

Non-Traditional Music (NTM) Survey Results from Teachers of Technology-based Music Classes

David Brian Williams (dwilliam@ilstu.edu)
Emeritus Professor of Music and Arts Technology
Illinois State University
August 2011

POPULATION

Survey sent to 19 music instructors who had previously submitted profiles on music technology classes in middle school and high school music programs to the website, musiccreativity.org. 14 of the 19 survey invitations responded.

INSTRUMENT

Email with seven open ended questions. The questions were as follows:

The Non-Traditional Music Student (NTMs) may be described as:

1. in the 6th-12th grades,
2. a non-participant in traditional performing ensembles,
3. having a music life completely independent of school music,
4. may or may playing an instrument (if so, likely drums, guitar, or sing),
5. may or may not able to read traditional music notation,
6. possibly unmotivated academically or having a history of discipline problems,
7. may be a special needs student, and
8. may aspire to a career in music recording or music industry.

Questions for your response (rough percentages will be sufficient)

1. First a few demographic points of information:

Number of students in your school?

Average number of students in your technology classes?

Grade levels of students in your technology classes?

2. What percentage of students in your music tech classes are "non-participants in the traditional performing ensembles" in your schools?
3. What percentage of students come into your music tech classes not reading music notation?
4. What percentage of the students come to your class(es) with little or no experience playing a music instrument? If they do play an instrument typically what

type of instrument (keyboard, guitar, drums, traditional band and orchestra instrument, voice)?

5. Of those who are "non-participants" what percentage would you say have an active music life outside of school?

Can you offer any examples of what those activities are?

6. Given the 8 attributes above, how well overall do these describe your non-traditional music students? Please comment on which attributes reinforce your experience from your music technology classes and which attributes you feel are off the mark.

7. Do you feel that this list misses an attribute that should be included?

RESULTS

Question 1. First a few demographic points of information: Number of students in your school? Average number of students in your technology classes? Grade levels of students in your technology classes?

- Number of students in school? Range from 140 to 2650.
- Grade levels: 9-12 (7), 10-12 (4), 9-10 (1), 7-8 (1), and 6-8 (1). Essentially two middle school responses and 12 high school level.
- Public vs. Private? From the previous NTM profiles submitted prior to the survey, 3 of the schools responding were private schools and the remaining 11 were public schools.
- Average number of students in technology classes? For those listing one class (9 schools) the number of students ranged from 20 to 45. Others offer multiple classes (2 to 4 different music tech classes), some with 300+ students participating over the school year. This was a poorly worded question in terms of how instructors responded.

Question 2. What percentage of students in your music tech classes are "non-participants in the traditional performing ensembles" in your schools?

Mean response = 82% with a range of 50% to 95%. The 50% from a school where tech specific classes are mostly taken by student in performing ensembles (10% NTMs) and the other classes are "music with tech integration" (50% NTMs). This result as an average comes in close to the 80% of non-performing or non-participating or NTMs found in several other studies and data sources.

Two respondents stressed that the music technology classes do appeal to students

in performing ensembles as well, although a few noted scheduling issues for taking both. One instructor expressed that: “One of the reasons I developed the music technology classes here...was to get the non-participant in formal ensembles and the student who would not usually have a musical experience involved with music. One other reason was to increase the enrollment in the music department.” Another instructor noted that this attribute was “true of many students, but not the rule. Many students in performing ensembles have multi-faceted musical interests.”

Question 3. What percentage of students comes into your music tech classes not reading music notation?

Mean response = 78% with a range of 50 to 95%. Same school as for Question 2 indicated 50% that matched 50% of NTMs in “music with tech integration” classes. One respondent indicate 60% did not read music notation out of 95% NTMs; this was a private school with students in 9-10th grade. One respondent commented, “most read a little, even if only guitar tabs. Most do not read well.” This comment suggests a more precise definition of what is meant by “reading music notation” is needed here.

Question 4. What percentage of the students come to your class(es) with little or no experience playing a music instrument? If they do play an instrument typically what type of instrument (keyboard, guitar, drums, traditional band and orchestra instrument, voice)?

Mean response = 33% with a range of 20% to 95%.

Of the various instruments noted by respondents: guitar (12), piano/keyboard (6), sing or rap (6), traditional band/orchestra instruments (5), drums (3), recorders from elementary school (2).

On instructor from a private school noted “80-90% play something including guitar, keyboard and drums because of school mandates.” Another comment indicated that 25% quit traditional performing ensembles between 6th and 12th grade, with “many playing something at one time.” Another comment indicated that many of the students were “self taught” on instruments.

Question 5. Of those who are "non-participants" what percentage would you say have an active music life outside of school? Can you offer any examples of what those activities are?

Mean response = 28% with a range of 10% to 75%.

In ranked order, the following outside of school music activities were noted by the respondents: rock bands/jamming together/garage bands (10), electronic/computer music making (6), songwriting and composing (4), rapping and hip-hop (3), church music and other community music (3), music lessons or playing at home (3), DJ-ing (2), studio recording work (1), attending concerts (1).

