Lessons That Bear Repeating and Repeating That Bears Lessons: An Interdisciplinary Unit on Principles of Minimalism in Modern Music, Art, and Poetry (Grades 4–8)

Eric Smigel and Nan L. McDonald

General Music Today 2012 26: 5 originally published online 10 April 2012
DOI: 10.1177/1048371312442942

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://gmt.sagepub.com/content/26/1/5

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
National Association for Music Education

Additional services and information for General Music Today can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://gmt.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://gmt.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
Citations: http://gmt.sagepub.com/content/26/1/5.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Aug 28, 2012

OnlineFirst Version of Record - Apr 10, 2012

What is This?
Patterns and Perceptual Processes

Patterns are everywhere. Any place we direct our attention—walls, floors, clothing, bookshelves, landscapes, ticking clocks, pedaling bicycles, and so forth—we automatically situate the repetition of lines, shapes, colors, sounds, and movements into coherent groups. Creating perceptual order is crucial to functioning in the world, but once we identify a pattern we sometimes overlook the individual qualities of the components that comprise that pattern. For instance, if we look at a field of poppies, we tend to focus on the unifying effect created by similar characteristics of color, shape, and texture rather than the intricacies that make each flower unique. Also, the criteria by which we determine similarity or contrast among objects or events may differ from one person, perspective, or situation to another. As people walk through a neighborhood, for example, they may observe things that those traveling by car might not notice, even if they are viewing the same objects. Those on foot might observe a sequence of individual wooden boards that form a fence, whereas those in the car might notice that a wooden fence surrounds every other house. Pattern recognition, in other words, is not a rigid assignment with right and wrong answers, but a perceptual process composed of both objective and subjective elements.

Minimalism

The arts provide an excellent arena in which to explore how the repetition and contrast of objective elements prompts the subjective process of pattern recognition. Patterns appear in virtually all art as a means of establishing segments of unity or continuity within a larger structure, but they occupy an especially prominent role in works associated with minimalism, a modern art movement that emerged in the United States in the 1960s. Systematic repetition is one of the basic principles of minimalism, which often features the recurrence, reorganization, or gradual transformation of a limited collection of materials.

In minimalist paintings and sculptures, geometric patterns typically replace organic forms, expressive gestures, and representational subject matter (e.g., people, animals, flowers). Similarly, much minimalist music contains extensive repetition of short motives or harmonically static textures instead of the thematic development and

Lessons That Bear Repeating and Repeating That Bears Lessons: An Interdisciplinary Unit on Principles of Minimalism in Modern Music, Art, and Poetry (Grades 4–8)

Eric Smigel¹ and Nan L. McDonald¹

Abstract

This theory-to-practice article focuses on interdisciplinary classroom activities based on principles of minimalism in modern music, art, and poetry. A lesson sequence was designed for an inner-city Grades 4 and 5 general classroom of English language learners, where the unit was taught, assessed, and documented by the authors. Included in the article is a detailed teaching script for use by classroom teachers, music teachers, and related arts specialists for Grades 4–8. Readers are guided through lesson materials, instructions, interactive hands-on activities, and assessments for young students with little or no background in music or other arts.

Keywords

interdisciplinary, minimalism, patterns, modern music, art, poetry, elementary general music

¹San Diego State University, San Diego, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Eric Smigel, School of Music & Dance, San Diego State University, 5500 Campanile Drive, San Diego, CA 92182, USA
Email: esmigel@mail.sdsu.edu
arch-like phrasing of traditional classical music (Bernard, 1993). Minimalism in poetry usually refers to a literary genre characterized by extreme brevity or directness of expression, but it would be more effective in this context to highlight techniques of repetition or pattern formation in literature. Concrete poetry, which features the typographical arrangement of text into visual and sonic patterns, offers a valuable literary analogy to minimalist art and music (Williams, 1967).

Minimalist paintings, music, and poetry often resist dramatic interpretation and invite the viewer, listener, or reader to focus instead on an optical, sonic, or literary phenomenon. By drastically reducing the number of elements involved and simplifying formal designs, minimalist art engages the sensuous aspect of the individual perceptual experience and foregrounds the complexity of neural processes. The study of minimalism in the arts, therefore, can provide students with creative avenues to recognize, analyze, and generate patterns of similarity, contrast, and variation in the world around them.

