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Development and Evaluation of a Project-Based Learning Module for Teaching Hunan Folk Music to Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT: In an era of globalisation, educators face ongoing challenges in sustaining local cultural heritage within formal curricula. This paper describes the design, implementation, and formative evaluation of a project-based learning (PBL) module on Hunan folk music for undergraduate education in China. The study addresses a gap in many tertiary music programmes, where curricula remain dominated by Western music theory and offer limited practical, culturally situated learning. Using a Design and Development Research (DDR) framework, the study proceeded in three stages: (1) needs analysis, (2) design and development of the PBL module based on expert consensus, and (3) a formative assessment of usability and feasibility. The module integrates PBL pedagogy with Hutchinson and Waters' Needs Analysis Model and Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory to support culturally responsive learning. The needs analysis indicated a perceived need for more innovative and student-centred approaches to teaching traditional music. Importantly, this study reports developmental evidence (expert review and classroom observation) and does not include quantitative outcome measures (e.g., pre/post tests) of student learning gains.

Classroom observations further suggested that the module was practical to implement and was associated with sustained student engagement and perceived intercultural appreciation. This work offers educators and curriculum developers a documented model for incorporating ethnomusicology into higher-education teaching and for iteratively refining culturally responsive PBL materials; however, the findings should be interpreted as formative rather than as measured effects on learning outcomes.

KEYWORDS: Project-Based Learning, Hunan Folk Music, Music Education, Cultural Heritage, Curriculum Development, Design and Development Research

INTRODUCTION

Within the process of globalization, the national culture of each nation represents an important piece of humanity, as it contributes to the overall cultural identity and the multicultural continuity of the world (Appadurai, 1996; UNESCO, 2003). The world has given attention to the assimilation of the traditional culture of a society into the education system as a way to sustain and advocate for the cultural legacies of a society (Banks, 2006). A number of countries have been active in the advocacy of the educational preservation and promotion of their cultural legacies. For example, Italy and France in Europe have included traditional arts and crafts in their educational system, which has fostered a sense of national pride and cultural awareness (Borucka, Parrinello & Picchio, 2023; Boustany, 2019). Likewise, educational initiatives in Japan aim at the preservation of traditional performing arts, while India stresses the role of classical music and dance in the formation of cultural identity (Thornbury,1997; Ramakrishna, 2022).

As Shen (2023) notes, recent Chinese education discourse has emphasised integrating traditional culture into curricula as part of heritage transmission and national identity-building. China has a long cultural history, and curriculum guidance has highlighted traditional culture, including music, arts, and philosophy, as a component of cultural literacy. In policy terms, institutions have been encouraged to incorporate traditional culture into teaching and to provide opportunities for students to engage with it in contemporary contexts (Tang, 2021).

In policy discourse since the mid-2010s, the term "文化自信" (cultural self-confidence) has been used to justify strengthening heritage-oriented education and cultural transmission in schools (The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2014).

This policy orientation is also reflected in national guidance documents on transmitting and developing "excellent traditional culture" (issued January 25, 2017), which frame traditional culture as central to national development and call for strengthening mechanisms for cultural transmission, cultural production, and international cultural communication, with milestones set for 2025.

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Within this policy context, aesthetic education positions arts and music as vehicles for cultural transmission and creative development across educational levels (General Office of the CPC Central Committee, 2020).

Following national-level guidance, the Hunan provincial government issued "Hunan Comprehensively Strengthens and Improves School Aesthetic Education in the New Era" on September 13, 2022, emphasising the value of Hunan's historical legacy and the integration of local culture into school pedagogy.

Hunan has a great wealth of diversity in its folk music, like the Hunan Huagu Opera, and Changsha Tanci along with the other traditional folk songs. Hunan music also has a great deal of diversity in the region characterized by diversity of melody, rhythm, and performance technique (Yang, 2020). On the other side, there are issues like concept, curriculum, and inheritance and development, regarding the education of Hunan folk music (Yang, 2020). The major issues have to do with the concept of the education system and the lack of emphasis on the development of traditional music as seen in curriculum design, the actual pedagogy, and the sustainability as well as practicality of the system (Liu, 2024; Jiang, 2024).

The implications due to such an educational gap can be considerable. Students in undergraduate programs become educators, interpreters, and even cultural representatives. They need to know and appreciate different strands of traditional Chinese music. The educational gap in Hunan folk music means students are less able to understand and value local cultural assets, and even less appreciate other strands of Chinese traditional music.

