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10. LANGUAGE POWER

Saying More with Less through Songwriting

INTRODUCTION

As singer-songwriter Mary Gauthier explained in her thick New Orleans accent to me during the summer of 2015, "you need to put the pot back on to boil a little longer." She was right. Mary's words helped me not only improve the song I was working on, it also helped me improve my writing. To return the pot to boil is to simmer down the wasted words, weak words, extra syllables, and non-critical ideas until the only thing on the lyric sheet left is pure. Mary's care and guidance as a teacher were just as inspirational as her songwriting. And, although I attended her three-day workshop to learn about songwriting not about how to teach young people to write more effectively, I ended up learning a great deal about both.

Writing teachers across the world might agree that one skill—the ability to say more with less—is one they'd like all of their writers to hone. The scene from *A River Runs through It* stands out in my memory as Norman Maclean's father asks him to rewrite his paper several times, each time "half as long" as the previous draft. I've asked students to rewrite or revise pieces over the years only to experience serious meltdowns. Taking ideas and revising them into more powerful language is a critical skill for good writing. For songwriting, it's essential. While most writing teachers have likely faced the opposite problem as well—parsimoniously short responses to writing prompts, wide margins, bigger font, and triple spacing—the skill of attempting to urge writers to say more with less rests at the center of this chapter.

Other chapters in this collection clearly demonstrate that there's practically an unlimited potential for music in the teaching of English. This shouldn't surprise anyone. It only makes sense that as teachers of language and literacy, we honor what our students are consuming and when possible, invite those rich texts into our classrooms. Because music had motivated me to pay closer attention to language as a student and had motivated me in many other facets of my life, I started using music to teach English almost immediately upon entering the classroom in 2000. In the 16 years since, I've both written and presented on variations of the topic extensively and continue the practice at every opportunity. Many of my own uses for music in the classroom started with Utilitarian and Cultural Capital approaches,

L. L. Johnson & C. Z. Goering (Eds.), Recontextualized, 141–152.

ideas that could help me reach my students and teach them English with fewer tears involved. Beginning in 2011 my ideas in these terms expanded as I was introduced to the world of arts integration, a concept that has changed my practice as a teacher—involving music and other art forms—more than any other single idea I've encountered to date—it's led me embrace songwriting as a possible endeavor in English class.

According to the John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts, the concept of arts integration is specifically defined as "an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. Students engage in a creative process which connects an art from and another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both" (p. 1). The term arts integration is thrown around much more often with less precise definitions and though strict, this one helps remind me that students must meet evolving objectives in both an art form and in the subject being taught. This differs from arts-enhanced practice in which a teacher attempts to teach something by introducing art to it. Every chapter within this volume meets the standards for arts enhancement, for example, but only two chapters—this one and Tim Duggan's, could be considered arts integration. This isn't to say that arts enhanced teaching is less valuable than arts integration but the distinction of learning and demonstrating increasing skill in an art form appeals greatly to me. A third way of thinking about art in school is the concept of arts as curriculum, which refers to classes like band or music. To recap, art exists in schools in three central ways: enhancement, integration, and curriculum.

One aspect of arts integration—an example of a recontextualized approach to teaching English with music—is the concept that students are specifically creating something. While recontextualized uses of music in the classroom can look different than the examples at hand and can push students to mix and mash musical and other texts into a new composition, the heart of the approaches are all to put students in the driver's seat, creating something new to demonstrate their understanding and knowledge of a concept and an a form.

Nathan Strayhorn and I recently (Goering & Strayhorn, 2016) related experiences moving students towards songwriting that we'd both independently and collaboratively attempted. We had varying degrees of success and met considerable resistance along each path, as students ultimately felt challenged by the concepts of songwriting. For us (Goering & Strayhorn, 2016), songwriting was an enactment of arts integration:

> What we find particularly refreshing about arts integration is that there are few limits. In an education world where it often seems like the only goals that matter are ones that can be quantitatively measured, we see possibilities in the evolving nature of students pursing an art form. (p. 34)

It is through this window of arts integration that my practice has become recontextualized and through which I've seen the potential for students creating musical compositions as a truly innate part of ELA.

