1998, p. 113). In reality, students

come to the classroom with a wide variety of prior experiences, knowledge and beliefs that may be cultivated to provide meaningful life-long learning (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002). Therefore, alternative assessment methods such as recordings, checklists, diaries, portfolios, student debriefings, peer conferences and reflective journal writing are necessary within a constructivist classroom (Worley, 2001).

Journal writing is the “recording of daily events, personal reflections, questions about the environment, and reactions to experiences” (Dyment & O’Connell, 2003). According to Chapman, it “should reflect various types of writing as well as levels of complexity related to the task assigned in the prompt” (Chapman, 1990). Examples of authentic writing in the journal include open-ended entries, where the student constructs an entry using background knowledge, or short answer entries that demonstrate understanding of the content taught (Chapman, 1990).

Journal writing can become one of the most important components of the assessment process because it has the potential to promote critical thinking. It also reinforces the importance of writing across the curriculum with an emphasis on process rather than product, allows for personal expression, and serves as a record of thought. Journal writing helps students understand how they learn and it gives a voice to those who are not good at expressing themselves orally. Finally, because reflective journal writing requires active participation, the students take ownership of their learning (Boud, 2001; Hettich, 1990).

For the teacher, reflective journal writing serves as a window into student thinking and learning.

According to Spaulding and Wilson (2002), reflective journal writing serves four purposes for the student and three for the teacher. The authors studied the journals, observation notes, conference notes and course-related projects of 34 students in their first course of the teacher education graduate program at Southeastern University. For students, journal writing serves as a permanent record of thoughts and experiences; establishes and maintains a relationship with the instructor; provides a safe outlet for frustrations and concerns; and aids internal dialogue. For the teacher, reflective journal writing serves as a window into student thinking and learning; establishes and maintains a relationship with the student; and serves as a dialogical tool.

Finally, reflective journal writing provides an opportunity for both the teacher and the student to assess learning. As White (1999) discovered in his research on more than 20 students in his advanced mathematics course, reflective journal writing provides students with the opportunity to express connections between previous knowledge and new knowledge. Although one of his Iranian students struggled with English vocabulary, he was able to describe a mathematic word problem in his own words by using connections to his culture (Spaulding and Wilson, 2002). I felt I needed to restructure my own classroom to allow for similar results.

The Classroom

I teach in an urban middle school that serves 450 youngsters in grades 6-8. More than half of these students come through my general music classroom door twice a week for 42 minutes a day. I have two general music classes per grade level.



Although I incorporated reflective journal writing into my general music curriculum for all grades, my action research project focuses on my eighth graders. My eighth grade classes consist of one group of 19 students and another group of 22 students for a total of 41 students. However, only eighty percent of the students attend school regularly. Sixty-three percent of the students are African American, 62% are male, and 20% are designated special needs students.

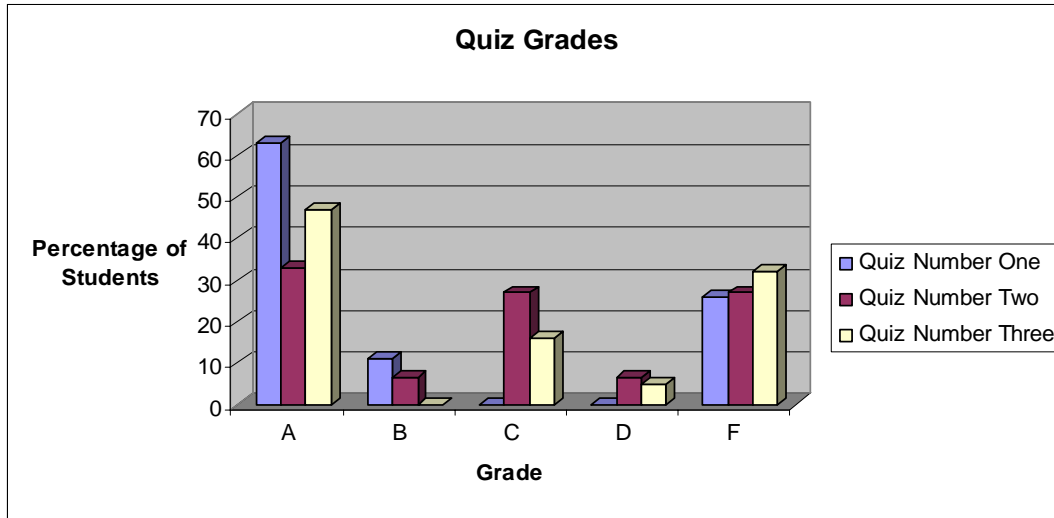
In my general music classroom, the first marking period of general music is an introduction to music. The students are encouraged to make a personal connection to music through listening to various styles of music, especially hip hop and rap and discussing, writing about, and drawing their reactions. Once the connection to music is established, they spend time learning the history and words to the Star Spangled Banner. Finally, the students are introduced to some of the basic components of music including vocal range, instrumentation, beat, rhythm, rest values and note names.

