

Building a strong knowledge base in music through recall

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In the Music Department we are constantly battling the task of embedding and developing knowledge against the infrequency of KS3 lessons. Teaching students once every two weeks leaves me struggling to remember something as simple as student names, and yet I find myself moaning at students for not remembering an aspect of Music theory we covered in the space of an hour a fortnight ago. Reading Rosenshine's Principles and Tom Sherrington's take on the study highlighted to me the significance of the space in between our lessons and impact this has upon students' ability to retrieve any past information. Rosenshine's first Principle is "Daily Review". That is not something that will ever be a possibility for a non-core subject, but should we not then focus efforts to the next best thing; weekly review?

My aim is to apply this to the "core principles" of music lessons, if you will, which is music theory itself. With the introduction of a permanent second member of the department faculty, we now have the opportunity to broaden the curriculum with the return of weekly lessons for all KS3 students. Currently, the "core principles" of reading notation and rhythms and discovering the elements of music is covered in Year 7 topics. These skills are then used in later topics, but the chance to revisit the initial learning is non-existent. Why? Because it felt as though with such little contact time, this would be limiting the new information we could then feasibly cover. Reading Sherrington offers the reminder that "we forget information... that we do not retrieve frequently enough." It's so simple and yet so easy to forget as a subject specialist, that students have not had enough time, rehearsal and practice to embed these theoretic principles themselves.

With the Music department being in a faraway corner of the school campus, lesson starts can often be lengthy and drawn out, with some students walking from a nearby area of the school and some having to sprint from A Block (and some meandering their way around campus regardless of their start point). The starter activity, therefore, feels like the perfect opportunity for long term knowledge recall. At the beginning of every lesson, let's continuously recall some of those basic, underpinning principles of music theory which are going to be needed in one way or another in everything that we are going to learn today. Weekly Music lessons are the most frequent we are ever going to achieve in education and so weekly recall it shall be. New, sequenced, theory based starter activities have been designed for KS3 students. Unfortunately, the virus has taken away lesson time altogether this year. We will, however, be ready for our return. Watch this space...

Rosenshine, B. (2010) "Principles of Instruction", The International Academy of Education (IAE) Educational Practices Series 21.
Sherrington, T. and Caviglioli, O. (2019). Rosenshine's principles in action. Suffolk: John Catt Education.

