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Editorial Note:

This latest issue of the Journal of Contemporary Society Education (JCSE) arrives at a moment when the boundaries between the academic, the social, and the urgently practical have never been more porous. A glance at the twenty-one articles in this forthcoming collection reveals a publication that understands its mandate: to serve not merely as a repository of scholarship, but as a sharp, coherent lens through which to examine the pressing complexities of contemporary society, with a firm grounding in education as a transformative force.

What distinguishes this issue is its refusal to settle for disciplinary comfort. The contributions, drawn from institutions across Africa, demonstrate a welcome intellectual restlessness. We see scholars interrogating the intimate, such as Mudau et al.'s exploration of language as a source of family conflict within Vhavenda families alongside those grappling with structural questions, such as Sikwela and Diedericks' critical look at performance management as "a mirror of inertia" in public administration. This range is not a sign of incoherence; it is a testament to the journal's understanding that societal education occurs in classrooms, in homes, in municipal water governance (as Zulu and Nojiyeza's work on Zululand shows), and in the very language we use to communicate.

Several pieces stand out for their conceptual bravery. Maungedzo's reframing of academic literacy through sociocultural theory for rural teacher development tackles a perennial challenge with fresh theoretical rigour. Similarly, Lubombo and Zethi's work on "linguistic justice" and the Disciplinary Literacies framework asks a question that South African higher education can no longer afford to postpone: how do we re-imagine instructional communication not as a barrier, but as an equitable foundation? These are not abstract debates; they are core pedagogical interventions.

The journal also demonstrates a commendable commitment to surfacing marginalised voices and experiences. Nkumane's exploration of intersectionality and the lived experiences of Black women scholars at UNISA, and Sibango's ethnographic look at how belonging is negotiated in Anthropology departments, remind us that the university itself is a site of intense social contestation. When Lekoa and Nojiyeza connect off-campus housing to "ecologies of distress" affecting student mental health, they do what good contemporary scholarship must: they trace the material conditions of life directly into the outcomes of education. If there is a through-line to this collection, it is the insistence that no social phenomenon, whether climate governance under the AU (Yemisi and Ani), the antinomies of decolonisation in literature (Moopi), or the gendered nexus of marital status and poverty (Dunga), exists outside the purview of rigorous inquiry. The JCSE is building a platform where scholars can hold those complex phenomena up to the light.

This volume does not offer easy answers. It offers something more valuable: a coherent, sharply focused set of questions, pursued with methodological care and regional relevance. For a journal of contemporary society and education, that is precisely the work that matters.

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MUSIC AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL AND EPISTEMOLOGY WITHIN A MULTILITERACIES APPROACH TO UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

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Abstract

Music remains an underexplored resource in university classrooms despite its potential to facilitate learning in several ways. Music not only possesses instrumental value as a learning aid, fostering content retention, engagement, enjoyment, and creativity. Introducing music into learning can also positively disrupt educational practices skewed towards text-centric and linear forms of logic, and can enrich knowledge offerings with affective and embodied forms of knowing, challenging assumptions of what counts as legitimate knowledge. This article investigates the educational benefits of music in university education from both perspectives. It investigates the instrumental and epistemic benefits of music by reviewing available research on the topic before presenting impressions gained from experimenting with music in academic literacy lectures at the North-West University. A social semiotic multiliteracies perspective underlies both parts of the research. A multiliteracies approach to literacy promotes multimodality, i.e. engagement with sound, gesture, and visuals besides written and spoken language, and frames literacy as a dynamic and socially rooted phenomenon. The research ultimately argues that a multiliteracies approach to not only literacy, but education generally, can afford music deserved space as both a pedagogical instrument and legitimate epistemology in university classrooms.

