

DESIGNING ACCESSIBLE INSTRUCTION: MULTIPLE POINTS OF ENGAGEMENT FOR ALL

This article serves as a continuation of “What’s in a Label? An Inclusive Person-First & Strength-Based Approach,” and “How Many Ways? Incorporating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in the Music Classroom for ALL” from previous *School Music News* editions.

What are the accessible tools?

When we think about how we provide access to students in our musical classrooms and ensembles, we may automatically assume this refers only to students with disabilities and special education settings. While there is truth to this, one aspect of accessible musical teaching is that ALL students benefit from it. It is only good teaching practice to approach musical content in a style that reaches ALL types of learners, ALL the time.

So, what are these accessible approaches? You may already be familiar with some of them, as they are prevalent in our professional development topics and within the literature regarding engaging diverse student populations. These approaches include:

- Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (multiple means of engagement, representation, action and expression).
- Multisensory Learning (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile).
- Assistive Technology.
- Task Analysis (breaking things down into smaller steps or chunks).
- Conceptual Learning (using real-world ideas to build connections).

These strategies, combined with a strength-based approach, help us create accessible learning environments for ALL. Three questions we can consider when using these tools are: How many ways can we engage our students? How many access points can we present to our students? How many access points can our students use to demonstrate their knowledge back? These three questions directly connect to UDL.

This may sound practical and easy, but there is a gap between understanding these tools and implementing them into an engaging lesson for ALL. There is a scaffolded process for developing accessible instructional goals in our classrooms. This process includes creating a clearly written

learning objective; identifying unintentional barriers in the content, environment, materials, or teaching; finding multiple access points for students to engage; and redesigning the goal into an accessible learning objective.

Planning and goals

When we think about creating engaging and meaningful lessons, it ALL originates with planning and goals. Music teachers must ensure that their lessons are high quality and standards based. For most, this would mean directly aligning with the New York State Learning Standards for the Arts (NYSLSA) or the National Core Arts Standards (NCAS). An easy way to think about engagement is to connect it directly to the four artistic processes in both the NYSLSA and NCAS (Create, Perform, Respond, and Connect). ALL the accessible strategies previously mentioned can directly tie into the NYSLSA and NCAS, especially UDL.

In her updated book, *Approach for Teaching Music to Diverse Learners*, pioneer music educator Dr. Elise Sobol mentions:

As a classroom practitioner, I saw that the principles of UDL worked hand in hand with our NCAS. Following the lead of our developers of cornerstone assessments, in designing standards-based lesson plans the music teacher can associate the UDL principle Multiple Means of Action and Expression with the NCAS process of Creating; the UDL principle of Multiple Means of Representation with the NCAS process of Performing/Presenting/Producing; the UDL principle of Multiple Means of Action and Expression with the NCAS process of Responding; and the UDL principle of Multiple Means of Engagement with the NCAS process of Connecting. The practices are embedded in the arts standards. (Sobol, 2025).

No matter the population of students we are teaching, we must ensure that our high-quality and standards-based lessons are rigorous, scaffolded, set high expectations, allow multiple ways to make music, and incorporate student voice and choice. In addition, music teachers should consider using music that our students connect with; provide opportunities for students to make cultural and historical connections; use music that is representative and authentic of our student population; and use music to build meaningful lifelong connections.

When we have set in place high-quality and standards-based ideas, we can begin developing our learning objectives or goals through backward planning. Nevertheless, many music teachers struggle when developing clearly articulated learning objectives. Our goals need to be clearly defined, measurable, observable, reachable, and teachable. Too often, the language is unclear, which can affect the lesson's overall goal and, therefore, student performance.

One recommendation in supporting the development of clearly worded learning objectives is the book *Preparing Instructional Objectives* by Robert Mager. For example, I use the ideas from this book with my pre-service music education students in developing their learning objectives. Each objective has five parts, and needs to be clearly defined and broken down. Once each area is determined, ALL of the pieces can be plugged in together to create a one-sentence goal. It is like using a formula where you can insert the information to ensure all parts are included and the goal is clearly stated.

Who?	How are students grouped?	e.g., individually, in pairs, in small groups, as an ensemble, with adult assistance/prompts, etc.
What?	What is the specific musical skill?	e.g., performing repertoire with legato and staccato sections
How?	How are they demonstrating it?	e.g., singing it, playing it on their instrument, describing it, using movement to show it, etc.
How well?	How well will they show you?	e.g., is it a percentage, is it a certain amount of errors they may make?
When?	When will they show this to you?	e.g., by the end of the class period, the end of the week, unit, etc.

This tool can help to break down each part and develop clearly defined learning objectives. *Brian Wagner-Young © 2025 Teacher Designed Materials.*

Unintentional barriers

Once we have a clearly articulated goal, we next need to consider the barriers in the lesson. I prefer to use the term “unintentional barriers,” as they are usually not intentional. This takes a lot of practice and self-reflection to consider what aspects of the lesson, environment, materials, or teaching delivery can pose a barrier for our students. Teachers must remember that it is not that our students cannot do the task; rather, there are barriers preventing success that need to be removed. Moreover, once the barrier is removed, every student benefits.

