

TUNE IN MEMORY

Music can help students learn any subject and they love it!

JOAN MAUTE

Memory - we know our students have it for they can remember an amazing amount of things: all their friends' phone numbers, statistics of sports teams and players, how much money somebody owes them, and all the words to ALL their favorite songs. But if we have them try to remember something for school, be it as simple as bringing books and supplies to class, or as complex as information for a unit test, all of a sudden, "I can't remember!" or "I forgot," is what we hear. Of course we can't always provide the motivation for memory that comes with phone numbers, money, and sports, but we can take a lesson from our students' favorite songs. Some of the lyrics they remember are actually quite involved, yet they remember them. Why?

The reason song lyrics are easy to remember is because they have the three basic R's: Rhyme, Rhythm, and Repetition. The rhyming pattern of the lyrics coupled with the rhythm and repetition can make even nonsensical words and phrases easy to remember.

That's all fine, but what does it have to do with teaching middle level students? There aren't a whole lot of songs out there on the Top 40 that will help teach science, language arts, social studies, or math. (Actually there are, but that's another article.) Sure, PRIMARY teachers use music to teach all the time, but our kids are different, they won't go along with the "Alphabet Song" idea.. or will they?

Last year my sixth grade son learned the prepositions to the tune of "Yankee Doodle." Ask students at our school to list the helping verbs and you'll get them to the tune of "Mary Had A Little Lamb." Mimi Bieritz, the math teacher on our team, introduced division with "Division Rap" (October, 1986, *Learning* 86). Right now, some of our seventh grade students are writing and performing their own "rap" songs to show what they have learned in social studies. These are just some of the ways music can be used across the curriculum to help students learn and remember information, or, tune in memory.

So let's not worry about how we're going to sell the idea to our students. Once they realize how much time it will save them studying, and how easy it is to remember things in song, they won't worry about the method, they'll just be glad it works.

There are two main ways music can be linked with information to remember. One involves the teacher finding or writing a song to introduce, reinforce, or review material covered in class. The other requires the students to create the song, either alone, in small groups, or as a class activity.

I'm very fortunate, as a singer and songwriter, when I want my students to remember the difference between longitude and latitude, I can just write:

Longitude slices, the long way around,

Latitude slices, climb up or down.

Longitude lines go from pole to pole.

Latitude's parallel that much I know...

(from "How You Slice It," by Joan Maute, copyright 1986, Studio 2, all rights reserved, used by permission)

My students are also used to seeing my guitar in the room, and hearing me sing. But where does that leave the teacher who can't sing, play the guitar, or write new songs? Well, *everyone* can sing, you don't need to play an instrument, and if you can write a test, you can write a song. If you're still not sure about giving this a try, remember you can always go to your music teacher, English teacher, or students for help.

Out of Your Head

Before we go any further, read an example of a song written by regular teachers in a graduate course, "Lyrics for Learning."

TOPIC: *plants*

TUNE: "*This Old Man*"

MAGICAL FOOD MACHINE by Lib Hauser, Nancy Krause, Linda Martins, Eva Exhuomel, and Nancy Wong

1) *How do plants make our food?*

Photosynthesis sets the mood. It starts with sunlight, that's the energy.

It produces food that's good for me.

2) *CO₂, H₂O*

That's what helps the plants to grow.

Chlorophyll, the stuff that's super green

Makes the plant a food machine.

You can easily see how this song could be used in science. But you may be wondering how you could go about trying to write something like this. We'll start at the beginning. First, in order for music to be an effective tool in your classroom, it must be one of two things: good or immediate. If you're lucky, you'll be able to write a song that is good and immediate, but if not, one of the two will do.

I should clarify that you really don't

have to write a SONG, just new lyrics to an existing one. Does that make you feel a little more secure? Think back to when you were just a kid, jumping rope. Remember how easy it was to come up with new lines for the jump rope songs? Not only could you do it, but it was fun and you rarely missed a beat. You probably started out by changing a word or two in a line, and soon worked your way up to writing whole new verses. That's what you do with song writing, don't set out to write a twenty verse song about the issues and events that led to the Civil War, start with something simple.

On To The Paper

Think of some facts, information, or ideas that your students have trouble Next select a familiar tune. This is important because if you have no doubt about the tune, you can concentrate on the words. Look at the rhyming pattern before you start your new words. You will want to match that same pattern.

It's a good idea to write down what you want to include in your song before you actually start on the new lyrics. As you include each item, check it off. This way you will be separating the information you want to convey from the creative process and will be less likely to leave out an important item. Let's say you wanted to write a song about mammals, you might follow this format: *TOPIC: mammals*

FACTS: warm blooded

fur on body

born alive

a wide variety

nursed by mother

found on land, sea, and in the air

TUNE: "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy"

MAMMAL MANIA

by R. A. Burtner, L. Doyle, and C. Shaw

I'm a furry, fuzzy mammal. Warm blood flows inside of me.

Most mammals walk upon the land

Except those that swim in the sea. (or fly)

I come in many shapes and sizes.

My name can start from A to Z I'm not

hatched, I'm born alive,

I drink milk from my mother. She knows just how to care for me.

Now watch how easy it is to change "Mammal Mania" into a song about birds.

TOPIC: birds

FACTS: warm blooded

feathers on body

fed by one or both parents

a wide variety

swim, hop, fly

nests

BIRD B/O

I'm a fluffy, feathered bird. Warm blood flows inside of me.

Some birds hop along the ground,

Some swim, fly, or build nests in trees.

I come in many shapes and sizes.

My name can start from A to Z.

I am hatched not born alive, I'm fed by my parents, They know just how to care for me

. (This same song can be changed into one about fish, people, snakes, etc.)

Into The Classroom

Once you have written a song, or selected one of the songs in this article to use, what do you do with it in the classroom? Remember, we are not asking our students to replace their music with these songs. Present the song as a way to help your students remember facts they will need. You may want to ask them the information first, and when they have trouble answering, offer the song as a way to conquer the facts. Give them access to the lyrics, either by handing them their own copy, writing the words on the board, or using the overhead projector. Make it clear that they will be expected to know the material contained in the lyrics. If necessary, you may want to lead a class discussion that will give the lyrics greater meaning. Remember, the songs don't teach; teachers teach. The songs are merely used to help teachers teach and students remember.

Out To Your Students And Beyond

What about letting the students write their own songs? way for them to show you what they have learned. You may want to assign verses to be written for "extra credit", or write a verse or two together with your class, using standard brainstorming techniques. When writing with your class, don't overlook the chance to sneak in a language arts lesson; noting when you need to change verbs, nouns, etc. Also remember many of our students are hams at heart. And, since the more they sing the song, the easier it will be to remember, let them perform the song for the class if they want to.

Well, there you have it, some ideas and steps to follow so you can write or use songs that will get your students involved in learning, creating, and remembering. I hope you can take these ideas, add your creativity, subject, students, and special insight to write great songs that will help you and your students tune in memory.

