

If music be the food of learning, play on...

Peter Cook looks at what we can learn about learning from music

In the book *Sex, Leadership and Rock'n'Roll*, I argue that music offers unique insights into personal development, individual learning and developing true learning organisations. This article offers a series of tips on how trainers can use ideas from the world of music to advantage in the design and delivery of individual, team and organisational learning experiences.

R U Experienced? – Music as an invaluable learning tool

The philosopher Emmanuel Kant said music is the language of the emotions. Madonna pointed out that music makes the people come together. The very same point, except Madonna rocks harder than a philosopher.

Certainly music touches many of us at a much deeper level than a Powerpoint presentation, reaching our head, heart and soul, evoking powerful memories and connections when used well. Music has been used to bolster courage before battles, sing babies to sleep, improve romantic attraction and to accompany rites of passage through life. It is clear that music allows us to directly affect people's emotions, bypassing their rational and logical centres.

Many trainers will also be familiar with the work of Lozanov in the field of accelerated learning, the psychological discipline of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), concepts of relaxed attention/flow states and Howard Gardner's research on multiple intelligences. These all serve as useful reference points for this article. All of this points to a developing body of evidence which indicates that music can provide a useful enhancement to learning in terms of:

- *Long-term retention of knowledge:* I'm sure many of you could recite the chorus of Abba's classic *'Dancing Queen'*, which is 30 years old, but you might have greater difficulty remembering your company's competency framework (unless you composed it).
- *Anchoring important learning points:* Music is a cultural anchor – just think how it is used as a vehicle for advertising.

However, the impact of music on the mind is complex and a short article can only scratch the surface of this vital topic. Some people think that it's just a case of slamming on a few records that they personally like in a training event, like a bad DJ. While I don't claim to have invented a precious art form, there are some principles I have developed over the years that

will help you use music in learning successfully. They are unashamed generalisations from which you should develop your own specific rules of thumb. I'm absolutely sure that there will be some controversial views on these principles, given that we are dealing with a subject that raises strong emotions.

Enough caveats, excuses and premature evaluation. As Prince, Marvin Gaye and Marc Bolan would say, "let's get it on".

School of Rock: 7½ tips for using music in learning

Tip 1 – Mama weer all crazee now: Don't overuse music

Your learners are there to learn from you – they are not at a disco, so be minded to use music sparingly. Your talents as a trainer can be enhanced by an appropriate use of musical examples and analogies, but they should not be masked by the overuse of music as an aid to learning. Good times to use music are at the start of a session to energise people, during periods of reflection and at the end, to consolidate people's learning and to facilitate closure.

Tip 2 – I did it their way: Be a good DJ

This means not playing what you especially like, but playing music that will harmonise with the mood you are expecting your learners to



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experience. Although this is not a precise art, it is surprisingly effective when done well. However, there's nothing wrong with putting your favourite songs on while you are preparing the room before delegates arrive to get yourself in the mood!