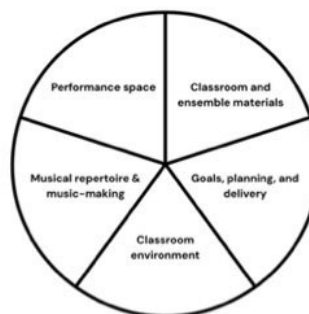
I have selected five areas where unintentional barriers can prevent our students from engaging fully in music. These include classroom and ensemble materials; goals, planning, and delivery; classroom environment; musical repertoire and music-making; and the performance space. Consider the barriers that may exist in each of these areas for yourself. Everyone will have a different list, as their teaching situations are vastly different.

For example, an unintentional barrier could be that you are using rhythm sticks with a class, but a student does not yet have the muscle dexterity to hold the sticks or tap them together. Therefore, either an adapted instrument would need to be used or a different way for this student to make music would need to be found. In this example, the unintentional barrier lies within the classroom and ensemble materials.

A second example could be that your music classroom has an echo, which creates sensory overload for one of your students. Noise-cancelling headphones may be needed to help the student process the information you want without the distracting echo. In this example, the unintentional barrier occurs within the classroom environment.

A final example is that you are teaching a lesson in only one way and some of your students are not connecting with this singular approach. Therefore, a teacher would need to revise their teaching style to ensure there are multiple ways for students to connect. This unintentional barrier occurs under goals, planning, and delivery.

It is essential that we consider ALL of these different unintentional barriers that may arise or already exist before moving forward. This list will also change depending on the activity that you are doing with your students. The more that we become aware of the barriers, the more we can find accessible solutions.



This pie chart shows the five areas; it is recommended to brainstorm potential unintentional barriers in each region. *Brian Wagner-Young © 2025 Teacher Designed Materials.*

Designing accessible learning objectives

The next step in this process is to take the original goal and combine the unintentional barriers with it. This is where we can apply the accessible strategies mentioned earlier (e.g., UDL, multisensory learning, assistive technology, task analysis, and conceptual learning) and craft an accessible solution. What we are really doing in this process is taking our original learning objective and redesigning it into an accessible one. “The difference is that we provide multiple different ways for ALL to engage. Remember, for us, engaging connections to the National Core Arts Standards four artistic processes (create, perform, respond, and connect),” (Wagner-Young, 2025).

This entire process consists of six steps. First, we create the original goal. Then, we consider the unintentional barriers.

continued on next page

ers. Next, we consider how many ways we can present the content that we are teaching. In addition, we consider how many ways our students can demonstrate their knowledge back to us. Furthermore, we must consider how students have a voice and choice in the matter. And last, we can revise the goal into an accessible learning objective.

Remember: the goal of this process is to design multiple access points for students to engage. This may seem like a tedious process, but over time, it becomes a learned skill. To ensure that every student has access to learning and can engage in ways that work for them, we must teach ourselves to approach our content through this lens. Gradually, as this becomes ingrained for music educators, we can fade this process out. The goal is to teach ourselves to develop accessible instructional goals consistently for ALL students.

1) What is the original learning objective?	2) What are the unintentional barriers?	3) How many ways can you present the content?
4) How many ways can students show you back?	5) How can you account for student voice and choice?	6) What is the revised accessible learning objective?

This planning tool can guide music educators through the process.
 Brian Wagner-Yeung © 2025 Teacher Designed Materials.

Putting it into action

Let's look at an example. An ICT (integrated co-taught) third grade general music classroom is currently working on a rhythmic accompaniment for the Liberian folk song *Take Time in Life*. The original goal was for students to perform an accompaniment combining quarter notes, eighth notes and quarter rests using non-pitched percussion.

After consideration, the most significant unintentional barrier concerns the decoding of standard musical notation, as students had varying skill levels in the class. To present the content in multiple ways, special consideration was applied including using color-coded notation (green quarter notes, red quarter rests, blue eighth notes); connecting notation to go and stop signs; using various sizes of images to represent rhythm; using visual icons to connect to rhythm syllables (e.g., eighth notes are called pizza, so students saw a pizza slice); and different-sized LEGO® pieces were presented to allow a tactile approach.

When it comes time for students to perform, they have multiple options, including playing their selected instrument; using rhythm syllables; using body percussion; tapping and/or pointing to a printed copy of the visuals; or using gestures/movement. Students were given the option of how they would like to perform the accompaniment to demonstrate

their understanding of the different rhythms. Once applied, the revised accessible learning objective was:

Individually and/or in small groups, students will be able to perform the accompaniment to *Take Time in Life*, combining quarter notes, eighth notes, and quarter rests through non-pitched instruments, body percussion, movement, and/or rhythm syllables with 80% accuracy by the end of the class period.