Incorporating traditional music teaching in classrooms that are flexible and adopt active learning methodologies is crucial in this context. One of the most applicable and effective pedagogical strategies to encourage cultural learning and deep engagement is Project-Based Learning (PBL). Cultural education is about solving real life problems in collaborative teams. In PBL, students can develop projects that include researching, performing, and even adapting Hunan folk music.

The historical development of Hunan folk music is important. It can help shape the integration of PBL and other contemporary educational approaches with music. The integration helps students acquire more musical skills and understand their culture better as educational environments become more innovative.

This study proposes to develop and assess a project-based learning (PBL) module to teach Hunan folk music to undergraduate students, addressing the imbalance between students' technical musical proficiency and their cultural understanding. The module aims, through PBL techniques, to provide students with enhanced opportunities to experience, practise, and develop musical skills alongside culturally situated awareness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The State of Folk Music Education

Educational approaches to the teaching of folk music differ across various stages of schooling, shaped by teaching objectives, the availability of teaching materials, and the students' musical background. In early childhood education, folk music is presented using participatory methods, such as games and storytelling, to help the children make a primary connection. As students move to the Compulsory and Secondary Education stages, the focus shifts to the students' cultural identity as national folk music is included to foster a sense cultural identity and appreciation of one's heritage. Folk music education at the university level is more advanced and in professional programs of music education, there is a fusion of western and Chinese music pedagogy and in other educational general courses, the focus is to improve the overall cultural literacy of the students (Yang & Welch, 2023).

Despite these efforts, persistent challenges remain in folk music education across schooling levels. In primary education and in rural contexts, key constraints include insufficient specialist teachers and limited teaching materials. Misalignments between curriculum intentions and local cultural contexts may also reduce student engagement. In senior high school, programmes often emphasise listening over performance, limiting opportunities for musical creativity. In countries with substantial internal geo-ethnic diversity, such as China, these challenges are compounded by the difficulty of developing curricula that are both coherent and locally responsive.

In higher education, there is a considerable challenge presented by the variety of students' musical experiences, including students in general education courses, who may have a varying degree of interest and skill in folk music, and students in professional music programs who, although they have a high degree of technical musical proficiency, tend to have a shallow understanding of the theoretical elements of traditional Chinese folk music, as a consequence of the enduring predominance of Western music theory in the curriculum (Yang & Welch, 2023). Such a situation is especially problematic in light of the important responsibilities of higher education in sustaining and advancing folk music traditions (Shi, 2021; Xu & Charoennit, 2022).

The Case of Hunan Folk Music

Jiang (2021) reports that Hunan Province hosts dozens of universities offering courses related to the region's diverse folk music and culture; however, implementation challenges persist. Some universities designated for cultural-heritage work function as preservation bases largely in name only (Xu & Charoennit, 2022). Where courses are offered, provision can be fragmented, limiting the development of coherent teaching materials (Jiang, 2021). In addition, institutions in areas with ethnic-minority communities may have limited capacity or incentives for sustained, practice-oriented heritage engagement (Zhou & Chuangprakhon, 2023).

Project-Based Learning as a Pedagogical Solution

The most recent additions to the music programs in China's higher education institutions are now being redesigned to include innovation, entrepreneurship, integration, and the overall growth of the student (Wang & Li, 2023; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022). Folk music education also faces challenges, and in all other educational fields, PBL (Project Based Learning) continues to be an effective solution (Nurhidayah, Wibowo & Astra, 2021). Because of PBL's focus on practice, the pedagogy also supports deep and active learning. The

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incorporation of PBL in folk music education has the potential to promote educational equity, enhance the quality of teaching, and develop music educators with innovative and practical competencies (Saputra et al., 2023).

At present, none of the studies or research assume the working model of the PBL in the context of the undergraduate Hunan folk music education. PBL in education has been documented theoretically in considerable details as compared to the rest of the studies based on practical cases (Nurhidayah, Wibowo & Astra, 2021). A few cases where PBL has been documented in detail, there are a number of challenges. Specific and comprehensive project design documents are absent and contextualization with the aspects of Hunan folk music and with the essence of the students is also missing. Also, weak project management and control of the processes and deficiencies in the project's supervision and facilitation make the attainment of the target educational outcomes difficult (Liu, 2024).

