

FUNDAMENTALS

Turn Up the Music

Rev up participants' emotions through song.

By Lenn Millbower

Music is used as a learning tool primarily in one facet of life, childhood. When we were young, we learned many life lessons through nursery rhymes and children's tunes, demonstrating the powerful connection between learning and music. But as participants grow older, many trainers cast aside music, labeling it as silly or juvenile. That's a huge mistake given its teaching capacity. Language can communicate information; music can communicate emotion.

Numerous studies of adult learning conclude that music has a wide variety of effects on participants, depending on how it's used. For example, music played as participants enter a classroom warms the environment, making it comfortable and familiar. That results in a relaxing and receptive atmosphere for learning. Background music reduces on-the-job accidents, boosts worker production, creates a sense of privacy for small-group discussion, and makes people more likely to say what they're feeling.

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The various styles of music, rhythm, and tone all have an effect on the learning environment. Music written in a major key, such as most rock music and all marches, creates a happy, optimistic feeling. According to cognitive studies expert Pierce Howard, the fast beat encourages learning by cooling the brain and stimulating a better mood. Minor keys tend to generate a sad feeling, giving music a reflective quality. Many waltzes, classical pieces, and pop ballads use low tones. Slower beats in a minor key, says Howard, warm the brain, making it more alert.

Press “play”

When adding instrumental music to your training session, your goal should be to enhance the environment, not distract participants. The best pieces are those with clarity and purpose. Choose songs that capture a mood so completely that participants instinctually know its meaning. Background music should maintain a constant tempo and volume level, feature consistent instrumentation, and not attract too much attention. Here are some ways to apply music to your session.

Assist repeated tasks. Throughout the world, people organize and perform repetitive work to music. Any activity with a timed sequence can be set to music. Establish consistency between the task and the musical tempo, then try accelerating the tempo to help participants increase task speed. Additionally, repeated classroom activities, such as the turning of workbook pages, can be tied to an auditory cue.

Promote memorization. Music aids memorization by appealing to both the analytical and emotional sides of the brain. When those regions are simultaneously engaged, more brainpower is focused on the lesson. Try introducing important training points during a slide presentation tied to music. The song will provide memory cues for learning.

Enhance reviews. Reciting material to a beat also helps participants remember information. Giorgi Lozanov, a pioneer of learning through music, recommended reviewing information while playing slow, Baroque-style or early classical music that pulses at a rate of 76 to 80 beats per minute. That pace parallels the beating of the human heart and encourages relaxation.

Frame activities. Any learning activity can be accompanied by musical themes. Game shows, for example, use short songs to present quizzes in a nonthreatening manner. Similarly, you can use music to introduce and conclude activities, establish expectations, heighten tension, set time limits, and create movement.

Change energy levels. Music is ideal for changing classroom dynamics and maintaining control over the learning environment. But selecting the right kind of song is vital. For example, after a period of intense concentration, play faster music in a major key as a pick-me-up. Alternatively, you can calm down participants after a heated discussion by playing slow music in a minor key.

Foster creativity. Music enhances creativity, so brainstorming sessions are an ideal place to turn up the tunes. Slow, reflective music can bring participants’ brain waves into the theta cycle, which encourages sudden insights and inspirations.

Troubleshooting

There are some issues to watch out for when adding song to the classroom. These approaches will ensure that you use music appropriately in training.

Use music judiciously. It’s not the notes that make the music, it’s the silence between the notes. Select music for legitimate reasons, not just to create noise. Keep playing time to less than 40 percent of classroom time.

Integrate. Composer Max Steiner once

said, “Music should be *felt* rather than *heard*.” When you apply music correctly, it’s a seamless component of the learning, not an add-on. It shouldn’t be noticed.

Select appropriately. Music should support the needs of your training session. Never choose music because it’s your favorite song or replace appropriate selections because you’ve grown tired of them. Select the best piece for the training need and fully integrate it into the instruction. If it works, stick by it with conviction.

Match cultural norms. Regardless of how appropriate the music is and how successfully you integrate it into the instruction, songs that participants don’t relate to will distract them.

Use music legally. Music is considered intellectual property and is protected by a copyright. Penalties for ignoring copyright law can be severe. Before you decide to use another person’s musical material, obtain the advice of legal counsel.

Music is a tool for reaching beyond language. It awakens the recesses of the mind and calls emotion to attention. In the classroom, it provides the savvy trainer with a powerful teaching tool. For life has a rhythm, music has a meter, and training, if done properly, has a beat.

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