While the original goal was to have students perform the rhythmic accompaniment, the main unintentional barriers were focused on students' decoding of music literacy. Therefore, consideration was taken to present music literacy in multiple ways and to provide students with multiple ways to perform it back. Students were able to choose which version of information was best for them, as well as how to perform it in a way that connected with them. Finally, we revised the goal into an accessible learning objective.

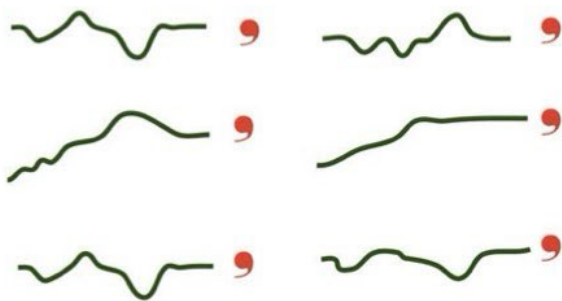
A second example is within an after-school middle school musical theatre program. The rehearsal takes place once a week for two hours, with time split between a music teacher, a dance teacher, and a drama teacher. The music teacher only has about 30 minutes each rehearsal to work on the repertoire. This group of students did not receive formal music education training during their elementary education, so their prior knowledge is limited. Let us imagine the music teacher is working on the song *Jolly Holiday* from the *Mary Poppins JR.* performance kit.

The original goal is for the cast to sing the second half of the song together as an ensemble. Some of the unintentional barriers in this example fall within the area of music literacy, specifically the lack of prior musical training among this group of students. Within this melody is a dotted-eighth-to-sixteenth-note rhythm and a complex melodic contour. To consider presenting the musical notation in various ways we could include teaching the song by rote; breaking down the rhythm using food visuals and size (dotted rhythms could be called ap-ple with a picture of a large and small apple, followed by a quarter note pie); a drawing of the melodic contour using the colors green for singing, and red for breath; having students use movement to follow the shape of the contour as the recording plays.

When it comes to providing multiple ways to perform the music, students can sing; use movement paired with the recording, and/or have others sing; and use their fingers to trace the melody. Gradually, the revised accessible learning objective could be:

As a whole ensemble, students will be able to perform the melody of *Jolly Holiday*, combining dotted eighths to sixteenth notes and quarter notes, through singing, movement, or tracing the melodic contour, with 90% accuracy by the end of the rehearsal period.

In this example, the original goal was to perform the melody. However, the music teacher recognized that the unintentional barriers included the students' lack of musical training and the complexity of the rhythm and melody. The music teacher presented the content in a multisensory way and provided multiple access points for students to engage with the music in ways that were comfortable for them. Gradually, by offering multiple ways to engage, students learned the melody in a way that made sense to them, and this, in turn, helped prepare them for an upcoming performance.



This example shows the accessible melodic contour to *Jolly Holiday* using the colors green and red. Brian Wagner-Yeung © 2025 Teacher Designed Materials.

Designing accessible instructional goals involves multiple steps. First, we must ensure that the instruction and content are high quality and standards based. We then create a clearly defined original goal; identify the barriers; provide multiple access points; offer opportunities for student choice; and set a revised goal that reflects this process. While this framework of thinking is designed to support students with higher support needs, ALL students would benefit from having musical instruction provided in multiple ways. This is how we connect the accessible strategies directly into practice in our classrooms and ensembles for ALL.

Brian J. Wagner-Yeung is the author of the book *The Accessible Music Classroom for All*. He is the Neurodiversity & Accessibility chair for NYSSMA®, teaches for NYC Public Schools, is an adjunct faculty member at CUNY Brooklyn College, and is an independent music education consultant. You can check out his website at www.brianwagneryeung.com to view his work.

References

Mager, R. F. (1997). *Preparing Instructional Objectives: A Critical Tool in the Development of Effective Instruction* (3rd ed.). Center for Effective Performance.

Sobol, E.S. (2025). *Approach for Teaching Music to Diverse Learners: A Neuro-Inclusive Resource* (4th ed., p. 78). Bloomsbury Academic published in cooperation with the National Association for Music Education.

Wagner-Yeung, B. J. (2025). *The Accessible Music Classroom for All* (p. 48). Rowman & Littlefield in cooperation with the National Association for Music Education.

Wagner-Yeung, B. (2024). How Many Ways? Incorporating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in the Music Classroom for ALL. *School Music News*, 88(2), 19-21.

Wagner-Yeung, B. (2023). What's in a Label? An Inclusive Person-First & Strength-Based Approach. *School Music News*, 86(4), 28-30.

Teaching Tips Featured on NAFME's My Music Class!

Here are some examples:

- Designing Effective Rehearsals
- Creating a Student Handbook
- Developing a Relationship with Administration
- Your First Day of Class



Visit musiced.nafme.org/my-music-class to browse tips.