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Photo courtesy of Kevin Droe

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Kris Versteege, publications/advertising editor
Parker Baumberger, publications/advertising assistant editor
IowaMEAditor@gmail.com
526 Wilder Ave.
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Learner-Centered Teaching in High School Orchestra:

Pennsylvania and Iowa



Kevin Droe

Kevin Droe, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of Music Education at the University of Northern Iowa

The concept of learner-centered teaching might suggest that the students are the central focus of what the teacher imparts. In contrast to a traditional “music-centered” classroom, a “learner-centered” approach places emphasis on the students’ active involvement in their learning. However, it is essential to clarify that some teachers who genuinely care about their students’ learning might mistakenly believe they already have a student-centered classroom or equate it with project-based learning.

The fundamental philosophy behind learner-centered teaching is that “those who do the work, do the learning.” This principle is evident when considering teacher attendance at conferences. For educators, attending the conference themselves yields more significant learning benefits compared to receiving information second-hand from a colleague. Similarly, in a learner-centered classroom, students take on the roles of decision-makers, creators, assessors, and ultimately, learners.

It’s important to understand that both learner-centered and teacher-centered teaching can coexist in the same classroom and even during the same class period, allowing for flexibility and variety in instructional approaches. In a teacher-centered approach, the teacher assumes complete control over the curriculum, music selection, performances, and other aspects of the classroom. Conversely, a learner-centered classroom empowers students to make choices, solve problems, and actively participate in shaping their music education.

Lower Moreland High School - Philadelphia, PA

A prime example of a successful learner-centered secondary school music program can be found at Lower Moreland High School in Philadelphia, PA, led by Sarah Gulish. Her approach

to musicianship goes beyond mere instrumental proficiency, encompassing skills such as playing by ear, improvisation, arranging, and leadership abilities. By recognizing the vast array of musical talents students possess, she expands the definition of musicianship beyond traditional boundaries.

At Lower Moreland, students have a say in important decisions, such as concert choices, fundraising strategies, and repertoire selection. The orchestra members, through the String Orchestra Council, actively participate in the direction of the ensemble, and they engage in various collaborative activities that foster leadership, communication, and teamwork skills.

Furthermore, the learner-centered approach allows students to take full ownership of their music-making. For instance, in the Pops Concert Music segment, students compose or arrange music, direct the orchestra, handle ticket sales, and design the entire concert program. In the Chamber Music section, students form their own groups, select their music, and arrange it to showcase their creativity and autonomy.

The benefits of learner-centered teaching at Lower Moreland High School are evident. Students develop a more comprehensive and inclusive view of musicianship, recognizing and valuing diverse musical talents. Collaborative activities teach them the power of teamwork and compromise, while also instilling a sense of accomplishment that transcends the classroom. Additionally, students take an active role in assessing and improving their musical performance, fostering a culture of constructive support and growth.

Abraham Lincoln High School - Council Bluffs, IA

Amid the challenges of the pandemic, the Abraham Lincoln High School

(ALHS) Orchestra in Council Bluffs, under the leadership of Dan Black, took a unique and learner-centered approach that not only sustained but also expanded their music program. While many group ensembles were forced to suspend activities, the ALHS Lynx Orchestra flourished by embracing a fresh perspective.

Rather than canceling traditional performances, Dan Black redirected the students' focus towards an innovative endeavor—recording, producing, editing, mixing, and marketing their music under their own label. This shift empowered the students to take ownership of the entire creative process, from selecting the repertoire to designing the orchestra's logo.

This learner-centered approach was pivotal in the orchestra's growth during and after the pandemic. By giving students agency and responsibility, they became deeply invested in their musical journey. The newfound sense of purpose and creativity drew more students to join the orchestra, eager to be a part of this exceptional experience.

In this learner-centered environment, every decision was made collaboratively, fostering a supportive and inclusive atmosphere. The students honed their artistic skills while also developing essential project management and marketing abilities. Furthermore, by navigating the challenges of recording and production, they gained valuable problem-solving and critical thinking skills. They released ten albums for the holiday season!