RETURNING TO SCHOOL

While I haven't worked as a full-time classroom teacher since 2005, I've continued to make it a priority to spend time each year in other people's classrooms working with adolescents. The benefit of a semester away from teaching and service at the University of Arkansas in 2016 allowed me an entire month to spend with a group of 10th, 11th, and 12th graders at Fayetteville High School. I worked with Amy Matthews, an outstanding 12th grade and creative writing teacher at the school. We'd met through student teachers she'd graciously hosted in her classroom and my work with her in that capacity caused me to invite her to attend an invitational summer institute of the National Writing Project. She continues to be a wonderful mentor teacher to the preservice teachers with whom I work.

Fayetteville High School has the distinction of being the first high school in the old confederacy to integrate, a feat they enacted just days after the Brown v. Board of Education decision. While the forced integration of the Little Rock schools, specifically of Little Rock Central High School a few years later, continues to rightfully garner the most attention in the history books and other accounts, Fayetteville was first in all of the south. I surmise that since it was a peaceful experience, it is often forgotten.

In almost all of my previous school-based interactions since leaving the classroom, I was introduced as a teacher or professor and was positioned as such whether I was inviting students to write, to participate in Socratic Circle discussions, or working with them through the window of research. This was different—I was introduced as a singer-songwriter but one who was there for teaching purposes; I was a teaching artist.

I think it important to note a caveat to this work before moving forward—one does not need to be a musician to be successful in getting students to create music. Conjuring up a classic vision of Jimmy Driftwood writing and singing "The Battle of New Orleans" to his students in rural Arkansas in the 1950's isn't likely too helpful. Plus, since he was the one creating the music and singing it to his students, the practice would fit into the Utilitarian—using music to teach something—part of the *Recontextualized* framework. I am a musician and singer-songwriter but have prepared this chapter in thinking that most readers won't fall into that same category—my full-time teaching experience all occurred before I fancied myself a songwriter and thus I prepared this chapter with my former self in mind.

Who Are My Students?

Before beginning the songwriting unit with Ms. Matthews' students, I asked the students in the creative writing class to complete a questionnaire in hopes of learning what experiences and background they brought to our unit of study. I discovered that one student had gained a fair amount of local notoriety as a singer-songwriter, had published songs to YouTube, and was known, at least in part, by the guitar case

he carried around school most days. In complete contrast, multiple students also confessed that not only had they never written a song before but that they were terrified of and/or disinterested in the prospect, a healthy dose of reality for me. One young man, Kenny, stopped me before class on the first day to let me know that he wouldn't be participating; I begged him to give it a chance. The results of the questionnaire, along with my previous experience attempting similar projects (see Goering & Strayhorn, 2016), informed me that I'd need plenty of scaffolding to get all of the students to ultimately write and share a song. As the unit began, I held two overarching goals for each student in class—that they would develop skills that would help them be better writers in general through our focus on saying more with less and that they would develop and share a song with the rest of the class.

Getting Started, Warmed Up

As silly as it might sound, one of the first activities that I asked the students to participate in was simply singing children's songs together. I asked them to do this for several specific reasons, including to build community in the classroom, and to start to understand what different song structures look and sound like. We disturbed the class next door with "I'm Bringing Home a Baby Bumble-Bee," "Old Macdonald Had a Farm," "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" and others. Looking out at this class of cool high school kids singing songs all I could see were smiles. When people make music and take risks in front of their peers, I maintain that tremendous opportunities are created for teaching and learning.

For homework during the first week, students were asked to return with an example of writing that fit their ideas of what saying more with less meant. I allowed them to bring anything and many chose poems or excerpts from novels they were currently reading. We shared each of them and discussed them as a class, starting to get our heads around the idea of what *saying more with less* meant.

Next, I took a page from Tim Duggan's playbook (see Duggan's chapter, p. 66) and had the students read the excerpt from Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* in order and then create music to words. Instruments were welcome and I raided my daughter's drum kit for a few rattlers and shakers to add to the students who brought guitars. Some of the groups chose to sing a cappella but each group stood in front of the class and performed Cisneros words with an original tune they'd created. My specific goals with this activity dealt with continuing to develop climate in room while also forcing students to create musically, something most of them confessed to not doing.