Keywords: *music as a tool, music as epistemology, multiliteracies, multimodality, academic literacy,*

1. Introduction

The literature review that follows shortly suggests that employing music in teaching and learning offers several benefits, such as supporting memorisation; facilitating interaction, motivation, and engagement with learning materials; promoting enjoyment and a relaxed classroom atmosphere; unsettling classroom hierarchies and lessening the distance between lecturers and students;

promoting social harmony and community; encouraging the cultural and social embeddedness of educational content; fostering creative, adaptive and critical learning; and enriching the modal offering of educational material in ways that reflect contemporary information consumption and production realities. Despite these benefits, music remains an under-exploited resource in university classrooms and an under-researched topic in tertiary-level educational

scholarship. Most literature on the educational role of music (outside of music education itself) appears to be concentrated in the fields of early education and, to a lesser degree, second language acquisition. The tendency for music's educational function to be emphasised in children's education and its scarcity in tertiary-level pedagogical literature has implications for the way legitimate knowledge is conceived in university contexts. Universities often promote textual-rational epistemologies in which written argument, linear logic, or job-oriented knowledge are stressed. Music's operation through affect, embodiment and rhythm offers epistemic resources that do not easily find a place in what are considered to be "serious" knowledge ecosystems although music's modal affordances can facilitate creativity, innovation, and critical and divergent thinking, which are highly valued in both academic settings and industry.

This article argues that extending the modes of information and knowledge with which students engage through the incorporation of music in education offers two types of benefit. Firstly, it supports learning as a tool to encourage engagement, enjoyment, community, creativity, and so forth. Secondly, its nature as an affective and aesthetic phenomenon offers epistemic resources that can enrich learning in welcome ways and offset the artificially text-centric nature of university education. Regarding the latter, music may even help decolonise curricula by embracing alternative epistemologies that resonate within local cultural knowledge frameworks (see, for example, Seth et al. 2024).

To concretise both types of pedagogical benefit of music, this research discusses experimentation with the incorporation of music in an advanced academic literacy module at the North-West University (NWU), Potchefstroom, in 2025, with classes of between 70 and 200 students. The departure point for this approach was a need to find ways to engage students in large classes and a desire to motivate students who typically have a negative attitude towards academic literacy modules. Negative attitudes towards academic literacy are explained by the fact that at the NWU, as at most South African universities, academic literacy is generally taught through compulsory first-year modules that do not form part of students' core curriculum. Furthermore, while students in writing-intensive fields (such as the Humanities) require the skills taught through these modules early on in their studies, they only become relevant within fields such as the hard sciences and commerce much later, leading to a common view that academic literacy modules are useless. The modules are also often perceived as difficult, since many students enter university unprepared by the school system for the literacy demands of university (Khumalo & Reddy, 2021, p. 2; Mudau *et al.*, 2025).

The discussion of the musical interventions used in these classes is reflective and practitioner-based and rests upon the multiliteracies view of literacy inspired by social semiotics roughly three decades ago. This view of literacy was developed by the so-called New London Group, an influential group of ten education scholars that met in London in 1994 to redefine approaches to literacy in response to rapid changes

in society brought on by globalisation and technological development (Lim & Tan-Chia 2023, p. 3). They published their findings on multiliteracy – an approach to literacy that sought to dethrone textual knowledge amid the increasing modal complexity observed in society – in *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures* (1996). The group essentially offered an expanded notion of literacy beyond logocentric language education by emphasising the multiple and multimodal means of meaning creation (and interpretation) in the digital age (Lim & Tan-Chia 2023, p. 3).

The following section elaborates on multiliteracies as an approach to literacy within which music as an educational tool and alternative epistemology can be understood. The section thereafter outlines some of the instrumental benefits of using music based on available literature. Thereafter, the concept of music as epistemology is elaborated, and its implications for the broader implementation of music in education are discussed. Finally, practitioner-based reflections on the instrumental and epistemic functions of music in academic literacy classrooms are presented within a multiliteracies approach.

2. Multiliteracies

As has been mentioned, recognising the multiple modes through which meaning is conveyed in contemporary society underlies the multiliteracies approach to literacy. Instead of viewing literacy as a neutral, technical skill revolving around (standardised and formal forms of) written language, multiliteracies draws upon social semiotics to conceptualise literacy as plural, culturally situated,