Interdisciplinary Studies

An effective way to teach about minimalism in music is to set that study within activity-based lessons and within contexts common to other arts and content areas (Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1994). By creating interactive, interdisciplinary activities that compare the structural features of music to those found in other art forms, we seek to help students gain more valuable and memorable perspectives of the music itself (Snyder, 2001). Also, “by examining interdisciplinary correlations, students can develop their vocabulary, apply new terminology to different contexts, and enrich their understanding of a diverse cross-section of the curriculum” (Smigel & McDonald, 2011, p. 11). The comparison of different art forms facilitates hands-on learning as well. Through active engagement, students formulate meaning and establish memory of newly acquired information, effectively moving from knowledge to understanding (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006, p. 27). In addition, because many minimalist composers drew from the musical practices of West Africa, Bali, and India, the study of minimalist principles across the arts provides an excellent platform for multicultural activities.

This article offers a model lesson script for building classroom activities about minimalism based on comparisons of modern music, visual art, and poetry for Grades 4 to 8. The lesson was taught by the authors in a Title I, inner-city, Grades 4 and 5 classroom where the majority of the students are English language learners. The students had little or no previous experience with music and the arts. Also included is an outline of teaching procedures and sequences, a description of creative projects for students, ideas for assessment, materials and resource lists, and reflections by the participating classroom teacher and young students.

Several National Standards in Music Education will be addressed: improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments (Standard 3); composing and arranging music within specific guidelines (Standard 4); listening to, analyzing, and describing music (Standard 6); evaluating music and music performances (Standard 7); understanding relationships between music, the arts, and disciplines outside the arts (Standard 8), and understanding music in relationship to history and culture (Standard 9; Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1994).

The following sample lesson script, which was designed to be taught within a 1-hour period, need not be followed verbatim but is offered here to demonstrate creative ways students can learn about minimalism in music, visual art, and poetry. Through these detailed instructions, the lesson can be taught by music teachers, classroom teachers, or teachers of related arts. Also, any component(s) of the following script may easily be extracted and integrated into a lesson in any content area that addresses principles of pattern recognition.

Teaching Script: Lesson on Minimalism

Note: Procedures and materials commentary appears in italics. When teaching this unit, create a “word wall” or cumulative vocabulary list on the board displaying all new terms (which appear in boldface within the script), titles of art works, and names of artists, composers, and poets.

Teacher: What’s a pattern? What are some different patterns you see in this room? (Students share patterns they find, e.g., clothing, furniture, walls, etc.) What about outside the classroom? Can you imagine patterns on the playground, in your neighborhood, or in nature? (Students share ideas and are asked what makes them patterns.) What do these patterns have in common? (Sequence of repetition and contrast.) Patterns are designs based on repetition and contrast.

Teacher: Patterns help us organize what we see around us, and visual artists often use patterns to organize their paintings, sculptures, and architecture. (Show examples of patterns in non-minimalist artworks, such as David Hockney, “A Lawn Being Sprinkled” (1967); Jasper Johns, “Target With Plaster Casts” (1955). Michael Graves, “Portland Public Service Building” (1977).) Patterns can be formed by different elements like line, shape, and color to show how a group of things belongs together.

Teacher: We just saw how different artists have incorporated patterns into their work, but some artists create works that are made up almost entirely of patterns. (Show
images of Frank Stella, “The Marriage of Reason and Squalor II” (1959); Frank Stella, “Hyena Stomp” (1962); Donald Judd, “Untitled (Stack)” (1967); Bridget Riley, “Blaze” (1962). What do you see? (Black and white, different colored lines.) How are the lines organized? (Rectangular pattern; concentric zigzags.) When you look at them, how do they make you feel? (Dizzy, etc.) What makes you feel that way? (Illusion of movement.) But the paintings don’t move, so what’s moving? (Our eyes and brains, i.e., perceptual process.) Instead of painting people, places, or objects, these artists made pictures and sculptures that show what happens to us when we look at things.

Teacher: Many artists in the 1960s were interested in creating works with the repetition of lines, shapes, or colors to create the visual movement you just experienced with the paintings by Mr. Stella and Ms. Riley. This kind of art is known as **minimalism**. What do you think the term “minimalism” means? (Focus on “minimum” or “mini.”) It refers to the use of a minimum variety of colors, lines, or shapes to create a maximum effect. Everyone get out a piece of paper and three different colors of crayons, then pick one kind of line or shape you like and draw it many times using different colors. (Students create minimalist crayon drawings. When they finish, select some of their works to share and discuss. Point out the similarities and differences within a single drawing and between two different drawings.) Minimalist art can be very repetitive (Figure 1), but as your pictures demonstrate, repetition gives us an opportunity to pay closer attention to details of similarity and contrast we often overlook.