Traditional Assessment

In the past, my general music classes consisted of Power Point presentations with accompanying study guides. I gave frequent quizzes and tests, generally at least four quizzes and one test per quarter. It was a very organized, systematic and easy way *for me* to present content and to assess student understanding. However, it was not as easy *for my students*.

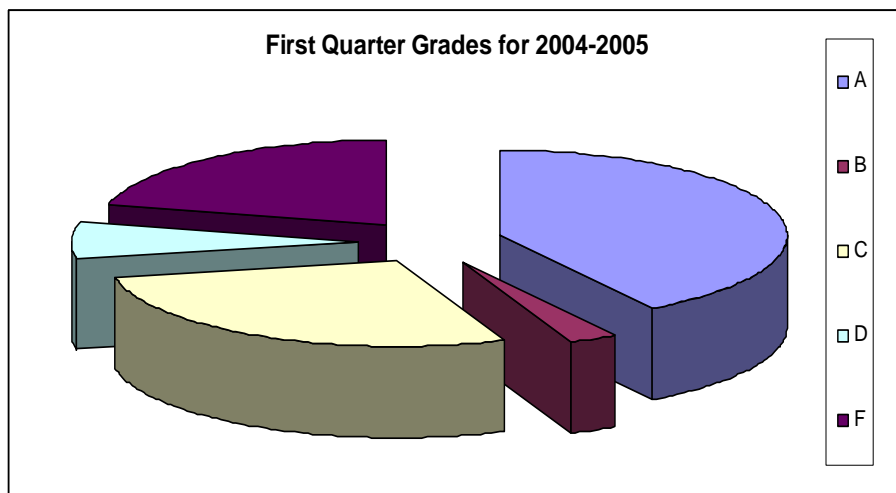
I presented new material in a Power Point presentation while the students quickly scribbled down the material on a study guide. I did not allow the students to talk or interact with me or with one another. They were only allowed to take notes. The study guide was assessed daily and, at the end of the quarter, it was assigned a grade. Absent students were required to copy the work of a neighbor to receive the necessary participation and study guide grade. More than 25% of my students in the 2004-2005 school year, specifically my low performing students, did not complete their study guides.

After two or three Power Point presentations the students were quizzed on the new material. The quizzes consisted of multiple-choice, true/false and fill-in-the-blank items. On average, 28% of my students failed these quizzes and approximately ten percent of the students did not even take them (see graph below).



The marking period ended with a test covering all of the new material presented in the Power Point presentations. Like the quizzes, the tests consisted of multiple-choice, true/false and fill-in-the-blank items taken based on the study guide. Sixty-five percent of my students failed the test. Twenty-four percent of the students did not participate.

Due to the low quiz and tests grades, over twenty percent of my students failed their first nine weeks of general music in the 2004-2005 school year (see graph below). By the end of the year, 40% were failing. I was extremely discouraged by these numbers. Obviously, I was not succeeding with my students.



Reflective Journal Writing Assessment



Without making any changes to the general music curriculum, my teaching or the classroom environment, I replaced my traditional tests and quizzes with reflective journal writing assessment. On the first day of the 2005-2006 school year, I gave each student a spiral bound notebook to use as a reflective journal and explained there would be no more tests and quizzes in general music. We discussed the meaning of reflective journal writing and the function these journals would serve for them. Many of the students raised issues that had been identified by Spaulding and Wilson (2002). For example, they were concerned about the audience for the journal and they wanted to make sure I would be the only one reading their entries. In addition, the students wanted to be allowed to take notes in their journals. Without realizing it, the students were asking to track their progress on a daily basis. As a side note, many of the students asked to decorate their journals as well. I found this desire to take ownership of their journal very exciting.