multimodal, and dynamic (Chen 2023, p. 13). Within such an understanding of modality, Kress (2009, p. 45) defines a mode as a “socially shaped and culturally given resource for making meaning.” Being literate within a multiliteracies approach requires the effective and appropriate combination and use of different semiotic modes, such as language, image, sound, and gesture, within a given context (Lim and Tan-Chia 2023, p. 5). It also requires effective interpretation of the meaning conveyed via these modes. Social semiotics directed the New London Group towards a so-called “pedagogy of design” in which both teaching and learning, as meaning-making, are conceived as recursive stages of design (Lim and Tan-Chia 2023, p. 7). There are three stages in the design process: “design”, “designing” and “designed”. The term “design” refers to available cultural and semiotic resources, which are drawn upon and shaped in specific contexts in the “designing” stage to produce new outcomes (the “designed” stage) (Lim & Tan-Chia 2023, p. 77). Cultural and semiotic resources may include home languages, musical preferences and digital skills. A literacy informed by social semiotics renders learners active agents in meaning-making processes rather than static receivers of knowledge (Tomlinson 2014, p. 536-537). Learners are therefore not viewed as “acquiring skills”, but as “engaged actors who frame, interpret and respond in infinite ways” (Tomlinson 2014, p. 536). Cope and Kalantzis (2009), original members of the New London Group, reworked the original multiliteracies framework within the so-called Learning by Design framework to describe various knowledge processes. These include

“experiencing” (reflection on the familiar and exposure to the unfamiliar); “conceptualising” (“by naming” – to identifying patterns and “with theory” – to build interpretive frameworks); “analysing” (functionally, to explore causes, effects and reasoning and critically, to unveil biases, motives and power relations); and, lastly, “applying” (appropriately and predictably or creatively, through innovation and so-called transmodal redesign) (Chen 2023, p. 50-51). Transmodal redesign may include interpreting music as dance or written text as spoken discourse and involves “the selection and re-ordering of fresh semiotic resources” (Tomlinson 2014, p. 538). The centrality of creativity within such an understanding of literacy is apparent. The modes offered to learners are compared by Kress to toys such as marbles, dolls and cardboard boxes with which children create fantastical worlds and stories using their creativity and imagination (Lim & Tan-Chia 2023, p. 2). What is given to the child determines what the child can do, since each mode has particular affordances (Lim & Tan-Chia 2023, p. 2). The modal affordances of music that render it particularly useful pedagogically are discussed in the following two sections.

3. Music as a pedagogical tool

As has been mentioned, literature on the pedagogical benefits of music is concentrated in two areas: early education and second language acquisition. The body of literature is also relatively small, pointing towards a need for more research in this field. Many of the benefits of music in education are general, however, rendering them applicable to various educational

contexts. This review highlights the main pedagogical benefits of music as far as they are applicable to tertiary education, drawing mainly on research in second language acquisition, children’s education, and music education.

One pedagogical benefit of music with a very wide application is its ability to improve retention and recall. Sadiqzade (2004, p. 135) shows that rhyme, rhythm, and melody are easier to remember than written or spoken speech. This has been proven by empirical studies such as those by experimental psychologist Wanda Wallace (1994), who tested recall ability and found that spoken text was the most difficult to recall, followed by rhymed text, with melodic text being the easiest to remember. Rhythm breaks language down into smaller, more manageable parts, and the repetition of rhythms creates frameworks that aid memorisation, relying on the brain’s ability to recognise patterns (Sadiqzade 2004, p. 135). Neurological research has shown that music activates various parts of the brain in both hemispheres, most notably those processing memory and involved in learning (Sadiqzade 2004, p. 136). Music not only facilitates recall, but musical strategies also help learners commit knowledge to long-term memory. In the ESL context, Fonseca Mora (2000, p. 148) has found that lexical patterns stored in long-term memory through music can be retrieved easily. Additionally, the tendency for songs to get stuck in one’s head, a phenomenon known as involuntary rehearsal, accounts for music’s ability to promote long-term memory (Fonseca Mora, 2000, p. 150; Khaghaninejad & Fahandejsaadi, 2016). It should be noted

that melody has an affective influence on memory retention. By its emotional appeal, it renders learning more enjoyable and therefore more memorable because of the emotional connection with the learning experience (Sadiqzade 2004, p. 135).

