

# Finding Time for Creative Musical Activities in Undergraduate Curricula

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In 1999, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that Creative Musical Activities (CMAs) are rarely included in public school music curricula. Since then, policy makers have worked to encourage greater amounts of CMAs through the revision process of our national and state standards, where all students are encouraged to “conceive and develop new artistic ideas and work” (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2016, p. 13). Lack of training at the undergraduate level may play an important role in determining whether or not teachers choose to include composition, improvisation, and other CMAs in the curriculum (Adderley, 1996; Byo, 1999; Snell, 2013; Bernhard & Stringham, 2015).

Even though the past twenty years has seen an increase in discourse surrounding the inclusion of CMAs in music education standards, curricula, publications, and practice, Piazza (2017) found recent college graduates teaching in New York State reported receiving less instruction and exposure to CMAs than previous generations, not more, but the low sample size does not allow for generalization to an entire undergraduate population. To understand this contradiction, the present study was designed to compare pre-service music teachers’ and music teacher educators’ self-reported experiences with creative musical activities and their perceived levels of importance in undergraduate curricula. Five research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How are CMAs defined by pre-service music teachers and music teacher educators?
2. What types of CMAs are being incorporated in undergraduate music education curricula?
3. In what ways are CMAs being incorporated in undergraduate music education curricula?
4. How prepared do pre-service music teachers feel to incorporate CMAs in their future classrooms?
5. How well do music teacher educators feel they are preparing pre-service music teachers to incorporate CMAs in their future music classrooms?

Pre-service music teachers ( $n = 236$ ) and music teacher educators ( $n = 95$ ) from across the United States completed this survey. Chi-square analysis indicates there is a significant difference between pre-service music teachers and music teacher educators in their definitions of creative musical activities  $\chi^2(5, n = 331) = 14.901, p < .05$ . On average, pre-service music teachers report that creative musical activities occur most in theory and general music methods courses, as well as during student teaching experiences. Pre-service music teachers often experience creative musical activities through projects centered around music from the Western historical period (motets, sonatas, madrigals, lieder, and other classical genres). Pre-service music teachers value the inclusion of arranging, composing, and improvising as important activities and desire more opportunities to practice these creative musical activities. Music teacher educators rate their perception of pre-service music teachers’ levels of preparation higher than the pre-service music teachers rate their own levels of preparation. Most pre-service music teachers in this study value and expect to include arranging, composing, and improvising with their future students, so it is important for music teacher educators to find ways to consistently integrate these activities as regular components in undergraduate music curricula.

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# Practical Suggestions

Have you ever met a music teacher—or pre-service music teacher—who complained about having too *much* class time? It seems like most teachers are always racing the concert date or the class syllabus to get everything done in time. Including creative musical activities designed to increase student understanding of the music may actually buy teachers *more* time. When students learn to interact with music through improvisation and composition, they tend to learn music faster, so ensemble teachers can spend less time telling students what to do – “That’s the melody, bring it out!” – because they have developed the ability and awareness to self-correct. Pre-service music teachers who learn to arrange, compose, and improvise develop the skills and confidence to succeed as a new music teacher.

Hopefully, you find these suggestions helpful. It’s really as simple as trying just one thing at a time. Start simple. If it works, keep doing it! Even if you feel uncomfortable or unprepared to include creative musical activities with your (future) students, simply providing them with the opportunity to create and perform original music is a great place to start!

## ARRANGING

- Arrange a pop song for classroom instruments—think Jimmy Fallon and The Roots!
- Reharmonize an American folk song in a piano techniques or voice methods class.
- Use dictation exercises to reinforce rhythms from current or future performance repertoire.

## COMPOSING

- Encourage students to write down musical ideas they have created themselves. Compare this to writing in language: if a student can write it, they can read it.
- Start simple. Have students dictate the rhythm to a 4-line poem, then add pitches to the rhythm. Or, they can write a eight-measure melody in four-part harmony
- Encourage a student to write their own cadenza in lessons. Even if it isn’t used, the act of writing their own cadenza will help them internalize various elements of the piece of music.

## IMPROVISING

- Start each class with one minute of call-and-response rhythm patterns.
- Make up a simple, 4-measure melody in major tonality. You can compose this ahead of time, or make it up on the spot. Sing or play the first 3 measures, then have your students make up the last measure. Here’s an example:



- Pick a simple melody. Teach it to your students by ear – no letter names, scale degrees, or solfège allowed! Once they learn it, they can try embellishing (or “decorating”) it.