Genre Study

With the ultimate goal in mind of each student writing an original song, we began by studying the structure of songs with which students were already familiar. I began

by leading the class in a analysis process that asked them to identify what parts of each song exist in an example I chose called "Able, Baker, Charlie, and Dog" by Joe Crookston. We identified the verse and chorus structure of that song while also counting the syllables of each line. I then asked them to perform a similar task with the songs they'd brought to class that day. We learned that Joe's song used similar structures—verses, pre-chorus, bridge, tag, syllable counts—to their songs. This activity allowed us to build understanding of songs and their structures.

SONGWRITING CHALLENGE NUMBER ONE

Our first challenge was two-fold. First, I asked students to select a structure for a new song based on the structures in their favorite songs, and second, to create a new song using other people's structures. As far as a topic for the song, I offered information about FHS and their place in history as far as integration in the south. When asked, a few students reported knowing about this fact but most did not and thus we spent time reviewing historical documents and various accounts of the experiences of the students who began attending school in 1954 on the very grounds on which we were standing. I issued the challenge to compose lyrics about the events by considering one or a mash-up of their favorite songs as a structure to follow. Once the groups had chosen an approach for their song—we discussed how the story or the concept could be expressed in nearly countless ways—they moved into selecting a structure and composing lyrics.

The results of the songwriting challenge were encouraging and also indicated to me that students had much room to grow. Writing songs as a group of three to four people presented challenges as absences got in the way and group dynamics posed obstacles for collaborating. Most of the songwriters I know do not attempt to co-write a song with three other songwriters and thus the group structure posed limitations and delimitations to the success of the effort. My previous attempts at music integration with different students and circumstances frequently did not meet my expectations and here again, I am reminded of the necessity of "evolving objectives" innate to the Kennedy Center definition of arts integration (Silverstein & Layne, 2010). While some of the students in this class could independently write songs, most of them had little idea how to go about doing that and thus, breaking each of the ideas down into smaller chunks and experiences was important. Songwriting Challenge One allowed for people to learn from one another and the groups all had more musically inclined folks by design, even if they weren't the kid with the guitar.

In terms of how students met evolving objectives, most groups used a recognizable structure in their approach to writing the songs and the groups all tried employing rhyme schemes, some with more success than others. In the following example, one group was able to capture a snapshot of the situation to begin their song, employ a recognizable structure, demonstrate syllable awareness, and use a rhyme scheme.

1954, racial integration
Topeka ed lost, joy across the nation
We won't bench our kids, Faubus
Do you even know how you rob us?
We're Fayetteville; we've got some plans.

All of the groups composed music—either with instruments or with their voices—to accompany their songs and that alone could be considered a success. Three of the six groups had stronger senses of rhythm in their songs and presentations.

Song Analysis Anchor Chart

Our next move was to return to our favorite songs, the excerpts of powerful language that each student brought to class, and to the songs we had composed about the high school and conduct some analysis of them in light of the question, "How do writers say more with less?" The students, working in groups, created a helpful if not exhaustive anchor chart of how writers accomplished word economy and power in their language. Figure 1 below represents the various responses.

Poetic wording
- symbolism
- metaphor
- simile
- personification
- imagery

Ambiguous meanings
Concrete details
Hidden meanings (those that must be inferred)
Authenticity
Repetition
Sense of Place/Setting
Tells a Story
Word Economy (careful with syllables)
Action verbs

Figure 1. Anchor chart on saying more with less

We continued to count syllables and examine structure of songs, this time with the songs the students created. I had a bifurcated focus in doing so—I wanted students to gain exposure to different types of songs and structures and develop a

vocabulary for talking about songs while also setting up an opportunity for them see songs through a lens of analysis.