Music's affective potential is a very significant modal affordance that positively influences not only memory, but also learning more broadly. Music elicits joy (Van der Merwe 2025, p. 6), and joyful experiences, in turn, encourage ongoing learning (Van der Merwe 2025, p. 8) and other positive learning behaviours. Writing in the field of psychology, Fredrickson (2004, p. 1369) has found that positive emotions such as joy, interest and contentment "broaden the scopes of attention, cognition and action, and ... build physical, intellectual and social resources". What is described as the "broaden and build" effect thus suggests that positive emotions momentarily broaden one's mindset, encouraging openness to new thoughts and actions. Similarly, Sadiqzade (2004, p. 138) has found that introducing fun into the classroom through music encourages both motivation and confidence, which have obvious benefits for learning. Along the same lines, Degrave (2019, p. 412) has found that music's ability to lighten the classroom atmosphere reders students more receptive to learning. Degrave (2019, p. 412) points out that when music introduces an enjoyable, relaxing atmosphere, stress levels or affective filters are lowered, encouraging learning by reducing stress in university classrooms. Music's potential to introduce fun into classrooms may also help to bridge the hierarchical gap between teachers and

students (Sohrabi 2014), which may positively affect learning by reducing fear of engagement. Regarding affect, there is also the powerful emotional effect of music that may be harnessed for educational purposes. Van der Merwe (2007, p. 178) explains that music is a powerful form of enactive and symbolic representation with a potentially strong emotional impact.

Following from the previous point, music further provides sensory stimulation that fosters an engaging learning environment (Argyriou 2024, p. 70). In this regard, Van der Merwe (2007, p. 176) explains that: "[m]usic can give the learner a multidimensional, perceptual, and interactive" learning experience. This, she adds, is increasingly important in the contemporary media climate (Van der Merwe 2007, p. 190) – an argument supported by the multiliteracies approach. Roa-Trejo et al. (2023, p. 91) note in this regard that

[t]he shift from pencil and paper to screens, the emergence of Recurrent Neural Networks for text generation (such as ChatGPT), or the proliferation of media such as audiobooks, social networks, video game chats and streaming platforms or forums, are events that lead us to rethink what types of language should be taught in educational institutions.

The authors argue that in an increasingly complex modal environment, sound and music should be granted more attention as literacy tools with significant semiotic potential, but are often used merely "decoratively" or are dismissed for their "immaterial and abstract" properties (Roa-Trejo et al. 2023, pp. 91-92).

Music offers excellent sensory stimulation by activating not only hearing, but potentially also sight (when employing music videos or musical performances) and touch (when using musical instruments or dance) (Sadiqzade 2004, p. 138).

A further pedagogical benefit of music is that it may encourage social harmony and community. Argyriou (2024, p. 71) argues, in this regard, that integrating musical literacy into education can promote inclusivity and cultural responsiveness, especially when student populations are culturally and linguistically diverse. Similarly, Fernández Garcia (2023) has dedicated an article to music as the “missing link” in fostering intercultural competence (in foreign language learning). Likewise, Khaghaninejad and Fahandejsaadi (2016, pp. 78-79) explain that singing in classroom settings encourages social harmony, creates a safe space for collective learning and fosters community. Engh (2013, p. 114) similarly states that group in-class singing may encourage trust and cooperation, which are important factors in contributing to the progression of group cohesion and a sense of community. Engh (2013, p. 114) mentions that the sense of belonging to a cohesive community is something towards which educators should strive for the promotion of teaching and learning goals. The benefit of fostering teamwork and communication can be added to this list of social benefits (Van der Merwe, 2007, p. 174). It is worth noting that this ability to foster a communal type of learning may offer an intersection between the use of music and decolonial approaches to teaching.

A further pedagogical benefit of music is that it can promote cultural and social embeddedness and authenticity of educational content. Songs can comment on important social, political and historical issues, adding social relevance to learning content (Arleo 2000). Songs can be considered “authentic” texts that relate to the “real” world with which students are familiar and are less estranging than academic texts (Sadiqzade 2024). Engh (2013, p. 115) elaborates on this aspect, explaining that pop culture and pop music are oriented towards a global and common youth culture, therefore rendering pop music both significant and familiar to students. He adds that this may bridge generational gaps, lessen the distance between the teacher and the student, break the formality of the classroom setting, and validate students’ music, language, and culture (Engh 2013, p. 115).