The ALHS Lynx Orchestra's success serves as a testament to the power of learner-centered teaching and how it can breathe new life into a music program even during the most challenging times. By embracing innovative approaches and empowering students as active



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participants, educators can foster a love for music that transcends conventional boundaries. The ALHS Orchestra's journey showcases the potential for growth and transformation when learners are at the center of the musical experience.

Pivoting to Learning-Centered Teaching

The learner-centered approach requires dedicated effort from teachers in terms of defining clear learning goals, implementing authentic assessments, providing constructive feedback, and relinquishing some control in the classroom. However, the rewards are well worth it as learners become more invested in their music education and experience the joy of creative expression.

For educators interested in implementing learner-centered teaching, several resources offer practical examples and guidance. *The learner-centered music classroom: Models and possibilities*, edited by David A. Williams and Jonathan R. Kladder, provides both elementary and secondary school music classroom examples. *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice* by Maryellen Weimer offers concrete strategies for transforming teaching styles. Additionally, *Equity in music education: Establish safer learning environments using student-centered music activities* by A. W. Fung presents ways to facilitate respectful communication and discussion within a music classroom.

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Fung, A. W. (2018). Equity in music education: Establish safer learning environments using student-centered music activities. *Music Educators Journal*, 105(1), 57–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432118788263>

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Who made the Top Ten!?
Thank you to all nominations for the TOP TEN list! There's a TON of great music out there, but check out the favorites!

ALHS Group Video Project
How can musicians share their artistry digitally? ALHS students explored that question and many others in their latest project. Check them out!

The landing page of the Lynx Orchestra Studio featuring music of Council Bluffs middle school and high school students



From Idea to Impact:

Innovative Music Education in Council Bluffs Community School District



Dan Black

Dan Black serves as an orchestra and modern band teacher in the Council Bluffs Community School District and is an executive board member with the Iowa Alliance for Arts Education. He holds degrees in music education and school leadership from the University of Northern Iowa.

Just as the COVID-19 pandemic was winding down, the Council Bluffs Community School District added a 1.0 FTE position to support the growth of music education. How on earth did we make that happen? It's the most common question I get among music educators, and I'm excited to share our story.

While many initiatives to boost music enrollment concentrate on improving access through instrument investments, scheduling priorities, and advocacy, the key factors for increasing enrollment and student achievement are quality teaching and engaging, relevant learning experiences. But despite achieving an 80% or higher retention rate across all grade levels and record enrollment in beginner classes over multiple years, I recognized that my impact would be limited if I taught a subject that didn't interest the majority of students in my school.

With a goal to increase access to the music classroom and involve more students in arts education, I collaborated with our curriculum specialist to introduce a guitar course for 7th and 8th grade students featuring popular music. The course quickly gained popularity, with demand consistently exceeding available seats. Building on this success, I worked with secondary building principals to propose a long-term vision for popular music course programming beyond our guitar class. This vision aimed to provide additional entry points to the music classroom at all grade levels, create flexible scheduling options for students and counselors, and increase the relevance and appeal of music education for all students.

With guidance from Dr. Kevin Droe, associate professor of music education at the University of Northern Iowa, we

launched our first-ever modern band course. Modern Band is an emerging type of school music program that teaches students to perform the music they know and love. By tapping into students' interests and backgrounds through popular music, it enables them not only to learn how to play music but also to compose and improvise in genres like rock, hip hop, reggae, and other contemporary styles. Modern band class features a range of instruments, including guitar, bass, keyboard, drum set, vocals, and technology, but it is not limited to these instruments. In districts nationwide, modern band acts as an expansion of existing music programs like band, choir, and orchestra, attracting students who may not have been interested in enrolling in a traditional music class.