Structure Sings

It was a songwriting workshop I attended delivered by local singer-songwriter Shannon Wurst that took the approach of leading songwriting by first creating a structure. I've found it to be transformational not only in my teaching approach but also in my own songwriting. By getting a sense a song and then building a structure around which to write it, I spend far less time attempting to jam ideas into spaces they just won't fit. Plus, even if the song changes dramatically during the time I'm creating it, if I'm writing with a mathematical structure in mind, it's easily transferred to other types of songs. While I'm not a huge fan of the five-paragraph essay, it's undeniable to me that the structure of that is something that pervades almost all writing. When I was writing my dissertation, my adviser encouraged me to think about the format as a really long five paragraph essay and songwriting, like other forms of writing, benefits from a sense of structure throughout the composition process. Ultimately for songwriting, if a song doesn't fit into some sort of structure, it doesn't sing.

A second reason that starting with structure is important is that it allows non-musicians to participate fully, especially with the aide of GarageBand and similar programs. With these programs, students can build the entire song, add music, set and change the tempo, and create a shell within which lyrics will fit. This isn't to say that all songs are written this way or that any songwriter should take this approach, depending on their level of expertise. For students new to songwriting, I find it essential that they begin with a structure, even if it is a loose one.

SONGWRITING CHALLENGE NUMBER TWO

Halfway through the second week of a four-week unit, we began in earnest to address the overarching challenge—to write and perform an original song and through that process, say more with less. At this point, students had presented interpretations of Cisneros' work and their own group songs about FHS integration to the class. We'd engaged in a feedback process with the integration songs that asked each group to count syllables, identify techniques to *say more with less*, and to use a structure in the composing process. It's important to note that students who originally held reservations about engaging in the project were all participating in the activities. That said, many of the students still felt apprehensive about attempting to put together an entire song on their own.

Two questions that students asked at the onset of this section of the unit was a) whether or not they could work with others, co-writing songs together, and

b) just precisely what they would be expected to do in terms of presenting it to the class. I returned the second question to the class (while I pondered the first) and asked the class to brainstorm potential methods that students could share their songs. They concluded that there were essentially three ways that would be appropriate for sharing—to sing and play, to invite the class to sing-a-long by projecting the lyrics in front of class, or to video/audio record a performance of the song and play that for the class. I sensed a sigh of relief from the students to learn of their options, perhaps in no small reasons because I invited them to decide what would be acceptable. While the thought of students collaborating on songs was necessary for this unit to come to fruition since many of the students did not possess the musical abilities to accompany their lyrics and truly create a song, I maintained that each student had to produce an original song. Co-writes were welcome but they didn't decrease the ultimate goal of each student creating an original song.