Finally, music responds to current needs to produce adaptive, critically-minded learners by encouraging creative and critical thinking (Van der Merwe, 2007, p. 190). Research by Chen *et al.* (2024, p. 246) in the field of English as a foreign language has found that using music and educational technology has a significant impact on improving academic achievement, creative thinking, and self-esteem among learners and that it is necessary to reevaluate pedagogical approaches to include both music and technology as the digital age advances. Chen *et al.* (2024, p. 246) explain that creativity is important since it “encompasses the ability to generate innovative ideas, establish connections, and think critically”. They further mention that composing songs, writing song lyrics

and writing narratives encourage imaginative expression and alternative communication and that multimodal experiences promote divergent thinking and support creative problem solving (Chen 2023, p. 246).

This brief review shows that music offers several instrumental benefits that apply to almost any teaching and learning context. Music is shown to be a versatile pedagogical tool that may help to address some of the educational and attitudinal problems surrounding academic literacy specifically.

5. Music as an epistemology

Approaching music as an epistemology represents an alternative view of knowledge that departs from text-centric and linear views of knowledge favoured in higher education. Seeing music in this light rests upon views of music such as the Adornian notion of music as “a non-rational institution within society, akin to religion or art, playing a crucial role in offering individuals a space of resistance and affective engagement within an increasingly rationalised and mechanised Western world” (Argyriou, 2024, p. 78). In further reference to Theodor Adorno, Argyriou (2024, p. 78) describes music as a “refuge for subjectivity and imagination” and a symbolic language that articulates collective emotions, historical memories, and socio-political tensions”. Argyriou (2024, p. 78) emphasises that music has long been recognised as “more than an aesthetic or artistic endeavour”, seeing this as a premise for arguing for music’s epistemic affordances. Yet, I believe that its aesthetic nature is precisely part of what allows music to enrich traditional ways of learning, and that this represents a

better interpretation of Adorno’s clearly affective impression of music as an alternative epistemology. Therefore, aestheticism does not minimise the pedagogical and epistemic worth of music, to my mind, and it is not only those aspects of music which transcend aesthetics (social and historical commentary, historical worth, etc.) which render music pedagogically useful.

Writing in the field of music education and spirituality in music, June Boyce-Tillman (2000) introduced the term “subjugated ways of knowing” in her exploration of music as epistemology. She is critical of Western knowledge systems that unduly privilege received wisdom and distinguishes two types of knowledge. System A, promoted in Western society, focuses on objectivity, logic, and scientific evidence (rationality, in Adorno’s terms), while System B, subjugated in Western society, rests upon subjectivity, personal feeling, “magic”, and associative knowledge (i.e. subjective and non-rational knowledge) (Boyce-Tillman 2000, p. 92). Music is described as a “veiled medium” for its opaque but nonetheless operative ways of transmitting meaning (in fact, meaning is inferred and interpreted within this view rather than conveyed or transferred) (Boyce-Tillman 2000, p. 94). Music’s mysterious and “veiled” nature, Boyce-Tillman (2000, p. 95) argues, renders it incompatible with post-Enlightenment knowledge paradigms which still favour unity above diversity, although such a preference does not necessarily reflect “messy” social and psychological realities, and although diversity has become increasingly acceptable. This raises

questions regarding who decides what counts as legitimate knowledge and what power dynamics underlie such designations.

These assumptions regarding the privileging of certain types of knowledge were seen to motivate the multiliteracies and multimodality approaches. In an interview published in 2016, Gunther Kress straightforwardly argues that the idea that only linguistic representation counts as “serious knowledge” is nonsense (Björkqvall 2016, p. 25). He points to the value of tacit knowledge in fields such as medicine, where surgery, for example, may rely very much on embodied knowledge (Björkqvall 2016, p. 25).

It is curious that university education has resisted alternative epistemologies for so long, though these hold much potential for democratising knowledge, decolonising curricula, fostering creativity, and reflecting new realities of knowledge production and consumption in an era of prolific digitisation and AI. The question is how music's particular modal affordances (affect, subjectivity, etc.) may foster incorporation of music into university curricula as epistemologies rather than simply pedagogical tools. The reflection below hints at possibilities by distinguishing between music as a validated knowledge resource, mainly in processes of transmodal redesign, versus its function to enhance engagement and interest (though these are also significant). In the below explanations, multiliteracies offers a framework for establishing music's epistemic worth in relation to its functional value.