Although the mean response is low, one instructor noted that “many of these NTMs are active consumers of music” stressing listening to music as an activity.

Question 6. Given the 8 attributes above, how well overall do these describe your non-traditional music students? Please comment on which attributes reinforce your experience from your music technology classes and which attributes you feel are off the mark.

Five (5) of the respondents fully agree with the set of attributes. The remaining 9 respondents agree but with comments or exceptions noted. As one instructor indicated, “these attributes describe my non-traditional students completely” or another who said, “spot on” or “these attributes describe my non-traditional students completely! Numbers 2 and 3 are especially appropriate.”

A more extensive comment expressed: “These attributes are great! Our importance as educators cannot be limited by the traditional parameters of the performance ensembles. This may be our primary focus, but many of these non-participant students are active consumers of music.”

Valuable insights come from the comments noted as follows as well as earlier ones cited above:

1. Attribute 6 (academically challenged or discipline issues) and Attribute 7 (special needs student). The following comments were noted:
 - One noted 10% were special ed students and another commented that special needs students were “true of all music classes” suggesting this isn’t a unique attribute for NTMs.
 - Attributes 6 & 7 are “not a result of the music program so much as an attempt by guidance and administration to find places to put these students.”
 - Academically challenged appears as an attribute, an instructor suggests, because guidance counselors realize the nature of these music technology classes “can help these kids” by reputation.
 - “I see the same percentage of “academically challenged” or special needs students as any other teacher. The difference is that these students know they can succeed musically and usually stay with me in Music Tech for two or three years, while they drop other subjects at the first opportunity.”

- Thirty-five (35) percent of students “placed in my music recording, tech, and composition classes are unmotivated or have discipline problems. But, when they come to my class they are not a problem...due to the hands on nature of the class.”
- “I get the ‘alterna’ and ‘rapper’ kids. I feel these are the kids that ‘dummy down’ in school.... I see changes in them because...music tech teaches them something that they really enjoy, be successful, and not have the fear of ‘losing face.’ They have so much fear of show how smart they are.”
- “Most of my students are NOT poor in academics or discipline. Actually my class keeps discipline problems way down because the kids love working with the computers/ software. All other characteristics [attributes] are true. It seems I get the "alterna" kids and the "rapper" kids.”
- “Those that are afraid to be associated with the social clique of TM students in a school setting” this comment suggests, are more comfortable in a music tech class with other NTM students.
- “#6 is almost ubiquitous. I’ve been known to complain that just once, I’d like a motivated, smart kid. On the other hand, I would rather have a motivated kid of mediocre talent than an entitled prodigy.”

2. A few instructors made comments about the degree of motivation of students in these classes and the extent of their creative instincts, some at odds with one another. Comments include:

- Motivated
 - “Most highly motivated to be there” in music technology class.
 - “Kids that are NTMs are artists in other ‘areas of production.’ Some move into traditional programs over time, and some just live in a studio...as jack-of-all-trades.”
 - “The kids dig the looping stuff, recording and playing piano. What they really dig is learning to play a new instrument (piano, bass, drums) well enough to perform or rapping to the beats they create.”
 - One instructor suggested that motivation was a “missed attribute.” Suggested that these students are “Individually motivated - does not necessarily need approval of others or sense of group as is true of many students in traditional ensembles.”
 - “many of my students are active seekers of new music, rather than passive listeners of the mainstream”
 - Repeating a comment from above, “I’ve been known to complain that just once, I’d like a motivated, smart kid. On the other hand, I would rather have a motivated kid of mediocre talent than an entitled prodigy.”
- Not motivated

- Students, indicate one instructor, are “unable, or unwilling, to work in a truly creative way. They need specific directions and outcomes, and tend to limit themselves to music that is familiar to them.”
3. Attribute 8 regarding future careers in music technology. Comments include:
- “I place approximately 35% off all my most advanced students into college for music recording, tech and composition.”
 - Commenting on #8, this instructor said this attribute shows up and “it always surprises me, because as a traditional music student, I never thought I could do anything in the music world. I think it’s the influence of American Idol.”
 - “Do have some students who are music majors who want to learn the technology to increase their music background.”
4. Gender issues. One instructor noted a bias toward boys being more interested in the music technology classes as a possible attribute or sub-attribute.

SUMMARY and DISCUSSION

Demographics. The sample drew from a reasonable range of school settings private and public, middle and high school, and large and small. The majority of the sample offers one technology-based music class with 20 or more students. A few programs have expanded to multiple tech-based classes with much larger student enrollment over the course of the year. At least one other school in the NTM profiles that did not respond to the survey is reported as reaching some 60% of students in the high school with multiple class offerings in music technology and recording. The prompt for the “average number of students” in a music technology class was poorly written and needs to be more specific.

Attribute 1: 6th through 12th Grade Students. From the survey all respondents agreed with this attribute and the evidence from the survey and from the online profiles supports that potential and enrolled students in music-tech based classes are present from middle school through high school, grades 6-12.

