



MUSIC *as* Teaching Tool

*Looking to Broadway's Hamilton as a
model for enhancing education in Ameri-
can schools.*

BY BROOKE HARRISON

Music – can it impact academic learning? We have a number of examples tying music to academic subjects like math or history, but I believe none are better than the current musical called *Hamilton*.

Lin Manuel-Miranda’s Broadway musical has taken the world by storm. Inspired by the biography of historical figure Alexander Hamilton, the play tells the story of the founding father through song and dance. The musical incorporates a wide variety of musical styles, including hip hop, rap, R&B, jazz, and more.

The musical is a wildly popular example of music’s ability to transform the way we learn. And coupled with its success in capturing the interest of younger generations, *Hamilton* proves that music could be an extremely beneficial tool for helping students learn academic concepts. But how?

Research has proven that music impacts both memory and mood. In other words, music is both enjoyable and a memorization aid.

Music helps students commit concepts to memory, thanks to repetition and rhythm. In his book “The Mozart Effect for Children,” author Don G. Campbell writes, “the material melds to the music.” He points to our ability to remember our Social Security numbers with fixed rhythms. In this way, music allows students to bundle groups of information so that more material can be stored in their memories.

Hamilton meets both of these

criteria. Repetition and rhythm are staples of the hip hop and rap music genres. The lyrics follow complex, fast-paced patterns.

In fact, creator and star Lin Manuel-Miranda admitted, “You could do a *Les Mis*-type musical about Hamilton, but it would have to be 12 hours long, because the amount of words on the bars when you’re writing a typical song – that’s



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maybe got 10 words per line.”

Particular characters and plotlines have their own tunes which are repeated throughout the play, but with new lyrics each time. This gives the audience an opportunity to identify each character according to their attached tune or musical genre, which is often thematic.

For example, King George performs three short songs to the same piece of music, a humorous

sort of British breakup ballad. Lin Manuel-Miranda thought this was appropriate because it portrays the king’s attitude toward his lost subjects, the people residing in the American colonies.

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But what’s interesting is that the purpose of the play is to entertain, to tell a story, not to teach a history lesson. And yet, the audience walks away with a significantly increased understanding of the life and times of Alexander Hamilton, US founding father and Secretary of the Treasury.

Therein lies the second benefit of using music as an academic tool – it’s enjoyable and accessible. We

could make the simple conclusion that ‘having fun’ equates to being in a better mood. Campbell writes, “Listening to music has been shown to slow the listener’s heart rate, activate the brain waves of higher-order thinking, and create a positive, relaxed, receptive state of mind that is ideal for learning.”

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Hamilton creates an emotional connection between its audience and its content. How does the play make its audience care about a guy who’s been dead for a long, long time? Certainly we could say this is due to Miranda’s portrayal of

Hamilton as a sort of “everyman,” a hero with strong passions and desires, strengths and weaknesses. Hamilton’s story of working his way up from the bottom is representative

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of the American Dream.

But we must also give credit to the music itself – hip hop and rap are relevant and current genres of music. We’re entertained – younger generations especially – because

it’s the music we download and the music we hear on the radio.

And if music like *Hamilton* is serving two purposes, to entertain and to educate, that’s incredibly powerful. This play is evidence of the opportunity we have to make changes in academic classrooms and to inspire a love of learning in our students.

Of course, music is not the only method of teaching, and I’m not trying to argue that music should be the primary method. But we could certainly use it more.



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