6. Music and multiliteracies in the academic literacy classroom

The interventions employing music in academic literacy classrooms at the NWU involved using music in three different lessons supported by two low-stakes graded assessments and one ungraded class activity. They were employed in four class groups of between 70 and 200 students enrolled in advanced modules in academic literacy at the NWU – ALDE 122 and ALDA 122 (Academic Literacy Development in English/Afrikaans – the same content offered in different languages). The first intervention, in the second class of the semester, entailed watching and discussing three music videos in class. The videos related to the topic of a large written assessment – environmental sustainability. These videos were associated with an online assessment that contributed roughly 2% to the module mark. The three videos included a 2020 cover by Julia Stone of the 1987 Midnight Oil rock song, Beds are Burning, which addresses the effects of global warming and other environmental problems

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WnisEbdpN0>). Stone's cover is a very emotionally charged rendition and depicts the destruction caused by Australian bushfires due to poor fire management. The second video is the satirical 1965 Tom Lehrer song Pollution, which addresses air and water pollution in American cities in a humorous way (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPrAuF2f_oI). The third was a scene from a recent opera, The Watering Hole (2024), by Willem Oosthuysen (composer) and Tristen Moseley (librettist), sung by

Melisa Bonetti Luna (<https://url-shortener.me/4LCC>). It depicts a post-apocalyptic litter-filled arctic scene in which the soprano role fishes amid the garbage. The libretto thematises microplastic pollution and clean water scarcity.

The discussion of these videos introduced the topic of the written assessment and sensitised students to the various semiotic modes through which discourse on sustainability is realized and to the modal affordances of music, visual material, lyrics and spoken text in their interaction to convey meaning. Through questions, students were directed to understand and evaluate the effect of various modes, and were helped to draw links to the nature and affordances of typical academic modes of meaning conveyance and construction. The online assessment about these videos supported this goal by requiring students to answer mainly assessment-for-learning type multiple-choice questions on content and modality, based on the class discussion. The sensitising function of these pedagogical activities relates to the idea of “semiotic awareness” which needs to be cultivated in students before meaningful design can be conceptualised or executed within the multiliteracies approach (Lim & Tan-Chia 2023, p. 5). The investigative aspect of the intervention corresponds with the analysis component of the knowledge processes framework within the multiliteracies approach, and required both functional analysis (identifying themes and structural elements in the songs) and critical analysis (evaluating the effectiveness of the use of elements).

Multimodality operated at two levels during this intervention. Firstly, by sensitising students to modal affordances and their semiotic function and effectiveness, it operated at the content level of a multiliteracies approach. In other words, music as a semiotic mode and its affordances were thematised as part of a legitimate knowledge repertoire and was therefore subsumed within the content of a multimodal and multiliteracies approach to academic literacy. Secondly, it had a generally supportive, or instrumental function. In this regard, the familiarity of music as a semiotic mode and the affective value of music (in combination with visuals) require elaboration. Firstly, within the knowledge processes framework, using popular or broadly familiar music genres represented “experiencing the known”, which facilitated the introduction of new content on both sustainability and modality (experiencing the unknown). Music’s accessibility and familiarity, in comparison with unfamiliar academic texts, thus represented a modal affordance which helped to ease students into the content of the academic literacy module.

Secondly, music produced diverse affective results. The first of these videos, a rendition with stirring vocals accompanied by minimalistic and dramatic chords and supported by the depiction of blazing forests and destruction, had a powerful emotional effect when viewed in the classrooms (most of which had a large screen and good acoustics). Students were serious and quiet after viewing the video and explicitly mentioned the powerful effect when asked what they thought. Students had trouble articulating the meaning of

the music, lyrics and visuals at first, but lively class discussions ensued in three out of the four class groups once students were prompted with questions and directed towards a likely interpretation. The emotional impact of the videos helped to engage students and capture their attention, encouraging lively discussions.