This research seeks to fill these gaps by designing and implementing a PBL module that has a specific focus on Hunan folk music and education at the undergraduate level. The focus of the module will involve a multifaceted approach that includes classroom learning, field study, and music theory and composition, having taken into account the various aspects that make Hunan folk music unique and the relevant characteristics of the learners. Through expert feedback and empirical piloting, relevant project ideas and activities will be determined, and the interconnections among them will be made more explicit, in a bid to facilitate students engagement and inheritance of the customs and practices of Hunan folk traditions. In addition, the PBL module will be designed to collect evidence on the teaching of the module to support evaluation of the outcomes and to shape the module for future iterations, optimising its potential in the teaching of folk music. More importantly, the present study seeks to be a resource in the dialogue on the teaching of folk music in more innovative ways as a means of preserving culture within the higher education sector.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study relies on a particular theoretical framework that interweaves sociocultural learning theory, models of curriculum design, and models of curriculum evaluation. The primary teaching technique used is project-based learning, a pedagogical constructivist approach that focuses on students' inquiry and hands-on engagement (Thomas, 2000). PBL is particularly suited for folk music education, as it provides opportunities for students to investigate, rather than simply be told about, the music's cultural and historical context (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). The design of the PBL module is also influenced by constructivist theory, which asserts that learning is a process whereby the learner actively makes and rebuilds knowledge from their experiences and interactions within and with the environment (Dewey, 1938). In music education, this interaction and engagement is realised through playing, composing, and improvising, and not through the passive reception of information (Rolinska, 2021).

Addressing learners' needs by including Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) Needs Analysis Model helps ensure the PBL module is effective. This model helps teachers specify target needs the students must be able to do (in this case, use the language of music) and learning needs (the ways students prefer to learn). By identifying the gaps between the desired assessable outcome for the students and the current knowledge and skills of the students, the needs analysis adjusts and focuses the curriculum to ensure it is of interest and motivational (Qadar, Rahman, and ur Rehman, 2020).

Moreover, the study employs Hofstede's (2001) Cultural Dimensions Theory to gauge the extent of the impact of culture on students' learning and the use of the PBL module. Hofstede identified several dimensions of cultural variability including power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance and the impact of each on the classroom (Nickerson, 2023). To account for these cultural dimensions, the study attempts to design a culturally inclusive and sensitive learning environment (Yang, 2019).

To conclude, the assessment within the PBL module is also guided by Tessmer's Model of Formative Evaluation (1993), which involves various forms of evaluation: expert judgement, one-on-one evaluation, small group evaluation, and field testing (Dick, Carey, and Carey, 2015). Through the integration of various reviewers throughout the developmental sequence, formative evaluation serves to repeatedly clarify and hone the instructional materials to make them effective and useable (Dick, Carey, and Carey, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

In this study, a Design and Development Research (DDR) framework was used to design and analyze a Project-Based Learning (PBL) module for the instruction of Hunan folk music at the undergraduate level. Educational research and intervention design benefitted from the systematic iterative approach of any framework. The research was conducted in three segments: Needs Analysis, Design and Development, and Evaluation.

Phase 1: Needs Analysis

To analyse possible outcomes from developments in project-based learning modules pertaining to undergraduate Hunan folk music instruction, our aims in this phase were to elucidate the need which this phase sought to answer: What are the needs for designing and developing a Project Based Learning (PBL) module for teaching Hunan folk music to undergraduate students?

To this, we applied a mixed approach wherein quantitative and qualitative studies were executed. Participants this time were undergraduate students sampled cross-sectionally from a range of tertiary Hunan Province institutions. Instruments in this phase comprised of questionnaires and focus groups. These questionnaires aimed to measure the students' knowledge, attitude, and preferences in learning Hunan folk music, while focus groups were designed to gather qualitative data regarding students' perceptions of the curricula and new learning module(s).

Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while focus-group data were analysed thematically. These findings served a formative purpose by informing the design choices and iterative refinement of the module in Phase 2.

Phase 2: Design and Development

Phase two in this research study was predicated on the design and development of the PBL module. What this phase of the study aimed to answer was: In what ways can expert opinion facilitate/streamline the overall design and development of a module that adopts a project-based learning approach to teach and appreciate Hunan folk music?

In order to determine an expert consensus around the content and construct of the PBL module, the Fuzzy Delphi Method (FDM) was utilised. FDM stands as an extension to the classic Delphi method through the incorporation of fuzzy logic to ameliorate the controversy and uncertainty

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associated with expert opinions and judgements. Music educators, ethnomusicologists, and performers of Hunan folk music all comprised the panel of experts in this stage.