Using the Understanding by Design (Wiggins/McTighe, 2005) approach to unit design and the Iowa Fine Arts Standards, I developed guitar and modern band courses that provide a fresh path to relevance and authenticity for a new audience of students. While there are fundamental skills and techniques for students to master, these courses go beyond simply learning to play an instrument and lean into the inherent benefits of arts education imbued in the standards. They enable students to explore how technique enables creative expression, how learning different techniques from a wide range of popular music genres unlocks possibilities for growth and creativity, and how creativity can be nurtured as a skill. Additionally, these courses empower students to self-direct their own learning using local and global resources so they can remain engaged beyond their time in the course.

Year after year, through each iteration and with valuable student input on song

selections, I have been able to design courses that leverage the cultural capital of the students and the community and are taught in ways authentic to the rich, diverse world of popular music. As a result, my classroom increasingly reflects the cultural contributions of my students and community. By reaching more students, I've learned more about the needs and interests of the student body. This has better enabled me to not only teach these courses, but to calibrate the orchestra program for increased participation and engagement. Simply put, teaching guitar and modern band has made me a better traditional ensemble teacher.

Over the span of four years, our modern band program expanded significantly, leading to the full enrollment of eight guitar sections and two modern band sections in grades 7-12. Meanwhile, our orchestra enrollment not only continued to grow but did so at a faster pace. To support this remarkable growth and the development of both modern band and orchestra programs, the Council Bluffs Community School District promptly hired an additional music educator without hesitation.

The increase in orchestra enrollment was certainly a cause for celebration. Orchestra students now benefit from more learning opportunities and support, thanks to the addition of a music teacher. Importantly, it was the demonstrated impact and viability of the modern band program that gave the district confidence in sustaining enrollment for two full-time teachers. Additionally, the new offerings were expected to provide lasting benefits to a larger number of students and families, both in the immediate and long-term. When I started six years ago, my classroom served 133 students. Now, it serves over 380 students, with

approximately 200 of them participating in modern band courses.

The remarkable impact and relevance to our school community cannot be overstated. The success of this thriving music program extends beyond the classroom, positively influencing the school community and culture. The enthusiasm and engagement among students are evident, and parents are delighted by the opportunity for their children to participate, with many expressing an interest in joining themselves. Students even use our online lessons to teach music to their family members. Modern band and guitar students have formed a new middle school show choir band, and students actively utilize our new recording studio. Parents often purchase instruments for their children after participating in these courses to sustain their engagement, and students regularly remark how they want additional popular music course opportunities added to our course handbook.

Moreover, the enrollment data at our school reveals that the introduction of more options in music has coincided with increased student participation in music electives overall. Students who are dual enrolled in both traditional and popular music courses continue to engage in their traditional experiences, and the retention rate for instrumental ensembles is stronger than ever. Currently, an average of 85% of instrumental students continue in band or orchestra as they progress through middle school, given the option to choose guitar or modern band courses. While I cannot solely attribute the decrease in student referrals or disruptions in popular music classes to my work, it is worth noting that behavioral issues in these classes are rare.

The potential of music education is profound. Students regularly comment on how these courses bring life to their school day, foster self-confidence and growth, and make lasting friendships. As we move forward, we will undoubtedly encounter significant challenges in education due to the rapid pace of change in society and technology. However, I couldn't be more optimistic about the future, not only for music education in my community, but also for the futures and contributions of an ever-increasing number of students entering the world with the creative and collaborative mindsets that I strive to foster each day.

It is essential to acknowledge the proud history of traditional ensembles in Iowa and their strong ties to our communities. However, it is important to recognize that the traditional ensemble framework is not the only path to realize the promise of music education. When we embrace the existing connections within our communities and bring them into the school, we can welcome and support new populations of students in discovering and sharing their artistic voices with the world.

So, how did we find ourselves adding a full-time music teacher position to our staff? Long story short, through starting a modern band program. You can teach modern band, and it's far more affordable than you might expect. I'll be sharing this story and more this fall at the IMEA Professional Development Conference in my 'Bring Modern Band to Your School' session, alongside other amazing modern band sessions with presenters such as Dr. Kevin Droe from UNI, Dr. Jill Wilson from Luther College, and Shelley Droe from Cedar Falls. I look forward to seeing you there. Together, let's make a difference for more kids in Iowa! ■