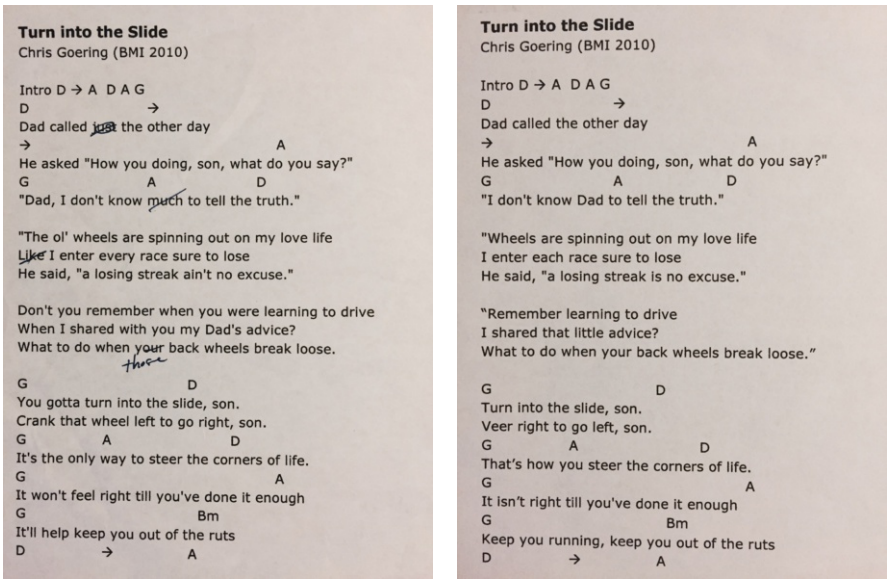
Finding Inspiration

Writers find inspiration everywhere and there are countless books about finding and maintaining inspiration as writers. We began a conversation about how songs are inspired by listing important events, people, and places in our lives to see if anything jumped off the page as worthy of a song. I use the same approach when having student writers complete The Soundtrack of Your Life assignment as they are asked to recount those events, people, and places that made them who they are (see Goering, 2004). It occurred to me that asking students to write something like a personal narrative that highlighted what made them who they are could very well lead to sources of inspiration for a song. The confines of the unit didn't allow for such an exploration and since the students were all enrolled in a creative writing class, I hoped that they could find some inspiration on their own. Spending more time than I did on this section of the unit could be very important depending on the class—there's not much worse than not having anything to write about. In addition to the list, I shared some of the sources of inspiration in my own songs and writing, especially highlighting the instances that literature has inspired songs and the Songs Inspired by Literature project (see Myers & Vest, pp. 114–115 for more information). Students spent the remainder of the day free-writing and working through their ideas in consult with me, each other, Ms. Matthews, and tools on the internet like a rhyming dictionary.

Syllables are Money

While more happened in the day-to-day activities of the unit than can be covered here, I'd like to zoom in on a mini-lesson I created to demonstrate the 'say more with less' motto in terms of songs. I began by sharing my own experience of writing a song I had recently finished and recorded. "Turn into the Slide" was a song inspired by the experience my father had when he lost his father—my grandfather—in

2010. Almost immediately I had a draft of the song but things about it never felt right to me and at times, parts of it seemed lost on audience members. Enter Mary Gauthier. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, it was her songwriting workshop—specifically her feedback—that gave this song and others a new life. By looking at the lyrics I'd created (see Figure 2) more critically and with an eye to every single syllable, I was able to revise and ultimately create a song that said more with less. Gauthier proclaimed that syllables are precious real estate in a song—the most valuable currency in which songwriters deal. After receiving that feedback, I returned to my song to look for wasted words, words that lacked power, and places to increase the white space on the lyric page. "The ol' wheels are spinning out on my love life" became "Wheels are spinning out on my love life," for example. Something as simple as the change in the chorus from "You gotta turn into the slide, son," to "Turn into the slide, son" created tremendous room to sing the song and communicate the messages without the clutter of "you gotta," which adds nothing to the song.



Turn into the Slide
Chris Goering (BMI 2010)

Intro D → A D A G
D →
Dad called just the other day
→ A
He asked "How you doing, son, what do you say?"
G A D
"Dad, I don't know much to tell the truth."

"The ol' wheels are spinning out on my love life
Like I enter every race sure to lose
He said, "a losing streak ain't no excuse."

Don't you remember when you were learning to drive
When I shared with you my Dad's advice?
What to do when your back wheels break loose.
then
G D
You gotta turn into the slide, son.
Crank that wheel left to go right, son.
G A D
It's the only way to steer the corners of life.
G A
It won't feel right till you've done it enough
G Bm
It'll help keep you out of the ruts
D → A

Turn into the Slide
Chris Goering (BMI 2010)

Intro D → A D A G
D →
Dad called the other day
→ A
He asked "How you doing, son, what do you say?"
G A D
"I don't know Dad to tell the truth."

"Wheels are spinning out on my love life
I enter each race sure to lose
He said, "a losing streak is no excuse."

"Remember learning to drive
I shared that little advice?
What to do when your back wheels break loose."

G D
Turn into the slide, son.
Veer right to go left, son.
G A D
That's how you steer the corners of life.
G A
It isn't right till you've done it enough
G Bm
Keep you running, keep you out of the ruts
D → A

Figure 2. "Turn into the Slide" version one (left) and version two (right)

Writing Time

Students were provided with most of three 90 minute block periods to work on their songs, many spending that time in a combination of individual writing time, collaborating with me or one of the other guitar players in class, or in testing out ideas on their immediate peer groups. We took advantage of a nearby classroom

that wasn't in use to divide the writers and those working on music collaboration, a noise and no noise room. Students also found a great deal of support for songwriting on the Internet. From the rhyming dictionary that is freely available online to voice recorders which allowed them to sing parts and then listen back to them, few songwriters work only in paper and pencil today.