Teacher: Visual patterns help us to organize what we see in the world, but there are other ways to organize our experiences. What do you do when you wake up every morning? (Teacher could humorously pantomime the start to her or his own day.) How do you get ready for school every day? How about patterns in your classroom schedule, or recess? (Discuss movement patterns in games, such as swings, jump rope, etc.) Just as visual patterns organize space, daily routines are patterns that organize your own time. If minimalist painters and sculptors create patterns in space, what kinds of artists create patterns in time? (Musicians, dancers, and poets.) Here is an example of a work by a composer named Philip Glass who created musical patterns based on the repetition of a minimum amount of sound. (Play a recording of Philip Glass “Music in Twelve Parts” (1971).) Mr. Glass created patterns in time by repeating musical figures, much like Mr. Stella created patterns in space by repeating lines and colors.

Teacher: We can find other patterns in time by reading poetry. Let’s read a minimalist poem by Mr. Emmett Williams called “do you remember,” which is based on a pattern of word repetition. See if you can hear and see words that repeat, and we’ll try to figure out the mystery pattern together. (Provide copies of Williams’s poem to the students, and read the following excerpt aloud.

do you remember

when i loved soft pink nights
and you hated hard blue valleys
and i kissed mellow red potatoes
and you loved livid green seagulls
and i hated soft yellow dewdrops
and you kissed hard pink oysters
and i loved mellow blue nights
and you hated livid red valleys
and i kissed soft green potatoes
and you loved hard yellow seagulls
and i hated mellow pink dewdrops
and you kissed livid blue oysters

Which words repeat? (All words; make a list.) Look at the first word of each line, then look at the second word of each line. What patterns do you notice? (and; i, you, i, you.) How about the third word of each line? (loved, hated, kissed.) What do you think is going to happen with the fourth word of each line? (The fourth word of each line rotates through a sequence of four words: soft, hard, mellow, livid.) Work with a partner to find patterns in the fifth and sixth word of each line. (Students discover patterns that comprise the rest of the poem.) See Figure 2.

Teacher: Many patterns include things that you expect and things that you don’t expect—in other words, they have some parts that are predictable and some that are unpredictable. Think of the patterns of your daily
You might have recess at the same time every day, but you probably don’t play the exact same games, the same way, with the same people—your lives have much more variety. What does the term variation mean? (Change that preserves fundamental identity. Demonstrate variations with voice or hairstyle.) The term “variation” means that something is basically recognizable but has some minor changes. We discussed how patterns often consist of repetition and contrast, but they also frequently contain variation. Look at this painting by Victor Vasarely called Marc Positive (1969). What repeats and what changes? (Shapes repeat, colors change.) Within a repeated pattern of two different shapes, there is an unpredictable variety of color.

Teacher: Repetition, contrast, and variation also appear in patterns in time. (Split class into three groups, and assign each group a different sound with a distinct rhythmic profile that they will repeat as they are cued in and out by the teacher.) You just performed a wonderful example of minimalist music that contains repetition (since you made the same sounds over and over again), contrast (since each group made a different sound), and variation (since the order and combination of the groups changed unpredictably). Here is a musical composition performed by Meredith Monk and her friends called Panda Chant I. Listen for the three different groups of sounds that they sing in various combinations, and see if you can guess why Ms. Monk called this piece “Panda Chant.” (Play a recording of Meredith Monk, “Panda Chant I” (1984).)

Teacher: We’ve seen and heard patterns that include repetition, contrast, and variation, but sometimes the patterns themselves change—they can gradually transform before our very eyes or ears like magic. Look at this famous woodcut by Dutch artist M. C. Escher. (Show image of M. C. Escher, “Sky and Water I” (1938).) What is the transformation you see? (Bird to fish.) Where do you see a pattern, and how does the pattern change? (Number of animals per line; black birds on white background to white fish on black background.) Some composers gradually transform musical patterns by adding or subtracting one note at a time, which is called additive process. Composer Steve Reich wrote a musical work called Drumming, which builds a complex rhythm starting with a single beat. (Play a recording of Steve Reich, “Drumming” (1971).) Now listen to a musical composition for piano called Phrygian Gates by John Adams, who uses an additive process to plant a beautiful musical garden that blossoms from the seed of a single note. (Play a recording of John Adams, “Phrygian Gates” (1977).)

Teacher: Everywhere you look or listen you can find many patterns of repetition, contrast, variation, and transformation. These patterns allow us not only to organize the world, but to notice interesting ways that people, places, and things are similar to and different from each other. Has anyone heard the classic expression: “You cannot step in the same river twice”? What do you think this means? (Everything constantly changes.) If everything always changes, then there is actually no such thing as repetition—it is just a way for us to create a sense of order, and to notice subtle differences that show how everything we experience is unique.