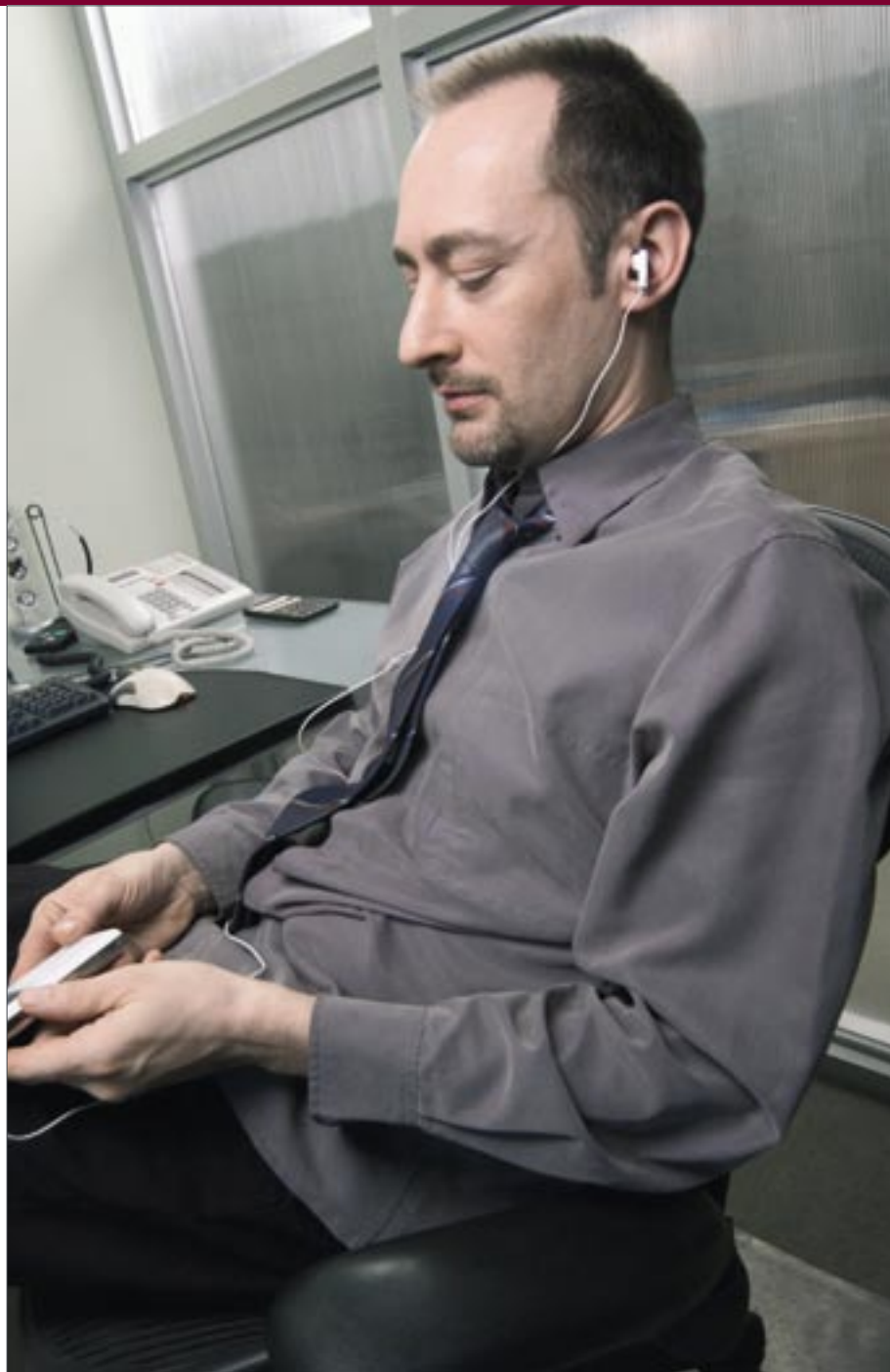
The link between music and mood is very strong. One of my MBA students even suggested that they are more likely to make a speed camera flash if they listen to Green Day than Jamie Cullum!

Learners move through different psychological states during the course of an effective learning programme. Perhaps you use the Kolb Learning Cycle as your underlying learning design model to ensure all-round learning or some other approach. Whichever approach you use, choose music to move moods/energy in the room, following your chosen model. Some crude rules of thumb include using upbeat music for activism, classical or ambient for reflection etc.

Tip 3 – The Young Ones: regress participants to create comfort Learners move between moments of 'consonance' (learning ideas that fit in with their own world view) and 'dissonance' (learning ideas that are initially uncomfortable with existing learning). NLP would call this 'pacing' and 'leading'. If you are working on a challenging learning agenda, use of 'comfort' music can greatly assist in managing the creative tensions that exist.

One way to do this involves working out the average age of participants and what year it was when they were around the age of 16-20. Ensure you have some material from that era to create a comfort zone as people slip back into (hopefully) pleasant memories.

This might sound manipulative, but you are there to put your learners in the best state to learn from you, so this is just basically good customer care. In any case, you cannot influence someone who does not *wish* to be influenced, so a small percentage of your learners



will probably be unmoved by the use of music. On balance, music is generally well received by the majority, if done thoughtfully and not obsessively

Tip 4 – Top of the Pops: go mainstream It's no good getting out your favourite Leonard Cohen number or an obscure 'B' side to impress your participants! They probably would not care. You are not there to give them a musical education. Use familiar songs, unless you are specifically trying to make a particular point. A good tip is to buy yourself a book of hit singles across the ages

to help find the most loved songs across different eras.