Due for Review

"Writing is never finished, it's only due" is a quote I heard attributed to Kelly Gallagher but whether it was Kelly, Constance, Penny, or one of the other luminaries of teaching writing, it's a phrase I live by. For the class' songwriters, it became our motto as well. Our songs were due on Wednesday for peer review and then were to be presented on Friday. In the interest of doing what I ask of student writers, I developed a song during this tight timeframe as well.

Wednesday arrived and the students brought their songs for a peer response group. The model of peer response asked each writer to read or sing their lyrics to the other members of the small groups (<4). I participated in one of the groups as did the host teacher, Ms. Matthews, who was also accepted the challenge of creating a song. Students gave wonderful feedback to one another and to me, providing feedback on what they liked, what questions they had about each song, and finally offering suggestions. With just under 48 hours before the final performances, students were dismissed from class to make final adjustments and to plan their presentations for Friday.

Presentations

Heading into the last day of the unit, I wasn't sure what the presentations would hold. While many of the students had clearly worked diligently at crafting their songs and I'd met with almost each student individually, class attendance was a bit inconsistent and some students had not made as much progress as others. What we all experienced during the presentations, however, was something very encouraging and in some cases, nothing short of inspiring. Ms. Matthews agreed to share her song first and since she wrote it about the songwriting unit in her class, it featured each student's name.

I mentioned earlier that Kenny confessed during the unit that he was fairly terrified of the prospect of writing a song and in all likelihood would not be performing in front of the class. I asked him to give it a chance and promised that I wouldn't ask him to do anything he wasn't comfortable with. I monitored Kenny throughout the unit and wasn't sure before Friday that he was going to have a song finished, let alone be willing to share. He'd been up in front of the class several times with a group and during the second time he actually sang some. On the final day, not only did he present a song but he was also a collaborator with two other small groups, singing background vocals in front of his peers. What stood out to me the most

was the presentation of his own song, something that he had scripted and planned down to the second. Audience members were required to participate and he wrote instructions on the board like a veteran teacher might. Neither his teacher nor others in the school who worked with him ever imagined such a performance. His tune, a full-fledged pirate song, absolutely demonstrated that Kenny was meeting/exceeding a sense of evolving objectives in the art of songwriting.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Not everything about this unit or my instruction was perfect, but in the space afforded here I wanted to provide some lessons that could be taken and used to help students begin to write songs in their English classes. While saying more with less is a universal and timeless skill that teachers seek to hone, other experiences I've had working with students to write songs worked to develop skills in narrative writing and reading, respectively. For me, the magical place that students go when they are invited to create something new is worth the risk that some students won't take to it or the natural vulnerability we feel as teachers in situations when we are doing something that makes us a little uncomfortable. What's more, the act of music integration, of advancing objectives in class and in the art form of songwriting is something about which I can't speak highly enough.

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LESSON PLAN

"Songs that Say More with Less"

Instructional Goal

The goal of this brief lesson is to help students understand some of the techniques that songwriters use to deliver a powerful message in a short amount of space.

Introductory Hook

Prior to this lesson, engage the students in a brief conversation about what they consider to be examples of powerful language. Following that open-ended discussion, ask that each student bring song lyrics to a song they like/admire that also embodies a sense of saying more with less.

Teacher Tasks

Prepare five alternative sheets in the case that students forget to bring their lyrics the next day. Here's a short list of artists that I like that do this, though feel free to use others: Mary Gauthier, Jason Isbell, James McMurtry, Stevie Nicks, John Moreland, John Prine, and Joni Mitchell.

Activities

1. At the beginning of class, ask each student to briefly introduce their song and tell why they picked it.
2. In groups of three, ask the students to look more closely at each set of lyrics and to start to list what techniques each songwriter is using.
3. Mix the groups and repeat step 2.
4. Have each group create a list of the techniques present in their songs and then ask that one representative lists it on the board.
5. Together as a whole class, examine and discuss the techniques listed and create a class anchor chart for 'saying more with less.'
6. Ask that each student in class, creates one goal for their writing based on this activity. Students will share the goals with each other and post them somewhere in the room before the end of class.