WebQuest: The Elements of Music

Though much more time-consuming than the previous Pinterest project, creating this WebQuest was an enjoyable experience that helped me approach the information in my content area from a new perspective. The topic I chose for my WebQuest – the elements of music – is a broad unit of study that takes up two full weeks of instruction in the course that I am developing. My course revolves around students being able to listen to music critically to pick out important details and then being able to communicate about those details effectively. The content of this unit is incredibly important in building the foundation for that academic vocabulary and in providing students with those details they should be listening for. If students struggle to perceive information about a piece of music or communicate about their perceptions, they will be directed back to the information covered in this unit.

The previous Pinterest project asked students to contemplate the variety and diversity in all of the music they hear. Students engaged with questions about how a society's culture can shape its music, and in turn, how music can define a culture. They began to contrast different types of music and understand how the appreciation of music can be a bridge to building empathy for other cultures. In this WebQuest, students build on this knowledge. They begin to confront the fact that despite all the apparent differences in the music they heard in the Pinterest assignment, all types of music, no matter where they come from, have some things in common with all other types of music. These things are the elements of music, the fundamental building blocks of the art form. Different musical cultures sometimes use these building blocks in vastly different ways and to varying degrees, but they can still be identified and communicated about.

An entire two-week unit of study (or longer) could be completed on each of the six elements of music I identified in this WebQuest, and this could have been accomplished with

PowerPoints, worksheets, scores of listening examples, and essays. The WebQuest format allowed me instead to think about what I really wanted students to be able to accomplish when working with the elements of music: namely that they could synthesize their knowledge the same way that actual composers do and create a musical artifact that itself contains each of the elements. I was mindful that students may not have any musical experience before taking this course, so it took a great deal of time and research to find materials and tools that could both isolate the elements of music and synthesize them without requiring professional know-how.

The final musical artifact that was the objective of this WebQuest was going to be a short song of some kind that students could create. This tool had to be free, accessible online with no download necessary, and it needed to be in the style of a sequencer tool that could allow students to rely on their ears rather than any theoretical knowledge. There also needed to be a way for students to share their creations with the teacher or other students. I settled on an online emulator for the classic Super Nintendo game "Mario Paint" that allowed players to compose real music with their game controller. This game is incredibly engaging and also provided a simple narrative backdrop that could "hook" students from the very beginning of the WebQuest. Most importantly, the online tool has a "low floor" and a "high ceiling," meaning it is very easy to learn and students can begin creating compelling music right away, but there are almost no limits to what students can create if they really put their minds to it (as evidenced by the YouTube playlist of impressive songs created with this game). When students have completed this WebQuest, they should not only feel more comfortable talking about the elements of music and perceiving how composers and songwriters use them to create high-quality music, but they should also feel more confident in their own music-making abilities. With luck, students will realize that expressing their creativity is not as challenging as they might have believed.