



## Taking Notes - Jazz and the American Story: A Partnership between Artists and Administrators to Increase Student Engagement

*“You can’t help it. An artist’s duty, as far as I’m concerned, is to reflect the times.”*

*-Nina Simone*

### **Collective Improvisation: Rationale for Taking Notes**

Thelonious Monk once said, “All musicians are subconsciously mathematicians.” His statement, in its simplicity, was a profound allusion to the fact that the lines between the artistic and academic world is not as finite as we once imagined. Tightening budgets in school districts have limited students’ access to art and music during the school day. Nevertheless, roses continue to emerge from the concrete of the educational landscape as urban districts develop and strengthen their partnerships with artists to provide students with experiences that develop their artistic talents and expose them to an eclectic palate of career possibilities. In 2011, while working as a curriculum coordinator for the Richmond County School System, our student achievement data revealed a steady decline in student performance in U.S. History. We needed to find a way to not only empower the teachers of the course with a new approach, but also a way to ignite student’s interest in the content. This course was a requirement for graduation in Georgia, so along with a team of teachers

and school administrators, we began to list the underlying causes of this trend and develop a set of strategies to address the issue. The implementation of Common Core State Standards has brought with it a reconceptualization of what engaging instruction entails. Assessments designed by the Smarter Balance Assessment consortia call upon students to demonstrate higher-order thinking that is nurtured in more student centered learning environments that engage students in deeper learning (Peel, 2014). We found the use of jazz music along with history content as a pedagogically sound, financially feasible inter-disciplinary approach that that lent itself well to community engagement and professional development for our teachers.

When examining the high school U.S. History curriculum in most school districts, educators may find guidance in the genius of Miles Davis’ advice to musicians, “Don’t play what’s there, play what’s not there.” One of the challenges that we would have to face as we looked for ways to increase student engagement was the lack of diversity in the U.S. History curriculum. The American story is a *mélange* of triumph and tragedy of people from across the globe seeking to create. Yet, the curriculum that is presented to most high school students in the United States is monolith of Eurocentrism, negating the significant

cultural impact of Native Americans, Africans and Asians whose lives provided the canvas upon which the American portrait would be depicted. Publishing companies wield enormous influence and without proper support from school and district administrators to protect their autonomy and nurture their creativity, teachers conform to the constraints of the resources provided to them. In some instances, these resources provide an image that promotes ethnocentrism, stereotypes, and political polarity that undermines the very democracy it claims to inform. This realization led to the development of a project that we would call Taking Notes: Jazz and the American Story. The project would be a multi-sensory presentation, engaging students visually, musically, and verbally. I would share interesting highlights from American history for 2-3 minutes and a live jazz band would follow up the oral presentation with a selection from the time period that was discussed. For 90 minutes we would walk students through a survey of American history with Jazz as the soundscape. Drawing from oral history tradition and the power of music, we would create a memorable experience for students and teachers that could be replicated in the classroom in the design of student activities and presentation of content. The contents of the presentation would draw upon the existing curriculum

and attempt to fill the gaps and make the content more relevant to the lives and culture of students of color.

The presentation opened with a discussion about the uses of the drum and how important it was in the lives of Africans long before they were brought to the Americas. We presented students with images of the civilizations of West Africa to help them conceptualize the idea of the complexity of African cultures and the impact of slavery on the lives of the enslaved. This helped them to understand the importance of music in the lives of people from whom everything had been taken. Students are introduced to a sampling of musical instruments that originated in Africa and were brought to the Americas in the memories of enslaved people. Most students were surprised to learn that the banjo and the xylophone had African origins. As the program progressed, they met familiar faces such as Louis Armstrong and Cab Calloway, as well as not so familiar faces such as Thelonious Monk and Mongo Santamaria. We discussed how the big band era gave birth to Bebop where smaller ensembles were a way for musicians to express artistic freedom in a society where racial oppression restricted their lives beyond the bandstand.

### Set List: Planning & Challenges

Once the idea was developed, we began the planning phase. A local community organization, Garden City Jazz, had been hosting free Sunday evening jazz concerts in downtown Augusta for several years. The director of the event, Karen Gordon, was a local jazz legend and champion for the arts in the city. She became an instrumental community partner with the school district in the success of the Taking Notes project. She met with the curriculum director and me to discuss the logistics of the presentation. Which schools would we visit? How many musicians would be involved? What expenses would the project incur? How would it be funded? We also considered how to extend the professional learning of teachers and students beyond the actual 90-minute presentation. We found resources that could help teachers make their own connections with the content, the music, and the students in the weeks after the presentation left their schools. The

musicians that were part of the project were Karen Gordon (piano), Dave Weston (bass), Joe Collier (trumpet), and Not Gaddy (drums). Weston and Collier had been key players in James Brown's band and had played in their own jazz bands in recent years. Gaddy had developed a successful program for public school children called I Drum 2U, exposing them to the history of the drum and therapeutic benefits of drum circles. We met for several rehearsals, discussing the design of the lesson, the timing and sequence of the musical selections and the imagery that would serve as the backdrop for the presentation.

