

Welcome: A New Academic Year

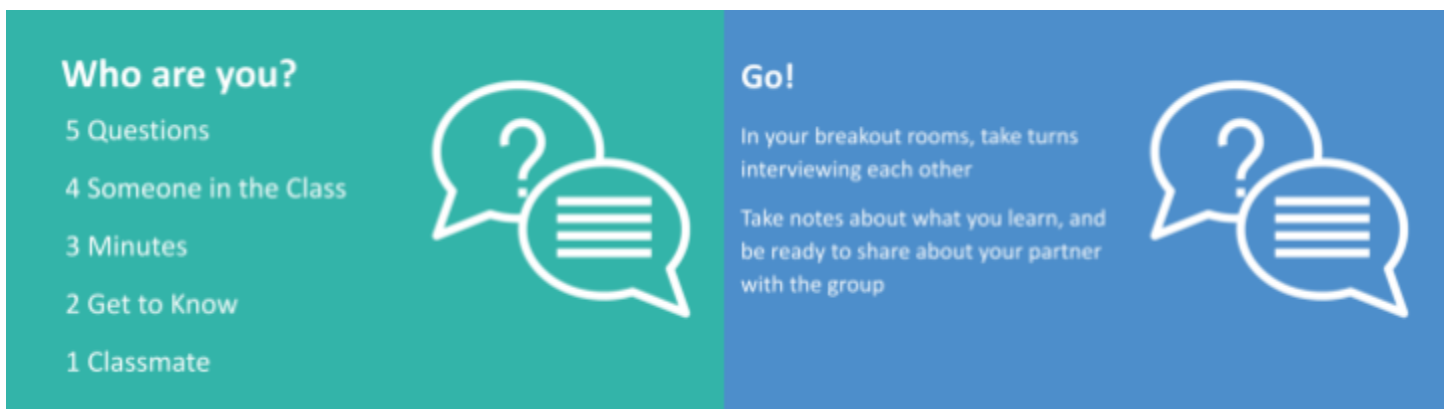
Welcome to the 2021-2022 edition of Sistema Toronto's Curriculum Blog. As our curriculum continues to develop, the focus of the blog will widen to include curriculum topics beyond our Social Curriculum. This academic year there will be a special focus on the development and implementation of our 2021-2022 Theory and Musicianship curriculum, which launched this October.

The start of this term has been challenging for our program, as we adapt to shifting regulations and expectations within the school system. Initially, our team was planning on a return to full in-person program delivery sometime this fall, but as the school year began it became apparent that we would need to pivot to a plan that allowed us to continue offering online programming for most, if not all of our students. At the time this blog entry is being written, only a small group of students at one of our centres have been able to return to in-person classes.

Social Curriculum: Identity

This month's Social Curriculum theme is Identity, a fitting topic for such a challenging time. The beginning of fall is often a time for students to explore different aspects of their identity through new clothing choices, new friends and relationships, or new activities. For our teachers and program staff, the fall is also a time to reconnect with our identity as a program, renew our pedagogical and ethical commitments, and engage anew with our sense of mission and purpose. The long physical separation from our students has made it more challenging to connect and work together, but it has made us all appreciate the importance and value of our group identity.

An important part of this group identity is getting to know one another. Social connection is an important part of our program, and we want our students not only to get to know one another, but to reflect on how they can better understand people who are different from them. "Who are You?" is a Social Curriculum Activity designed to help students learn these important skills. The activity challenges students to create a short interview for a classmate, with a maximum of five questions, then report back to the group about what they learn.



Who are you?

- 5 Questions
- 4 Someone in the Class
- 3 Minutes
- 2 Get to Know
- 1 Classmate

Go!

In your breakout rooms, take turns interviewing each other

Take notes about what you learn, and be ready to share about your partner with the group

"Who are You?", slides 1 and 4, Sistema Toronto 2021

The activity is designed to be short and easy to execute, so that it can be repeated in multiple rounds. Each round, the participating students get a chance to see how the same questions can elicit different responses from different classmates, or to try out new questions. Reporting to the class about their partner pushes the participants to focus on what they do and do not learn about their classmates, and rewards the most insightful interviewers and the best listeners.

Introducing Theory and Musicianship: Pitch

This fall we are launching our new Theory and Musicianship curriculum, designed to work alongside the Social Curriculum to support student learning and engagement. Over the next few months this blog will explore how the design and development process led us to create a new model for Theory and Musicianship activities in our program, and how we are implementing the curriculum in practice. Like our Social Curriculum, each month the Theory and Musicianship curriculum explores a different topic, through a variety of fun and engaging activities. Each week our teachers will receive an Activity Card with new activities and support materials to use with their students. This month's Theory and Musicianship theme is Pitch.



Pitch Activity Cards 1 and 3, Sistema Toronto 2021

Curriculum Development

The creation of this new initiative was driven by our curriculum development process. Each year we look for new ways to improve the resources and curriculum documents, and we send a weekly email with activities and suggestions for new ways to work on the topics in our curriculum. During the academic year, we hold regular Professional Development workshops for our teachers, which give them a valuable opportunity to ask questions and us an invaluable opportunity to hear how this work translates into reality in the classroom.