The second video (in black and white) depicted Tom Lehrer at his piano during a live performance of his upbeat cabaret-style song. The meaning conveyed by the music and humorous lyrics was easier for students to interpret, and the song clearly elicited amusement, judging from the audible laughter at times. The light-hearted and playful nature of this music contributed to the lively discussions about this video that took place in three of the four classes.

The third video was experienced by the students as strange, and the depiction of a futuristic, post-apocalyptic scene in the genre of opera did not match students' expectations and knowledge concerning this genre (which they admitted when asked about their expectations of opera). In this case, it was probably the unusualness of the operatic vocal style in combination with a futuristic setting that attracted and maintained students' interest. Students watched attentively and engaged in discussion following the viewing of the video. The meaning of the music, text and visuals could be effectively interpreted.

In all four class groups in which these videos were played, the use of music thus fostered a positive class atmosphere and an above-average degree of interest, interaction and participation. When asked whether they enjoyed analysing the videos, students responded

affirmatively (with one class even requesting to see more videos). Moreover, the use of music videos stimulated critical engagement with the texts and topic. This could be ascribed to Fredrickson's (2004) "broaden and build" concept, mentioned in the literature review, where positive emotions (in this case sparked by music and multimodality) do not just make people happy, but momentarily broaden their thought-action repertoires, encouraging exploration of complex ideas.

The second intervention, a class assessment contributing 2% to the module mark, required students to interpret module content about academic integrity and the use of AI and transform it into a song or a rap of about 200 words in groups of up to 3. Students' compositions had to answer the question "What is academic integrity?" or "How may AI be used in assignments and how not?" Students were allowed to use djembe drums, brought to class by the lecturer, as accompaniment when composing their songs/raps, but only a written copy of the lyrics, uploaded to the Learning Management System, was graded. Within a multiliteracies perspective, this intervention can be conceived as transmodal redesign (transforming written content into aural, kinesthetic and reframed written content) within the design, designing and designed paradigm. The available designs in this case were students' existing cultural, linguistic and musical knowledge, which they combined with the module contents in the designing stage to create novel designed multimodal artefacts. In this case, while music facilitated learning by its affective and motivational effects, it again

operated at another level to legitimise musical resources as a valid part of the academic knowledge repertoire.

Music's instrumental value was also significant, however. The students generally showed a great deal of enthusiasm and were seen laughing, giving each other high fives, and engaging excitedly with the content. While it was not required of students to perform their songs, several groups asked to perform their compositions for the lecturer, even remaining after class to do so. Some students explicitly expressed their enjoyment of the activity to the lecturer without being prompted. A positive student-lecturer relationship was fostered through these informal interactions. Moreover, students' compositions displayed a very high degree of originality and creativity. Drums were used enthusiastically in one larger class (but were not popular in the other classes) and visibly contributed to the enjoyment of the exercise. Tactile musicking likely contributed to the enjoyment derived from drumming. In terms of fostering engagement, enjoyment, a positive learning atmosphere, and creativity, this activity was judged to be highly successful. It also offered an opportunity for student-culture embracing and even decolonial pedagogical approaches, as students could draw from familiar musical and cultural resources as well as authentic linguistic knowledge resources (many groups employed slang and code-switching, and one group composed their entire song in an indigenous language, also providing an English translation). This form of transmodal redesign demonstrated a high level of conceptual understanding because it required students to maintain the central

content while adapting it to the affordances and constraints of a new mode. It also demonstrated the most successful motivational employment of music.

The third activity employing music was an ungraded class exercise in which two music videos were shown on the topic of environmental sustainability, and very short excerpts from the lyrics of each video were displayed on screen. The videos were Bo Diddley's 1971 blues song *Pollution*

(https://youtu.be/CC4aTTfltw4?si=L_ma-qsxDg9zC1qo) and Jack Johnson's 2003 Indie song *The 3 Rs* (<https://youtu.be/Tzp17G8Gr4w>).

