

Creativity Prompt Ideas for Music

As part of our recent work with Hull City of Culture's "No Limits" strand, which aimed to improve the engagement of children & young people with culture, we created a series of creativity activity ideas. These ideas are practical, adaptable to different ability groups and easy to incorporate into a wide variety of settings. They're very effective at inspiring pupils to think creatively, generate new ideas and use their imagination.

Name Chains

Teacher leads a call and response using the names of the students in the class. This doesn't have to be sung to begin with but the teacher should play with the voice. Change the elements of voice: volume, pitch, tone, pace, intonation, emphasis. Get the students playing. Laughter is good and should be encouraged. We want the students to be open to singing and taking risks. Now start singing the names and joining them together so that they have to sing back potential nonsense: 'Jessica-Jamal-Kieran-Wendy', etc. Don't over-plan it. Allow yourself as teacher to play and make mistakes. One of these name chains will eventually resonate: it will have a nice rhythm, some good plosives, etc. Use this chain as the lyrics for the song that you will create as a group. Split the class into groups and devise their own 4 line song using only these lyrics. They then lead the class in their own call and response. By pulling together elements of all of these call and responses, you might have a song. Or you might not. Either way, you will have sung joyfully with your class and invited them into a simple song-writing process.

Sound Piece

Either find a space or create a space within the classroom where students can lie down calmly and with a bit of space around them. Lead them through a relaxation exercise that is centred around regular, deep breathing from the diaphragm, not the chest or throat. Once they are breathing well and all is calm, introduce the notion of mindfulness: all we have is in the present and, if we are warm and relaxed now, there are no problems. Get them focused on any noises they can hear from outside their space. Listen to it intently and try to hear it as music. Try to recreate it quietly, privately. What piece of music would it be from? Is it percussion? Voice? Woodwind? Try to fill in some music around it. Find a line of lyrics to suit it. When back in the classroom, use that line of lyrics to create a song, a story, a piece of non-fiction writing..

Build Percussive Music

Take the class to an unfamiliar space either within or outside the school. Use a variety of sticks and beaters to explore percussive sounds generated by the solid materials therein. Use call and response to test the echoes and sound quality of the space. Are there materials there with which to create instruments? What do they sound like? Record the sounds that are created and see if the class can build a soundscape/symphony of that specific space. Back in the learning space, can you create that using the recorded sounds? Once familiar with the methodologies used, the class can now create their own music wherever they are taken.

Build a Cacophony

Each student or pair of students should go on a walk around school and its grounds, listening out for interesting sounds. It could be the whirr of an air-conditioning unit, the raised voice of an angry teacher, birdsong, anything that they think is interesting. They must then be able to recreate the sound using only their voices and bodies. If it's a human voice they remember, they should remove the language and recreate only the sound. Once back in the learning space, the teacher acts as conductor of an orchestra, using a baton to point to pairs who bring their sounds to life. It can build to a cacophony where all sounds merge, all students could be directed to take part in the same one, there could be echoes, call and response, anything but try to keep the sounds going for as long as possible so that one long, strange and beautiful piece of music is created. Record it if possible.

Poetic Description of the School

Students tour the school and its grounds at various time of the day and note down interesting, remarkable, disgusting things that are either familiar or unfamiliar. Create phrases that simply describe these notable things. On returning to the learning space, they must start grouping these phrases together not in terms of content but in terms of rhythm and rhyme. Thus a poetic description of the school emerges:

Declan's playing pick-up sticks,

Suki's on her BMX,

Crisp bags flying everywhere

Wind is messing up her hair.

This can remain a poem or could be adapted to fit something like 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' by Bob Dylan. It could become a whole class song, a celebration of the school. This can be linked to Poetry & Literature as well.

One Song to the Tune of Another

Each group is given two familiar nursery rhymes and they must use the tune from one to fit the lyrics of another and sing it as a group. Move into pop songs/classic songs. Can they put lyrics to classical music or find tunes for lyrics from classic songs that they may not know? Can they sing these as a whole class? Can you use online resources so that they can sing lyrics to pieces of music where the lyrics have been removed? If things are tricky, paraphrase, fill the gaps with their own new lyrics that work with the existing ones.

Adapt Rhythm to Atmosphere

Teacher claps, drums or counts out a regular 8 beats. Students each choose a number between 1 and 8. Whenever that beat appears, they clap. As they get the hang of it, they can do it on two or three numbers that may or may not operate concurrently.

Gradually we are going to encourage the students to replace the clap with an onomatopoeia, or a sound (so they can hiss or say hiss in a hissy way!) But to begin with the sound should only last for 1 beat. Once we have a regular rhythm going with all sorts of sounds emerging, the teacher will call out an atmosphere (celebratory, haunting, terrifying, etc) or a location (medieval castle, haunted house, deserted forest, etc) and the students must adapt their sounds for this new atmosphere or location. So we are asking students to consider the volume, pitch, tone, duration, announcement of their sound(s). So a 1-beat loud 'hiss' might become a soft, elongated 4-beat long and quiet 'hiiiiissss'. Lots of potential links to numeracy.

Body Music

Inspired by Philip Herbert's 'Bodily Functions', students will create music from body sounds. Students will inevitably leap to farts and burps but encourage them to think about all of the other sounds we make: swallowing, bones clicking, teeth grinding, hair swishing, laughing, etc. In small groups, record as many sounds as they can and let them play them back and properly listen to them. Which could be used as percussion, as strings, as woodwind (yes, I know...). Give them some space to go to and an editing package and get them to produce some musical sequences made purely out of these noises. They may use some non-verbal singing to provide melody if needed.

Life Song

Link to 'How do you have a happy life?' Students identify the broad elements of their life: work, play, family time, friends, time, play, sleep, exercise, etc. For each they create two lines of a song and a melody to accompany it. If lyrics prove tricky, humming or laa-ing is fine. The melody and delivery should capture how they feel about each element. Once all are created, they run them together, assigning chunks to the various hours in a typical weekday. Then they repeat it but this time assigning the chunks how they wish a typical weekday would look. These can be developed into whole class songs/ presentations. This will lead to how we spend our time versus how we want to spend our time, and why this difference exists. Now research life in Freetown, Sierra Leone and explore the contrast with a typical day there.