

February: Communication and Dynamics

This month we will continue our exploration of curriculum development at Sistema Toronto, with a special focus on the role of communication. You can find the last blog entry, with its focus on organization [here](#), and the previous entry, introducing the new curriculum [here](#).

Communication and dynamics are used quite differently in musical contexts from organizational ones. The question of exactly *what* is being communicated to the audience in a musical performance can be a nebulous one, with answers ranging from the approximate to the esoteric, but a skilled musician will be able to tell you an enormous amount about *how* they are communicating with the audience. The special way that musicians use the term “dynamics,” meaning how loud and soft the music is, represents only one of the many tools used in performance to shape how the music comes across to its audience, a dynamic interaction if there ever was one.

Where the performing musician focuses on expression, the art of getting a message across to an audience, the teachers and administrators learn to put equal or greater importance on the messages that come back to them. For a skilled teacher every activity is an assessment, another chance to learn about what their students understand and what they don't. For a skilled administrator, nothing is more valuable than learning to understand the perspective of their staff.

Social Curriculum: Communication

In our social curriculum activities we want students to explore both the expressive, outgoing aspects of communication, and the incoming messages that can affect us consciously and unconsciously. This year, with Communication month taking place in February, we included activities that highlighted the diversity of Black Canadian musicians, and the different ways they communicated through music.

“Spotlight on Black Canadian Talent” is a listening and discussion activity that invites students to reflect on the different ways a music performance can communicate with its audience. Each week the students watch a video performance by a Black Canadian artist from a different musical tradition, classical pianist Stewart Goodyear, contemporary composer and songwriter Morgan Paige-Melbourne (a Sistema Toronto teacher), Cuban-Canadian percussionist Joaquín Núñez Hidalgo (a Sistema Toronto teacher), and singer-songwriter/producer Abel Makkonen Tesfaye (better known as “The Weeknd”). The slides invite students to reflect on what they notice about the music while they watch, and to think of questions they would like to ask the performer.

While We Watch, think about these questions:

- What do you hear?**
What do you notice about the music itself?
How would you describe the style or genre?
- What do you see?**
How does the performer present themselves?
How do they want you to see them?
- What do you think?**
What is the message of this performance?
What other music or song would you compare it to?

Sample Questions

- How did you become a musician?
- How did you learn your instrument?
- What music did you listen to when you were my age?
- What do you like to listen to now?
- How would you describe the music we just heard?
- What does Black History Month mean to you?
- What genre or tradition is this music a part of?
- Who are the musicians that have inspired you?
- How or where did you learn to write music like this?
- Who is your favourite musician?
- When did you write your first song?
- What other kinds of music do you play?

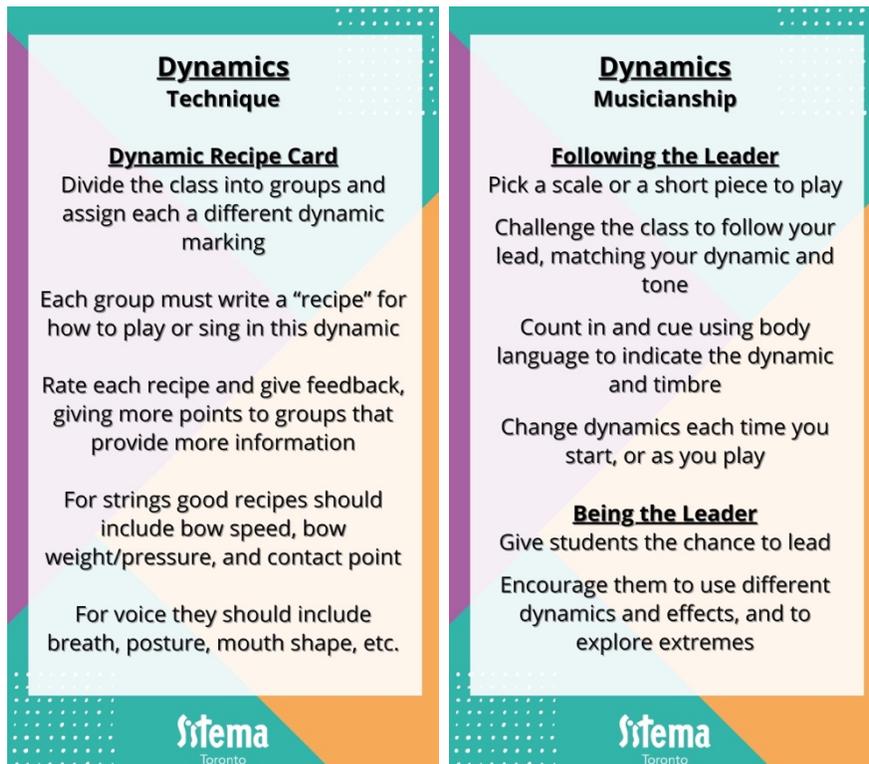
Couldn't think of a question? We've got you covered!