Attribute 2: Percentage of Non-Traditional Music (NTM) Students. The results from this survey with a mean percentage of NTM students of 82% models the 80% of non-performing or non-participating or NTMs found in several other studies and data sources. The range in response of 50 to 95% reflects the variety of settings in which the tech-based music classes are offered. As noted, private schools may have a music instrument performance requirement for all students, some tech-based

classes may have a bias toward more traditional music students while others are specifically targeted to NTM students, and in some schools scheduling may not permit ensemble participation and music technology class participation.

So the “Other 80%” found nationally with other data may well represent the norm for those students who do not participate in traditional ensembles, however, a high degree of variability will be found depending on each school or district priorities, and the initiative and the teaching strategy of the instructor who chooses to implement a tech-based music class.

One additional variable noted by a respondent is gender, boys more than girls are attracted to the music tech classes. This merits further research.

Attribute 3: A Music Life Independent of School Music. The results for this Attribute were not confirmed by these data. On the one hand most all respondents agreed with the set of attributes. On the other hand the mean percent of NTM students have an active music life outside of school was 28%. The results were, as noted, highly variable with a range of 10 to 75%.

Examining the outliers, the 75% came from an instructor who considers listening to music as consumers part of “outside music life,” a 65% rating was from a teacher who actively works with students to be involved with community recording studios, and a 50% rating came from an instructor who has a more integrated approach to integrating technology into traditional music teaching. With these three outliers removed, the mean percentage of students with an active music life outside of school drops to 19%.

While at first face the data suggest dropping this attribute for NTMs, upon reflection it suggest that the trait is more likely that only a small portion of NTMs have an active music life outside of school where they are performing in some fashion; further, that it is highly likely that the are, as the one instructor noted, are active consumers of music through listening. This researcher has extracted data related to music activity from a longitudinal study of substance, *Monitoring the Future*, at the University of Michigan. When students were asked how often they attend a music concert, in 2009, 50% of 12th graders said a few per year, only 7% one or two a month or daily, and 43% indicated “never.”

It is recommended for further study that “music life” needs to be operationalized to better define the types of activities youth engage in as participants or consumers.

Attribute 4: Percentage not playing an instrument or singing. The data report a more robust number of students playing or singing than originally anticipated with 67% reported. Again, there is wide variability in the data on this attribute. It does corroborate data extracted by this researcher from a longitudinal study of substance, *Monitoring the Future*, at the University of Michigan, where they asked students if

they played or sing. The 2009 study found some 50% of the students report playing or singing at least once or twice a month if not weekly or daily.

Attribute 5: Percentage not reading music notation. These data seem to confirm Attribute 5 that a high percentage of students not reading music notation, mean response 78% in a range of 50 to 95%. Again, there is variability depending on instructor and school bias in terms of the goals of the music curriculum, but the one respondents comment that “most read a little, even if only guitar tabs. Most do not read well” supports this attribute. Also, the respondent who pointed out the trend of dropouts from traditional ensembles from grades 6-12 suggests that some students do get some music reading experience. Given the nature of the out of school music experiences noted in the survey responses, the data confirm what has been documented elsewhere (cf. Lucy Green’s research) that popular music doesn’t demand music reading skills and may rely more on guitar tab notation, chord progressions, and other shorthand systems.

Attribute 6: Unmotivated academically or having a history of discipline problems. From the open-ended responses this attribute appears to be valid. Further insight into this trait reveals several considerations. First guidance counselors often put academically- or discipline-challenged students in these class because they don’t fit elsewhere or, by reputation, the teacher and the class content provides a rewarding experience for them. Several noted the “hands-on” component of the music tech class that works for this population, others noted that expressing music through performance or creating music in genres familiar to them offers a way for them to step outside of the “dummy down” shell and receive confirmation from a peer group they are comfortable in. There is research evidence from other academic disciplines demonstrating that technology-based classes help this population of students (need to document these).

Attribute 7: May Be A Special Needs Student. Of all the attributes this is one that the responses suggest dropping completely. Most compelling is the point expressed that Special Ed students are an instructional issue in all music classes, not just music technology classes and are not uniquely NTM students. However, one might argue that special needs students are able to express themselves musically through the help of music technology where they could not participate in traditional performing ensembles.

Attribute 8: May Aspire To A Career In Music Recording Or Music Industry. The responses from the survey support this attribute with further open-ended confirmation that many students do go on beyond high school to train in the recording or music business industry. The one statement that an instructor places 35% of the students in college for recording, tech and composition is compelling support for this attribute.

Additional Attributes? The responses suggest an attribute related to NTMs being self-motivated learners and highly motivated to music creativity when working in

genres they are familiar with. Interestingly this same self-motivating characteristic was revealed in Dammers' studies of music tech instructors in New Jersey schools and nationally. The one instructor expressed the opposite in that the students are "unable, or unwilling to work in a truly creative way." The key here may be, as was further shared, that they "tend to limit themselves to music that is familiar to them." The motivation entropies when the class is structured in such a way to force them to work in new genres that is unfamiliar.

The results of this study as well as incorporating other work by this researcher including the study of the *Monitoring the Future* data has been written up as a journal article currently being reviewed for publication.