

Backward Design And Repertoire Selection: Finding Full Expression
Professional Journal Article Review

James M. Novak

Department of Graduate Studies, Northern State University

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Dr. van Gent

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This article came to fruition when author Jocelyn W. Ames (2020), a doctoral candidate in music education and a part-time instructor at the University of Colorado Boulder, made the connection between her personal yoga study and her music education career. She finds similarities between the two activities in that there are multiple philosophies involved in teaching approach, both use curriculum and repertoire in imparting knowledge, and both enrich students over a lifetime.

During Ames' (2020) decade-long journey with yoga practice, she was able to map out her transition from beginning student to a more seasoned practitioner, allowing her to have heightened senses to the full experience and benefits of yoga practice. Ames learned that being invested in the process is more valuable and interesting than the achievement of mastering individual poses.

After becoming more comfortable with the poses, her focus shifted to the instructors' careful arrangement and ordering of poses (Ames, 2020). She learned that the poses by themselves didn't hold much meaning, but together they helped create a "peak pose." She observed that the most effective teachers appeared to first choose a peak pose and select individual poses that led to that peak pose, thereby planning the yoga session backwards. Ames recognized the correlation between yoga and music education and contemplated how she might incorporate this into her teaching.

This backward design concept is not new (Ames, 2020). Education scholars Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe used this approach in their widely popular curriculum known as

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Understanding by Design. In it, music educators are tasked with selecting repertoire only after determining learning objectives. By choosing relevant repertoire, not only are music educators ensuring goals are met, but they are also developing students who have a lifetime appreciation of music. Just as the yoga experience is greater than the value of individual poses, music appreciation goes beyond scales, fingerings, and rhythm reading. While a lifelong musician understands their individual contribution, they are more appreciative of the entire ensemble's ability to create engaging music.

Ames (2020) describes a four-step process for backward design in music education. The steps are to know your edges, set your intention, build to a peak, and find your breath.

The first step, know your edges, highlights the importance of pre-assessment (Ames, 2020). The goal of a music program should be to meet the students where they are, while offering challenges to grow their knowledge and abilities. Pre-assessment techniques include consulting prior instructors, sight-reading a variety of repertoire to determine strengths and weaknesses, and communicating the skill focus of each rehearsal to the students.

Second, setting your intention is breaking down learning outcome(s) using purposeful task analysis (Ames, 2020). While the communication in step one explains your intention to assess one particular skill, the communication in step two highlights goals for a certain skillset and asks students to set a personal intention for the class as well. The skill-based outcomes and assessments become a collaborative effort between the student and teacher. Ames uses the example of improving articulation which, when using purposeful task analysis, becomes a focus on attack, decay, sustain, and release at various dynamic ranges and tempi. This approach

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provides students with a specific checklist to ensure they understand articulation on this piece, and they can apply it to future pieces.

Step three, building to a peak, is a yoga term which means utilizing all of the postures to prepare the body for the most difficult or “peak” pose (Ames, 2020). In discussing music education, yoga poses are the repertoire. It emphasizes the importance of selecting repertoire based on goals rather than the repertoire determining the goals. While it is important to understand the various state and national rating systems, music educators are by far the best rater, because they know their ensemble’s strengths and weaknesses.

The fourth and final step, find your breath, stresses the importance of self-reflection and post-assessment (Ames, 2020). In yoga, learning how to breathe through poses is incredibly difficult. With enough practice, this breathing becomes second nature and allows the practitioner to focus on other aspects, such as how the pose feels, how to transition to the next pose, and why the poses work together to form the peak pose. This “thinking about thinking” enables the practitioner to connect breath and body sensations to the poses. Relating that to the music experience, fully explaining the goal makes students more active, engaged participants. Music educators must be certain their chosen repertoire is challenging only in the area of the learning goal, thereby creating the most direct path to reaching the intended objective.

In summary, backward design is an incredibly effective method to cultivate engaged and motivated students who are meeting learning objectives based on their own assessment of strengths and weaknesses. As an active participant in their learning experience, students will not only master selected repertoire, but will also be able to internalize and transfer that learning to new music.

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References

Ames, Jocelyn. W. (2020). Backward Design and Repertoire Selection: Finding Full Expression. **Music Educators Journal**, volume 106, issue 3 pp. 54-59