“Spotlight on Black Canadian Talent”, slides 3 and 7, Sistema Toronto 2022

Including performers from our own staff was a particularly important part of this activity, allowing us to not only highlight the incredible talent of two of our exceptional teachers, but help our students connect the dots between their everyday interactions in the classroom and the performance community beyond.

Theory and Musicianship: Dynamics

The four activity cards in our Dynamics unit explore many aspects of this important element of musical expression, from recognizing and translating and executing Italian dynamic terms, to using dynamics creatively as part of a composition.



Dynamics Activity Cards 2 and 3, Sistema Toronto 2021

These example activities focus on the *how*, rather than the *what* of dynamic expression, challenging students to understand how they use their bow, body, or breath to create different dynamics in their voice or on their instrument, and to practice matching dynamics or tones in a group, a vital ensemble skill.

Communication and Curriculum Development: How and What

Having worked out our design goals and curriculum framework, we had a good sense of what we wanted to include in the curriculum documents and how they would be organized, in other words of *what* we would be communicating. We also knew some things about *how* the materials would be communicated. During the early stages of the pandemic we began sending weekly curriculum emails to all our teachers, including one new activity developed for use in the online classrooms. This gave us the time to be thoughtful and flexible in what we were sending out, and teachers time to consider each activity individually as they came out.

One big change we wanted to make for the new materials was making sure they could work in the hustle and bustle of our in-person classes. It quickly became apparent that communication was a key issue. Online, activities could be longer and contain complicated graphics, videos, and other interactive digital elements. All these could be contained in a slide deck and sent out virtually with a single web link and used immediately in

the virtual classroom through share screen. In physical classrooms, we knew complicated activities with rich supporting materials would not be practical. For teachers to prepare, set up, and execute an activity with multiple printed or digital elements would be too complicated, and for us to prepare and distribute them would be too time-consuming and complicated. We also knew that teachers did not have the same need for long activities that would help them fill their lesson plans. They were eager to get back to more familiar modes of practicing and rehearsing together in the class.

This changed how we were thinking about *what* and *how* we needed to communicate our ideas and goals. Where our digital Social Curriculum activities were expansive, thorough, and comprehensive, to make sure everyone had enough material to work with in their classes, our Theory and Musicianship materials would need to be concise, adaptable, and open-ended, to make sure they were easy to integrate into busy classrooms. Support materials would also need to be simple, easy to produce, and easy for teachers to adapt for their own ideas and lesson plans. Our ideal digital activity was a game or a puzzle, but for this we needed something more like a flash card.

We had printed materials on index cards in the past, for in-person Social Curriculum activities and even card games. They were the right size for the bite-sized activities we wanted to use, and they could be easily and affordably printed on our office printer. Working with a restricted amount of space made it easier to figure out how to keep the activities short and sweet, forcing us to use the simplest and clearest language possible, and support materials could be prepared in the same format in the form of flash cards. On the other hand, there were some technical challenges. Mass producing the index cards was fussy and time consuming, and distributing would still be a problem.

Next month we'll talk about how these and other considerations led us back to a digital format, and how Style and Teamwork figure into our curriculum development process.