We also had to work on convincing school administrators that this was an effective use of instructional time. In a survey of principals conducted by the Public Schools of North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction, they found that 91% of respondents believed that arts integration was a critical component to educating the whole child (Guindon, Huffman, Socol, & Takahashi-Rial, 2014). Students who are in classrooms where the arts are integrated into their learning are more engaged in their work overall than students who don't have those opportunities (The Kennedy Center, 2014). After explaining the context, declining student performance and waning engagement, principals understood the approach and saw it as an opportunity to have their teachers rethink their approach to the content. We wanted to leave high school history teachers empowered with ideas for using historical images, song lyrics, interesting stories and music to shatter the monotony of the classroom. Without administrative support the project would not have been as successful. Teachers needed to see the 90-minute session as a launch point for a new approach rather than a singular non-instructional event.

### A Teaching Gig: Outcomes of Taking Notes

*Taking Notes: Jazz and the American Story* was a success because the program was born out of a discussion about what our data was telling us about student achievement and a willingness to try a new approach. We wanted to introduce an approach that brought community partners into the fold to assist us with a school-based problem. It's not uncommon

for schools to open their doors to artists-in-residence for mural projects and art lessons, but we wanted to try something that was more closely aligned to the standards of a content area to reinforce lessons and repackage the standards in a way that made them more memorable for learners.

In planning this project, we learned much about the challenges that teachers face in covering curriculum that spans hundreds of years. Our aim was to provide them with some autonomy to write their own creative instructional arrangements of the content that took into consideration student interests and learning styles. It was an opportunity for us to model a type of instruction that was one strategy to address the much broader issues of the lack of access to the arts in public schools and the inclusion of multiple perspectives when studying historical events. We can't feasibly discuss the achievement gap without taking aim at the exclusion of a broad array of contributions of people of color to the American story from the existing curriculum. As a result of this initiative, not only did student engagement increase, we also saw a 12% increase in student achievement in U.S. History. Teachers demonstrated a renewed interest in designing lessons that reflected student interest and an array of learning styles.

### Beyond the Bandstand: Implications

Just as the emergence of Bebop led to the decline of the Big Band Era, we hoped that this arts based approach to professional development, modeling, and thematic lesson planning would open a new path for the teachers in our district as they sought to recapture their students' attention. *Taking Notes: Jazz and the American Story* was a research-based mechanism that helped us to enhance our curriculum. If we are to truly address the opportunity gap and curriculum breath that challenges teacher effectiveness, what adjustments must we make in the design of instruction and the partnerships we foster in and around schools? The beneficiaries of our work are the teachers whose work is more reflective of their pedagogical creativity and the generations who are stewards of this heightened artistic and historical awareness.

## References

Guindon, M., Huffman, H., Socol, A. R., & Takahashi-Rial, S. (2014). *A Statewide snapshot of principals supporting arts integration: Their preparation and current practices*. Raleigh: Public Schools of North Carolina - State Board of Education.

Peel, R. N. (2014). Integrating arts in the classroom: A strategic approach to support common core state standards. *Delta Journal of Education*, 4(1), 63-72.

The Kennedy Center. (2014). *Selected findings from the John F. Kennedy center's arts in education research study: An impact evaluation of arts-integrated instruction through the changing education through the arts (CETA) program*. New York, NY: The Kennedy Center.

Andre Benito Mountain is a school administrator with Tacoma Public Schools in Tacoma, WA and a doctoral student in Curriculum Studies at Georgia Southern University. Prior work history includes serving as the K-12 Social Studies Curriculum Coordinator for the Richmond County School System in Augusta, GA. His article "Reinventing Edison" was published in the Spring 2015 edition of *Washington Principal Magazine*.



## Critical Question Series

Each year, WSASCD provides a forum for educators in our state to read and write about topics of interest to our members. Check out these articles, which are available on the WSASCD website.

- Whole Child Overview: What Do We Mean by "Whole Child"?
- Tenet: Supported: What is the True Meaning of Discipline?
- Tenet: Engaged: What does it Mean to "Be a Learner"?
- Tenet: Supported: Are Grades About What Students Earn or What Students Learn?
- Tenet: Engaged: Does using Technology in the Classroom Enhance Student Engagement?
- Tenet: Supported: Can We Learn This Together?
- Tenet: Engaged: What Does Your Local Legislator Know About Your Work?
- Tenet: Supported: Why Does it Seem Like Everything in Education is Changing? And, Is There a Way to Think About the Work That Could Make the Work More Manageable?
- Tenet: Healthy: Closing the Achievement Gap through Collaborative Bridge Building?
- Tente: Supported: Can You Help Me?
- Tenet: Suupported: Are You PLC Lite?
- Tenet: Engaged: Do I Need to Be A Connected Educator?
- Tenet: Engaged: How Do You Treat the "New Kid" in Your School?



**Check out our Blog at <http://wsascd.org.blogspot.com/>  
or download a PDF at <http://wsascd.org/critical-question-articles/>  
To contribute a topic, contact Kathy Clayton at [kclaytonascd@gmail.com](mailto:kclaytonascd@gmail.com)**