On the first reflective journal writing entry, the students were asked to tell me about themselves. I did not tell them what I wanted to know. I did not give them any guidelines. I wanted the students to tell me what they wanted me to know, not what I asked them to tell me. These journal entries were extremely diverse and wonderfully insightful. Some of the students told me about their likes and dislikes and others discussed friends, family and pets. Many of the students listed their accomplishments, especially in sports. One of the students expressed her desire to be in a different music class, so I reassigned her. Another student told me of his instrumental music ability; he later became a valuable asset to the band. A few of the students even discussed their learning impediments. I did not use this or the subsequent three journal writing entries as graded assessments. Instead, I used these initial reflective journal writings as a way to help students get comfortable with the process. I wanted the students to express themselves and to discuss their personal connections to music. The following is a good example of an average student entry.

“I like spelling, reading and singing. My favorite sport is basketball. I like to watch a lot of comedy tv shows. My favorite movie is the color purple and Friday After next. I am 11 years old and my birthday was Sunday. I like to eat spaghetti. My favorite rapper is lil’ scrappy. My favorite singer group is Pretty Ricky...”

The first graded reflective journal writing entry was based on the story behind the Star Spangled Banner wherein the students were asked to reflect on their new knowledge and connect it to their previous knowledge of the Star Spangled Banner. I gave the students specific words such as *Francis Scott Key, war, doctor, ship, poem, and flag* to guide their reflection. These were words used in the quizzes from previous years and I used the following rubric to assess the journal entries.

Reflective Journal Writing Rubric

	4 Complete	3 Generally Complete	2 Somewhat Complete	1 Incomplete
Content	All words in list accurately defined focusing on the most important information with interesting personal connections.	Some words in list accurately defined focusing on important information with personal connections.	Few words in list defined focusing on important information.	No words in list defined. Important information relayed. Significant errors.
Comprehensibility	Understand all of the student communication.	Understand most of the student communication.	Understand less than half of the student communication.	Understand little of the student communication.
Organization	Logical and effective.	Generally logical and effective with a few minor problems.	Somewhat illogical and confusing in places.	Lacks logical order and organization.
Effort	Exceed the requirements of the assignment and have care and effort.	Fulfill all of the requirements of the assignment.	Fulfill some of the requirements of the assignment.	Fulfill few of the requirements of the assignment.

The results on this first graded reflective journal writing entry were amazing! Ninety-three percent of my students earned a passing grade because they could tell the story of the Star Spangled Banner using all of the words on the list. More importantly, 100% completed their journal entry. Only two students earned a failing grade. I was completely astonished by the results. Below is an example of the first graded reflective journal writing entry from a student who earned an A:

“I think there was a war in 1812 against the British and the English. The British captured the doctor. Then Francis Scott Key went over with this guy and tried to save the doctor. When Francis Scott Key rescued the doctor there was a lot of smoke in the air they couldn't see who won the battle after that night. In the morning they saw the flag of the United States in the air when they were still on the ship. The war was a Baltimore. So Francis Scott Key wrote a poem then he showed it to his brother or cousin or whatever. He took it and I think published it. They perform that song in many places. Then it got popular and became the national anthem they called it the Star Spangled Banner. You can go to Washington D.C. and see the huge flag in the museum...”

On the next graded entry, the students were asked to discuss vocal range categories. Again, I gave the students specific words such as *vocal range, soprano, mezzo, alto, tenor, baritone and bass* to guide their reflection. Although the results were somewhat lower than the previous journal entry, they were still excellent. Eighty-four percent of the students earned a passing grade and 90% of the students completed their entry. I was most impressed with the connection many of the students made to the vocal range categories. During one of the vocal range category lessons, I used the piano to share with the students their approximate individual vocal range. I was very surprised to learn most of the students remembered it. In addition, when discussing the vocal range categories, I included singers and rappers they would recognize to demonstrate each vocal category. Many of the students remembered the vocal category for the singer or rapper. The connections the students were able to make through their reflective writing were outstanding. The example below is full of the type of connections that students were able to make.