Students were asked to paraphrase an excerpt from each song as they would paraphrase for an assignment (using formal register and including a reference), and were instructed to add their paraphrases to a Mentimeter open-ended questionnaire so that they could be displayed anonymously on the screen. This paraphrasing exercise again entailed transmodal redesign (adapting informal, sung lyrics into a written and academically appropriate paraphrase). Students found the first round of this exercise (the first video) very challenging and made several mistakes, such as misinterpreting the content, not providing a reference, referencing incorrectly and not writing in the correct register. After receiving feedback, students were able to complete the activity more successfully during the second round. The reason for their struggles was deficient knowledge of and experience with the existing "designs" of paraphrasing and referencing. While musical lyrics were more accessible and familiar than academic sources the transition from

experiencing the known to experiencing the unknown was still significant in this case. Additionally, music did not have the same effect of uplifting the class atmosphere and stimulating engagement as observed previously. Students were slow in composing their paraphrases and commented that the activity was difficult. This showed that when paired with a challenging task, music did not necessarily have a positive effect on the class atmosphere. Nevertheless, using informal song lyrics embedded within upbeat melodies for a paraphrasing exercise was pedagogically fruitful as transmodal redesign forced students to analyse multimodal meaning and required them to summarise the overall message in their own words rather than replacing certain words with synonyms (as is often the norm).

While music functioned successfully in many ways and at multiple levels in these interventions, certain factors require critical reflection. Firstly, it should be noted that different class groups reacted differently to these activities. The more lively classes tended to react better to the use of music than one generally less engaged group. Secondly, the use of music was concentrated around the beginning of the semester and did not guarantee sustained engagement throughout the course of the module. Towards the middle of the semester, students lost steam and became more difficult to engage. Fourthly, despite having composed songs about academic integrity and ethical AI use, a large percentage of students still used generative AI unethically in their written assignments, showing that creative engagement with the content did not necessarily translate into ethical practice. Lastly, the

effectiveness of the first and third activities was dependent on properly functioning classroom technology. While the technological infrastructure worked in these cases, these activities could have been jeopardised if it had not.

These preliminary experiments with using music in the academic literacy classroom were nevertheless judged to be successful, both in realising a multiliteracies pedagogical approach in which musical knowledge was legitimised and in fostering engagement, enjoyment and stimulation, mainly through the affective and aesthetic qualities of music as a semiotic mode. While these initiatives did not lead to sustained engagement, they did have positive short-term effects and would need to be combined with other innovative approaches to produce more enduring effects.

7. Conclusion

The distinction between the instrumental and epistemic uses of music reflects two different ways in which music adds value to university education. The music-based interventions conducted will be briefly revisited to emphasise the distinction between music as an instrument to create an atmosphere conducive to learning and to facilitate traditional learning goals, and music as an epistemology and legitimate way of knowing.

The activities conducted in the academic literacy modules illustrate how the instrumental and epistemic functions of music may overlap in practice. In the first intervention (analysing music videos on sustainability), music videos functioned as a tool to capture attention and stimulate engagement and

discussion. Similarly, by using familiar genres, music helped students experience the known, easing their transition into unfamiliar academic content. At the same time, music functioned as a legitimate semiotic mode. Students were taught semiotic awareness, evaluating how music, lyrics, and visuals interact to construct meaning, thereby elevating music to a serious subject of academic inquiry.

Similarly, in the second intervention (interpreting module content as songs), music elicited high levels of enthusiasm and created a positive atmosphere and student-lecturer relationship in its instrumental function. At the same time, through transmodal redesign, music became a valid academic resource with which new meaning could be created.

In the third activity (paraphrasing song lyrics), music had little instrumental benefit in terms of stimulating engagement, etc. Nevertheless, epistemic value was high as students were forced to derive multimodal meaning from videos and apply transmodal redesign in the opposite direction from the previous intervention (affective and subjective to objective and rational rather than the other way around).

The functional and epistemic functions of music can be mapped onto the knowledge processes within the multiliteracies framework. As a tool, music shows a closer relationship with the “experiencing” knowledge process by helping students access and engage with new academic experiences via music’s affective modal affordances. As an epistemology, music relates to analysis by becoming a subject of analysis. It also relates to application by becoming a legitimate semiotic resource within processes of transmodal design.

These applications of music within a multiliteracies perspective suggests that music deserves a place in university classrooms and requires further practical investigation and theorisation amid pressure in South Africa, but also elsewhere, to decolonise curricula, foster inclusion and transform education in reaction to changing digital realities.

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