You could, of course, be accused of going mainstream by music purists, to which the answer is 'lighten up' – there is just as much skill in producing a catchy three-minute hit as there is in a concept album. The skill sets are just different. True music lovers can appreciate *Tubular Bells*, *Led Zeppelin IV*, Chas and Dave, Robbie Williams, Radiohead, Prince and the Cheeky Girls!

Tip 5 – The Spice Girls effect: avoid recent material Music is powerful

but suffers from 'style' problems – people have strong reactions to bands who are 'in' and 'out'. When I was a teenager, my brother like soul and reggae music and I liked glam rock and metal. It simply was not going to be possible for me to like reggae even if I did privately, as my older brother liked this. Over time I have been able to admit my liking for all these genres of music.

This is a common experience for many people. If you use very recent music, you may fall into the trap of people thinking about whether the music is 'cool' rather than getting on with the work. Once a piece of music or a band is more than ten years old, people tend to soften their reactions.

Just think about it – if you hated the Bay City Rollers, Bananarama, the Spice Girls or Duran Duran when they first arrived on the music scene, over time there is a tendency to temper these violent reactions as we get older. Some of us even reach a point where we 'forgive them' for their bad taste or dress sense and start to enjoy the music!

Tip 6 – The drugs don't always work

Some people are relatively unaffected by music and anything up to 10 per cent of people find it difficult to concentrate when music is playing. This group are often musical in some way and find it hard to switch off.

You can minimise the potential problems this creates by not making the music you use loud enough to annoy, and finding out more about people's preferences. However, my experience is that music offers significant benefits which outweigh the problems. It is worth a little experimentation to discover what works for your learners.

Tip 7 – Can music save your mortal soul? Possibly not! However, I have developed a speciality of using music lyrics as shorthand for business, management and personal development concepts. We

know from Tony Buzan's work on mind mapping and memory that pictures can capture ideas more powerfully than syntax alone. So it is the same with music.

Just think about it: If I were to start singing the beginning of the Queen song '*Bohemian Rhapsody*' ("Mama, just killed a man...") a great many of us would have no difficulty in continuing the song. Yet *Bohemian Rhapsody* is more than 30 years old. Conversely, if I started reciting the words of the company mission statement, we might have a greater problem finishing the 'lyrics'. Simply stated, music helps us remember things.

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Recall the 'Real Thing' advert for Coca Cola? The hugely successful 'Cornetto' campaign for Walls Ice Cream? Going way back, we had Hoover's great chorus line "It beats as it sweeps as it cleans" – pure rock'n'roll!

How then can you use this idea in making your training great? Well, pop music tends to have much shorter lines than a memo, so it's possible, using some judicious reframing, to 're-create' the meanings of classic rock and pop songs in a slightly ironic way in order to cement meanings into your learners' minds. In the spirit of *Blue Peter*, here's a few I've prepared earlier:

1. '*Knowing me Knowing you*' is clearly a song about relationships. My radical translation of the chorus goes something like this: 'If you want to serve someone really well, find out their wants, needs, whims, foibles, fancies, fantasies, fanaticisms and ensure what you are offer-

ing touches the parts that others cannot or dare not reach, aha.'

2. '*It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it*'. Bananarama possibly meant to say something along the lines of: 'If there are no product differentiators, it comes down to the experience – service delivery or agility/responsiveness.' Unfortunately, this does not scan!
3. '*U got the look*'. Style always overwhelms substance. Once you have got substance sorted, go for style every time. Prince is a great example of an artist who combines both of these elements, playing 43 instruments but also well known for extraordinary presentation of what he does.
4. '*This town ain't big enough for the both of us*'. Competitive strategy is about differentiation rather than trying to fight it out in an overcrowded market. If you must do this, play to win. Frankie Goes to Hollywood pointed out that "When two tribes go to war, one is the most you can score", which aligns well with Sun Tzu's thinking in this area!
5. '*Video killed the radio star*'. It's not the competition we know about that kills us. It's the unexpected entrants to a market that wipe out the need for your product overnight, as Kodak discovered with the advent of digital photography. Make sure you look out for unexpected market entrants.

Tip 7 ½ – If you plan to actually play copyrighted music in a learning event, check that you and/or the venue have cover from the Mechanical Copyright Protection Society.

In the warped words of AC/DC: "For those about to learn, we salute you!" ■

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