“What I learned today in music is the different vocal ranges. Vocal range is the span of the high or low singing voice. However you talk that's most likely what vocal rang you are. I'm a mezzo soprano. I can sing in soprano. Mariah Carey is all 3 vocal ranges a female can sing. Mariah Carey sings in soprano, mezzo soprano and alto. Michael Jackson sings as a tenor. The different vocal ranges in boys are tenor (high), baritone (middle) and bass (low). The female vocal ranges are soprano (high), mezzo soprano (middle) and alto (low). One of the men of Boys II Men sings in bass. Selena Cruise sang in alto. My mom is mezzo soprano. My bestfriend named Sheleeah sings in soprano and mezzo soprano.”

For their final graded reflective journal writing entry, the students were asked to reflect on the instrumental categories. The students were given specific words such as *aerophone, membranophone, idiophone, chordophone and electrophone* to guide their reflection. While the results were somewhat lower than the previous journal entry, they were still much better than I had expected. Seventy-one percent of the students earned a passing grade and 80% of the students completed their reflective journal entry. I was very excited to see at this point in the marking period that 80% of the students were still completing their journal entries. Only five students did not complete this reflective journal entry. Below are two example entries. The first example did an adequate job of covering the material.

“I learned about aerophones and membranophone and idiophone. Aerophones is air and membranophone is a sound that striking a membrane across a resonating air chamber. Idiophones are instruments you scrape or shake. Chordophones have string and make sound by a string. Electrophones is a instrument that generate sound fro electricity.”

The second example not only included key words but also demonstrated that the student had cleared up a misconception.

“I learned that idiophones are thing that you hit. A drum is not an idiophone. I learned that a drum is a membranophone. I learned that a bass guitar is a electrophone. I always thought a bass guitar was in the strings or chordophone section.”



As stated above, in previous years the students took a test over material covered during the first quarter. This year, the students were asked to demonstrate their new knowledge and understanding through a first quarter reflective journal writing. I wanted to keep the format of the quarter reflective journal writing the same as the previous journal writing entries.

Editor's Note:
Click on the sitar to hear an example of an chordophone.

Therefore, the students were given specific words from the previous journal writings to complete their reflective journal entry. These words were used on the test from the previous year. The results were the most astonishing yet. One hundred percent of the students completed the entry and earned a passing grade. In my opinion, the students were not intimidated by the first quarter journal writing entry. They became accustomed to reflecting on their learning and describing it in their own words through their journals. Therefore, this reflective journal writing entry was just like the rest. In addition, they continued to make the same connections to the new knowledge at the end of the quarter that they did throughout the quarter. Because of these connections, they were very successful in retaining the information. Below are three excerpts from the end-of-quarter entries:

“In the year 1812 the British fought with the USA. When the British was leaving to go to Washington DC Francis Scott Key's friend the doctor was trapped on one of the British ships. So Key and Skinner got on the ship to save their friend. While on the ship key wrote the Star Spangled Banner in honor of winning the war. Today the Star Spangled Banner is played at all the National football games and other world wide events..”

“...Girls and boys sing in different vocabularies. A boy can sing its lowest and it would be called bass. A boy's highest is a tenor and in between is a baritone. A girls highest note is a soprano and Michael Jackson is the only male that can hit it. The girls lowest is a alto and its middle class is mezzo...”

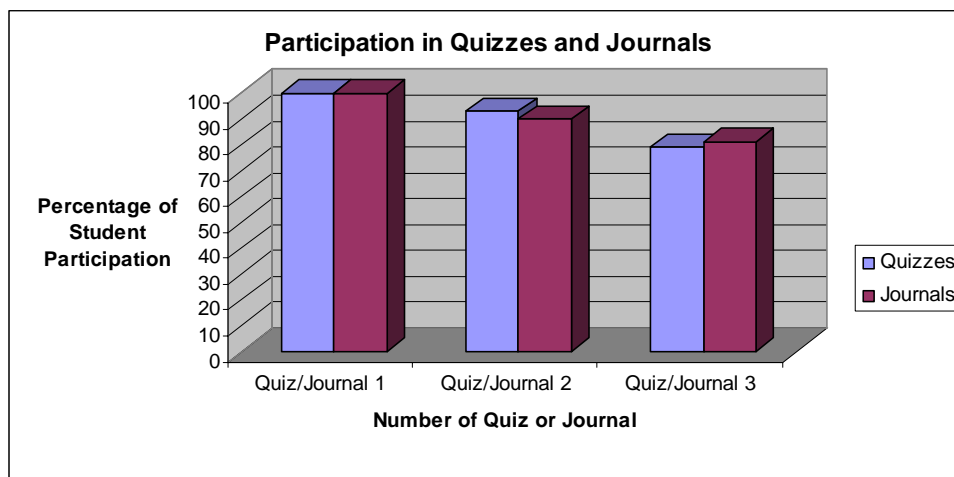
“...Beat and rhythm are in every song that has ever been put out. Beat is the pulse of the music which means the steady beat. The rhythm of the music is the movement which means the drums and the singer or rapper...”