The most important goal for our curriculum is that it supports our students in their learning. This may sound obvious, but if the program is designed to help our students, the most important thing to understand is the students' experience. The most obvious manifestation of this for the past few years has been the Social Curriculum, which has deepened and strengthened our relationships with our students and helped create a more inclusive environment in our classes. Our curriculum is at its most successful when our students feel empowered, engaged, and understood, and at its most useful when it helps teachers make this happen.

It was our teachers who brought the need for new theory resources to our attention. During a group discussion in one of our Professional Development sessions, one of our teachers asked if anyone had any suggestions for how to work on theory with her class. Students in the same class were demonstrating wildly different amounts

of theory knowledge, and very different levels of comfort with musical terminology and note reading. A lively discussion ensued, and it became clear this could be a fruitful avenue for us to work on as a team.

Theory Curriculum Background

One issue we were facing was that our existing curriculum did not line up with our current reality. In 2017, Sistema Toronto developed a comprehensive curriculum for our program, including theory and musicianship, technique, repertoire and style, and other topics.

Junior – Year Two

	December Goals	June Goals	Theory
Strings			
Posture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Violin: Introduce sitting posture Cello: Review sitting posture, can tune one string to tuner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students find proper posture with minimal corrections A string pitch matching 	
Geography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All notes in 1st position without extensions 8ve harmonic 	Violin: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> High 2 vs. Low 2 4th finger on scales Cello: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduction to extended 4th finger 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fingering chart understanding Understanding tones and semitones
Intonation	Students can self-correct intonation with a drone	Students can play in tune with finger tapes and recognize tuning errors	
Note Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All first position notes Translate melody from solfege to written notation and their instrument 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All notes in 1st position including h2/l2 (violin) and h2/l3 (cello) Fluent understanding and translation to / from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Solfege Note names Finger numbers Written notes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduction to the Grand Staff Name all notes in bass and treble clefs, up to two ledger lines above and below the staff Solfege one 8ve scales Solfedge melodies within the octave

Sistema Toronto 2017-2018 Curriculum, Junior Year Two, excerpt

The 2017-2018 curriculum was an important step for our team, helping us better understand our goals and priorities as an organization and support our teachers in their lesson planning. It covered strings, percussion, voice, and our then-new Music and Movement program and laid out a road map for what students would learn in each year of our program. Most importantly, it vastly expanded the topics included in our curriculum, and helped us start developing a common language for our teaching team.

Challenge One: Student Pathways

The problem we were discovering was that in reality students did not follow the neat and clean pathway laid out for them in the curriculum documents. In theory, students begin the program with a year of Music and Movement, then spend two years each as Junior, Intermediate, and Senior. In practice, students can move

through the program much more quickly, and a senior or intermediate class typically includes students who began the program in several different years and followed different pathways through the program.

Each year, Sistema Toronto registers new students for our program. Because our program includes after-school care, our enrolment process is designed to offer as many spots as possible to young students, who have the most urgent need for after school programming. In order to create as much space as possible for new students, every year we move as many students as possible into the Senior and Intermediate streams.

Teachers were doing a great job covering the materials with their classes, adapting to the level of their students, and moving their learning forward, but students did not move through the program in the simple trajectory mapped out in the curriculum documents. Our curriculum plans provided a fantastic framework, but they did not account for the challenges created by this aspect of our program enrolment.

Challenge Two: Suitable Resources

A second challenge we faced was finding suitable support materials to help our teachers and students in their learning. We experimented with theory workbooks designed for piano and strings, online resources of all kinds, and with creating our own ad-hoc activities and materials. Workbooks are expensive, easily lost or ruined, and proved difficult to adapt to our program needs. Resources focused on piano typically did not include alto clef, a challenge for our viola students, and provided limited synergies with our voice, percussion, and strings classes. Resources for strings were better suited to our string teachers, but even harder for the Music and Movement, voice, and percussion teachers to use. The most widely available resources were also heavily based in the conservative language of western classical music, including problematic repertoire choices and little in the way of composer diversity.

Challenge Three: Assessment and Evaluation

A third challenge was a lack of assessment tools. Without tests, quizzes, and knowledge-based report cards, teachers and students alike struggled with alignment and assessment. In a perfect world, they would be working on known unknowns, taking the next step in their learning but well aware of what they knew already. In reality, students and teachers alike were working with a world of unknown unknowns. They didn't even know what they didn't know, and they didn't have good tools to figure it out.

A Way Forward

In short, our teachers and students needed a curriculum structure that was better suited to this reality, one that would facilitate differentiated instruction for students with different learning needs, provide support materials where they are needed, and include meaningful and usable assessment tools.

This would also give us a chance to integrate some of what we had learned from the past four years of our curriculum development work. Teachers and students alike had responded to the approach we developed for our Social Curriculum activities: fun, engaging activities using inquiry-based formats centred on student responses, sent out weekly to all teachers, organized by a monthly theme. Creating new Theory and Musicianship resources would also give us the chance to integrate more diverse composers and music styles, align our curriculum better with our evaluation rubric, and foster our students' creativity by including more composition and improvisation.

Next month's blog entry will focus on how our new Theory and Musicianship curriculum took shape around this model, how we integrated our evaluation rubric into the curriculum structure, and how the design process helped us decide on our monthly themes and activity formats.