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Listening to Music in your Classroom

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LISTENING TO MUSIC IN YOUR CLASSROOM

You do not have to be a music expert to lead a musical discussion! Here are some suggestions for talking about music in your classroom and tips for conducting your own active listening—and your students', too.

For your own preparation, listen to the Global Encounters Mexico CD. Listen actively by posing the questions below to yourself before you listen to each track, and keep these questions in mind while you listen. Use this same method of active listening in your classroom. Rather than acting as a music expert, you can engage your students' listening skills and help them build their observations and opinions over time.

Because most of us are passive (rather than active) music listeners, we do not generally listen to music as closely as the activities in this program ask us to listen. Students may resist this active listening, but they will overcome this resistance as they discover the pleasure and benefits of listening to music in this deeper way.

OPEN QUESTIONS

Ask yourself, and then students:

- "What do you notice in this music?"
- "What stands out to you as you listen to this music?"
- "What happens first?"
- "What happens after that?"
- "What qualities do we notice in this music?" (For example: fast or slow, light or dark, thick or thin, smooth or bumpy, plain or fancy.)
- "What sounds are creating those qualities?"
- "What kinds of instruments might be making those sounds?"
- "Does this remind you of any music you know? Why?"
- "Can you make any connections between this music and any other music we have listened to?"
- "What questions do you have about this music?"
- "What do you imagine the creators of this music were trying to communicate to you?"
- "What would you change in this music to make it more effective?" (For example: instruments, melody, speed, intensity, or lyrics.)

LISTENING

Try these techniques for engaging students in active listening:

- Play a short (10–20 seconds) section two or three times before asking any questions about it; repeat these mini-excerpts to refocus a question or to verify what students say they hear.
- Model your own observations, self-questioning, and thinking out loud for students. Students will listen more energetically if you are a co-learner instead of an expert.
- Encourage students to both identify specific sounds in the music and support their observations with concrete examples. Many students will want to say things like, "It makes me think of ..." or, "It reminds me of ..." These statements may establish a personal connection to the music, but they will not help students notice much about the music itself. Follow up those kinds of observations with questions like, "What is it in the music that makes you say that?" Replay the track if students want to point out a specific sound in the music.
- When talking about qualities in the music (for example, fast or slow, light or dark, thick or thin, smooth or bumpy, plain or fancy), ask students to rate any quality they notice on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being a quality of low value to the music overall, and 10 being a quality of high value).
- Praise active listening. People are often afraid of "getting it wrong" when talking about music. However, active listening urges students to pay closer, more sustained attention to music. By pointing out to students when they are actively listening, you will encourage them to actively listen more often and worry less about being experts.
- If specific musical terms come up in a discussion, ask speakers to rephrase their comments using more common terms. If you or one of your students becomes the music expert of the group, it may be difficult to engage the class in discussion.