Findings

I found that reflective journal writing in my general music classroom created greater class participation, especially in lower-performing students, stronger academic achievement, and a better opportunity for the students to connect with general music.

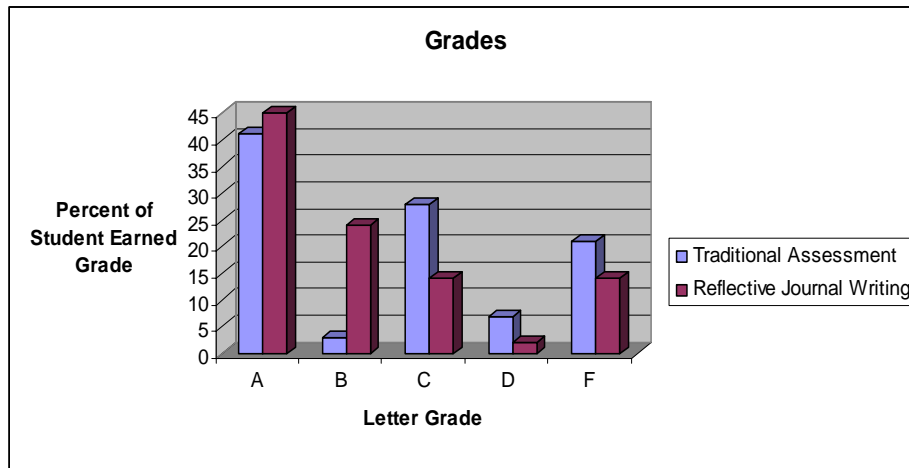
One of my greatest concerns in the past was the number of students who did not participate in the assessment process. This was especially common among my lower performing and special needs students. I watched these students take one look at a test or quiz and put their pencils down. In my opinion, they were intimidated by the simple fact that the paper in front of them was termed a test or quiz.

This year, I watched some of these same students start writing in their journals even before I was finished sharing the guidelines. They didn't even struggle with what to write. They dug right in with the other students. Although their entries were still occasionally minimal, I was so proud of their ability to begin and complete a portion of the entry. In my opinion, this is an amazing success for these students. On average 93% of the students completed their reflective journal entries.



Last year I also struggled with the number of students who did not do well on the tests and quizzes. Initially, I believed the students truly did not understand the new knowledge they were receiving. However, this year, I have learned the students do understand the new knowledge. They just need an easier way to demonstrate their understanding. The reflective journal writing entries allowed the students to explain to me what they had learned and how that learning connected to prior knowledge. They were able to do so in their own words. On average, 80% of the students earned a passing grade on their reflective journal writing entries.

Because the students were so successful in demonstrating their understanding through their journals, the first quarter grades were outstanding. Eighty five percent of the students earned a passing grade for their first quarter of general music as demonstrated in the graph below.



I clearly underestimated the learning of my students last year. Because the test and quiz grades were so low, I thought my students were not learning. In reality, they simply could not demonstrate their learning through the multiple-choice, true/false and fill-in-the-blank questions on the test and quizzes. My students confirmed this conclusion on a questionnaire designed to tap their reactions to my new approach to general music. The questionnaire was broken into three different sections with a total of 25 questions (see appendix). The first section was a general introduction to the questionnaire with only four questions. In this section, 88% of the students recognized that the assessment methods in general music had changed.

The second set of questions focused on the tests and quizzes and included seven items. I wanted to know if the students found the tests and quizzes helpful in their understanding and easy to complete. I also wanted to know if they would like to continue the test/quiz format. Fifty percent of the students did not think the tests and quizzes allowed them to show what they knew. Eighty-one percent of the students did not want the old format to return.

Finally, the last set of questions tapped their feelings about the journals. It was the most specific and in-depth part of the questionnaire. Specifically, I wanted to know if the students understood better through their journals. I also wanted to know if they found it easy to express themselves through the journals. Ninety-four percent of the students said the journals helped them understand and describe their learning. Seventy-five percent stated they would like to continue using the reflective journals, and ninety-four percent of the students stated the journals made general music easier.

