



Collaborating in the Cloud

A variety of online tools can help your students to collaborate on projects in the classroom—or anywhere else.

ONE OF THE MANY FACETS of the new 2014 Music Standards is the emphasis on providing music creation opportunities in our classrooms. At the same time, making the jump from being a consumer of music to creating it can be scary. This perceived barrier to becoming a composer continues to be made less of an issue thanks to innovative tools and equally innovative teachers who are finding new ways to encourage friendly, collaborative music creation environments.

Many students outside of mainstream ensemble programs shy away from getting involved in music classes due to the false belief that performing music comes with the prerequisite of being able to read and notate music. Matt Warren, a NAFME member and music teacher in the Webster Central

School District in Webster, New York, says that “technology removes a lot of the barriers that non-ensemble-performing students can encounter. They may not be able to notate music, but if they have an idea in their brain, they can use those tools to create something that sounds great even if they don’t know the theory behind it. Some of the kids may come to the class never being interested in performing or knowing anything about reading music, but by the end of it they are publishing their own creations and putting them out there for everyone to see and hear.”

There are several web-based music creation platforms options available. While some are more single-user oriented, others provide integrated sharing and collaboration functions that teachers can use to get their students working together. Tools such as Soundtrap (soundtrap.com) and Soundation (soundation.com) provide this functionality in various ways. Warren notes that his personal preference is Soundation, as “with [it] they can share their work and get constructive feedback from their peers. They listen to the music others in the class have created and make suggestions to each other. One student will point out that maybe this section could benefit from another embellishment, maybe change from one instrument to something else, etc. I think that being able to share your work, get another pair of ears to listen to it, and then have the chance to act on those critiques without the fear



of getting put down or made fun of is very powerful.”

However, getting to this point in the year requires a lot of careful, methodical progress in the classroom. Marjorie LoPresti—NAFME member, 2016 TI:ME Teacher of the Year, and music technology teacher at East Brunswick High School in East Brunswick, New Jersey—starts the year with simple, creative tasks where success is easy to achieve. Her first project of the year uses GarageBand with students simply pulling in loops, rhythms, and harmonies from the built-in libraries to get them comfortable with the process of creating compositions in this way. Later, she moves on to creative projects using Soundation. Many students embrace starting projects in class using Soundation, and then working together online outside of class.

Once the students are comfortable with the software, she throws in the collaborative components. The first step is collaborative critique. In the early weeks of the course, students give each other individual feedback in an informal way through listening on headphones. Complete pieces are not played aloud for the entire class, but

STRONGER TOGETHER

The beauty of web-based, online music collaboration tools such as Soundation and Soundtrap is that they are readily available for students to use in and out of the classroom. While the teacher may show them how to use the software during class, in most cases both Warren and LoPresti agree that students seem to enjoy working outside of school on their creations while still being able to get constructive feedback from their peers and others in their home or community. Warren in particular says that “these tools can provide greater access to both peer and teacher feedback, and easily allow the sharing of one’s work either for pleasure or for a purpose. A student’s work, when done in this manner, helps to showcase how the three musical processes of creating, performing, and responding to music can make our music programs as a whole ‘stronger together.’”



Technological tools foster teamwork in the classroom and beyond.

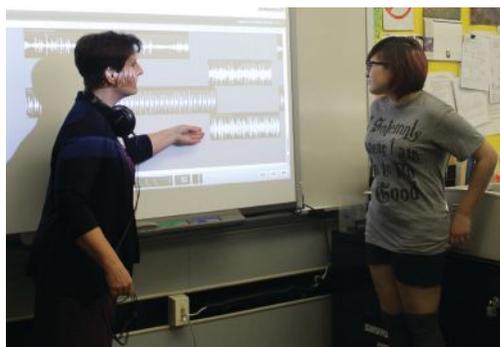
playing 15–30 seconds of each student’s work routinely through the classroom sound system helps build a culture of respect in which honest but musically robust feedback is the norm. Says LoPresti, “A first step in getting the kids to actually work collaboratively is to have them do something that Richard McCready calls a ‘gallery walk’—the students listen and respond to each classmate’s work in its entirety. During these interactions, I can see how students relate to one another, as well as their natural affinities in terms of style preference, process, and temperament. That information helps me put them into groups of two and three for their first collaborative assignment.” In that assignment, LoPresti uses Google Drive (drive.google.com) as a central repository for the students’ creations, sharing them to their collaborative partners as needed. “I have students do some sketchbooking activities by recording a bunch of melodies in different styles and keys using a MIDI keyboard with no background tracks. In groups of two and three, they take those sketches and put them together into a new creation. Each student becomes the main author

of a composition, while the others become contributors to it.”

Another favorite lesson of LoPresti’s is a musical collage project. “Students first come up with a thematic idea of some kind. One example would be a TV talk show intro. The guest is introduced with a montage combination of music, speech, and sound effects representing work in television or film. In another variation, students think of an object or idea that has strong visual or emotional symbolism. Students then craft a collage of music, speech, sound effects, and other audio media to reflect their impressions of that theme.”

Audiobooks to be shared with preschool and elementary school students are an effective collaborative project enjoyed by LoPresti’s music theory students. In Soundation, students use a combination of loops, original music, sound effects, and voice recordings to create audio versions of favorites such as Dr. Seuss books. Students each play a “role” in the story by voicing different characters and working together to compose music and select sound effects that move the story forward. Says LoPresti, “Soundation gives students the freedom to record voice tracks at home, where there may be less background noise, and to enlist the help of family members when needed.”

The ideas don’t stop there. Soundation is just one of many applications



“Technology removes a lot of the barriers that non-ensemble performing-students can encounter.”
—MATT WARREN

available as a part of the MusicFirst suite of music education software. Andrea Moss, content manager for MusicFirst, points out that “one of the backbones of the MusicFirst online classroom is the shared content library with fully fleshed-out units, lessons, and assessments that can be used with the integrated software tools in the MusicFirst suite. There are literally hundreds of lessons to choose from.”

With collaborative projects, there are technical issues to consider. Due to the way Soundation works, in order for one student to work on another student’s song, the first student must save and send the file to the teacher, who then shares that file with another in the group. Soundtrap allows students to share their creations directly with each other and sync those changes immediately. When synced, a student’s changes become visible on the other students’ screens.

Soundtrap also provides the ability to collaborate interactively with another user via a live video link during a work session. Per Emanuelsson, cofounder and CEO of Soundtrap points out that this video feature is so powerful that many teachers have begun to use it as an alternative to Skype and other videoconferencing programs when teaching lessons due to the innovative way in which it handles multiple audio streams. Whereas Skype cuts the sound from an instrument while someone is speaking via a mic, Soundtrap keeps both audio streams audible at full volume simultaneously. ■