Assessment

In addition to the several instances of formative assessment embedded in the lesson activities of the script, consider assigning one of the activities listed below. Classroom teacher Colleen Crandall, for example, asked her students to write an original poem using the literary formula of Emmett Williams’s “do you remember” (see Figure 3). Students then read their poem aloud in front of the class. Also, to review concepts and encourage the retention of important terms and people associated with this lesson, go through the “Word Wall” of new vocabulary within this lesson and ask students, who could work in pairs, to share what they learned about each term. Design a simple worksheet (see Figure 4) where the answers will be drawn from the Word Wall terms. Review the completed worksheet with the students, reshowing visual art and replaying musical examples as necessary.
Additional Classroom Activities

Build a story, dance, or song, one word, movement, or sound at a time.

Teacher or one student sings one note or performs a single sound as body percussion. Another student repeats the first musical idea and adds a new one. The third student repeats the first two sounds and adds a third, and so on.

Using the formula of Emmett Williams’s poem “do you remember,” construct an original poem in groups of four or five students, or with the entire class.

Reflections

It is expected that teachers will modify the script to reflect curricular needs or the abilities and interests of the students. The lesson above, however, proved effective in Colleen Crandall’s Grades 4 and 5 classroom, as she describes,

Students in my class at Rosa Parks Elementary School range from Kindergarten level to Grade 7 in their abilities in English Language Arts and Mathematics—only two students are at grade level in both areas—but I was amazed to see the amount of participation by all students. Meredith Monk’s *Panda Chant* was the overall favorite of the class, and the Emmett Williams poem with the sequenced words really tied in nicely with Language Arts. The presence of patterns in so many situations captured the interest of all students, and I expect they will find patterns in places they might not have noticed prior to this presentation. (Colleen Crandall, teacher, Rosa Parks Elementary School, San Diego, CA)

Conclusion

Minimalist art, music, and poetry will stimulate the imagination of students as they discover different ways to recognize, analyze, and create patterns in various media. Since the preceding model is based on the comparison of structural principles rather than stylistic factors, educators and students may apply these principles to virtually any perceptual form beyond the realm of art. Examples of repetition and gradual processes pervade numerous disciplines in the humanities and the sciences, and teachers are encouraged to integrate content areas wherever it may be relevant. Pattern identification is a standards-based instructional element not only in music but also in mathematics (e.g., number sequences and statistics), natural and social sciences (e.g., experimental predictions), visual art (e.g., unity/disunity of color, line, and shape), and reading and language arts (e.g., sentence grammar, rhetorical figures, rhyme schemes, and poetic forms). Through the practice of organizing a collection of random data into patterns and, conversely, interpreting patterns from multiple perspectives, students will be able to cultivate new meaning and value from a diverse array of information.

Additional music selections that reflect principles of minimalism:
Terry Riley, *In C* (1964)
Steve Reich, “Come Out” (1966)
Alvin Lucier, “I Am Sitting in a Room” (1969)
La Monte Young, *Dream House* (1973)
Philip Glass, *Einstein on the Beach* (1976)
Pauline Oliveros, *Horse Sings From Cloud* (1977)
Stephen Scott, “Minerva’s Web” (1985)

Other artists and poets whose works reflect principles of minimalism:

*Visual artists:* Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Sol Le Witt, Brice Marden, Agnes Martin, Kenneth Noland, Andy Warhol

*Poets:* Ian Hamilton Finlay, Ilse and Pierre Garnier, Eugen Gomringer, Ronald Johnson, Jackson Mac Low, Edwin Morgan

For other literary examples of minimalist processes, consider introducing the concept of *anaphora* (the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of each line), poetic forms based on systematically recurring words or lines (such as the sestina or villanelle), or ritualistic chants and mantras from various cultures.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**References**


**Discography**


**Websites**

Escher, M. C. *Sky and Water I* (http://www.mcescher.com)

Judd, D. *Untitled (Stack)* (http://www.moma.org)

Riley, B. *Blaze I* (http://www.karinsanders.com)

Stella, F. *Marriage of Reason and Squalor II* (www.moma.org)

Stella, F. *Hyena Stomp* (http://www.tate.org.uk)

Vasarely, V. *Marc Positive* (http://allencentre.wikispaces.com/Colour+in+Art)

**Bios**

Eric Smigel, who has served as a docent at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and as an art educator for the International House of Blues Foundation, is an associate professor of music at San Diego State University in San Diego, CA.

Nan L. McDonald teaches music education and integrated arts to future music specialists and classroom teachers as a professor of music at San Diego State University in San Diego, CA.