Reflection

The quantitative and qualitative data in my action research project clearly demonstrated the success of reflective journal writing as an alternative assessment method. The students,

especially my low performing students, were much more likely to participate in the reflective journal writing as opposed to taking tests and quizzes. For this reason alone, I would continue using the reflective journal writing entries. At this point in my career, I do not foresee myself returning to the use of tests and quizzes in my general music classroom.

Stronger academic achievement was another indicator of the success of my project. I truly believe the majority of my students understood the content in the past. They just could not demonstrate their understanding on the tests and quizzes. I think my average and low performing students benefited the most from the journal writing. The data showed a significant increase in the number of passing grades, especially with my low performing students. Regardless of the level of success, I would still like to find other ways to assist the few students who still feel “left behind.” They might benefit from a different form of alternative assessment.

Finally, the reflective journal writing provided a better opportunity for the students to connect with general music. The guideline words used in the reflective journal entries were very similar to the words on the tests and quizzes. However, the students were not able to use the connections they made to the content on multiple choice, true/false, and fill-in-the-blank items. In contrast, the journal entries actually promoted the use of personal connections. I would like to develop other alternative assessment methods that enable students to use their experiences to construct meaning.

... the reflective journal writing provided a better opportunity for the students to connect with general music.

My students’ success with reflective journal writing as an alternative assessment method may also have implications for improving the standardized test results of urban students. Newman, Bryk, and Nagaoka (2001) completed a study of 1,800 third graders, 1,700 sixth graders and 1,400 eighth graders in Chicago’s public school system in which they found “if teachers, administrators, policy makers and the public at large place more emphasis on authentic intellectual work in the classroom, yearly gains on standardized tests in Chicago could surpass national norms.”

Much like Columbus Public Schools, the Chicago schools felt their urban students only needed to have basic knowledge to fulfill their educational needs. They did not realize the need for the students to use their prior knowledge base to strive for in-depth understanding (Newman, Bryk and Nagaoka, 2001). Students who were in classrooms with high quality assignments demonstrated increased scores on the *Illinois Goals Assessment*. These assignments included written communication where the students were asked to discuss a topic using new content and connecting it to their lives. The reflective journal entries that my students were asked to complete are very similar to the “high quality assignments” in this study.

According to Piaget, “the principal goal of education is to create men who are capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what other generations have done – men who are creative, inventive, and discoverers” (Elkind, 1998, p. 113). He believed we must distinguish between “ready made trends” of the day and sound approaches. Continued research is necessary to provide further evidence of the effectiveness of reflective journal writing. However, it appears to be a promising practice.

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Appendix

General Music Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions honestly. Circle your response to each question (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Not Applicable, Agree, and Strongly Agree) **DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME ON THIS PAPER.**

Introduction:

- | | | | | | |
|---|----|---|----|---|----|
| 1. General music class is being taught different this year. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 2. I understood what I learned last year. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 3. I understand what I am learning this year. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 4. The general music activities are different this year. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |

Tests and Quizzes:

- | | | | | | |
|---|----|---|----|---|----|
| 5. The tests and quizzes helped me understand what I learned | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 6. The tests and quizzes allowed me to describe what I understood. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 7. The tests and quizzes did not allow me to reflect on what I learned. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 8. I understood the instructions for the tests and quizzes. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 9. I did not find it easy to answer the tests and quizzes. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 10. I had enough time to complete the tests and quizzes. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 11. I would like to take the tests and quizzes again. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |

Journals:

- | | | | | | |
|--|----|---|----|---|----|
| 12. The journal helps me understand what I am learning. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 13. The journal allows me to describe what I understand. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 14. The journal allows me to reflect on what I am learning. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 15. I do not understand what I am supposed to write in my journal. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 16. I do not have enough time to write in my journal. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 17. I would like to write more in my journal. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 18. I would like to share with the class what I write in my journal. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 19. I find it easy to write in my journal. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 20. Writing in my journal helps me practice writing. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 21. Writing in my journal helps me express myself. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 22. I can write how I feel in my journal. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 23. I am not learning from my journal. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 24. I would like to continue writing in a journal in general music. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |
| 25. The journals have made general music easier for me this year. | SD | D | NA | A | SA |