Within this stage, each expert was requested to evaluate the significance of a number of topics, learning activities, and assessment techniques concerning the PBL module. The FDM was then utilized to evaluate the expert responses, differentiating the items that reached consensus from those that did not. The resulting outputs of the FDM analysis were then used to design a PBL module that incorporated a sequence of projects that required student research, performance, and creativity in Hunan folk music.

Phase 3: Evaluation

The last part of the study sought to evaluate the PBL module, guided by the research question: How usable and feasible is the PBL teaching module, as determined by experts and feedback rounds?

For this part evaluation, Tessmer's (1993) Formative Evaluation Model was the framework utilized and comprised various tiers of evaluation, to include expert review, one-to-one, small group, and triangulation to the field. In this case study, the focus of the evaluation was on expert review and classroom field observation.

For the expert review, we enlisted a different group of experts from the design phase to look at the PBL module. The experts were asked to consider the potential and the design of the module, and the engagement of students. The feedback from the expert review was used to make further revisions to the module, as in a loop.

The PBL module was then implemented in a classroom at the university and after which the module was observed by the researchers who were there to document the teaching process, participation by students, and challenges. The information gathered during the classroom observation was used to assess the module and determine different parameters to be optimized for functionality of the module.

RESULTS

Phase 1: Needs Analysis

The needs analysis showed the demand for a more interactive and hands-on methodology concerning the pedagogy of Hunan folk music. Survey results showed there is a general interest from learners to comprehend and appreciate the local cultural heritage and traditions; however, there is a disparity between the interest to learn about the local cultural heritage and the learners' perception of the curriculum in addressing such interest; in fact, only 15% of the respondents believed that the curriculum offered in the course is fulfilling of such interest. Additionally, it was found that the course content is predominantly theoretical and lacks hands-on engagement. Focus group students' interviews further validated the findings, wherein learners stated the lack of "active" and "creative" of the course content and pedagogy. The interviews' thematic analysis revealed the cultural music context and the need to learn from and practice with performing musicians the missing elements to adequate and furthered the students actioned needs harmonious with students' plea for more engagement and diverse performances.

Phase 2: Design and Development

The Fuzzy Delphi Method (FDM) revealed considerable agreement among experts regarding the building blocks of the PBL module. The experts advocated, with considerable agreement, including activities that combined research, performance, and composition. The module also included, with no disagreement, the incorporation of fieldwork, specifically visits to and participation in listening to traditional performances and local folk music. The results from the FDM guided the design of a modular curriculum with 3 major projects:

Project 1: The Researcher-Performer. The participants in this project researched a specific genre of Hunan folk music, did fieldwork to interview a local folk musician, and a performance of a traditional piece.

Project 2: The Creative Arranger. Students in this project were encouraged to rearrange a traditional Hunan folk song for a contemporary ensemble by altering the harmonies and adding new instruments, but preserving the original rhythmic and melodic ideas.

Project 3: The Community Music Educator. For the culminating project, the students collaborated in teams to develop and implement a workshop on Hunan folk music for a local community organization or school. The purpose of this project was to enhance students' pedagogical competencies and to share specialized knowledge with the broader community.

Phase 3: Evaluation

The developmental assessment of the PBL module received positive remarks on its usability and feasibility. The expert review panel evaluated the module as having clearly defined, accessible learning goals, well-designed projects, and a solid correspondence with the fundamentals of PBL. The experts applauded the module for its focus on the learning experience and its capacity to nurture a greater understanding and appreciation of Hunan folk music.

Classroom oversight while the module was in operation affirmed its practicality for the university. There was a notable enthusiasm and interest in all three projects, and enduring student engagement was demonstrated by the researchers. Students were actively engaged in the research of the project, and their enthusiasm and creativity were displayed during fieldwork as well as in the workshops they designed and arranged music for. The projects' cooperative elements also appeared to create a positive and constructive environment for learning. There were some logistical concerns, mainly in organising fieldwork and acquiring some of the materials needed, but they were not seen as major challenges preventing the successful use of the module.

DISCUSSION

This study explores the feasibility and perceived value of a project-based learning approach for teaching Hunan folk music at the undergraduate level. Across the needs analysis, expert review, and classroom observations, the module was judged to be usable and contextually appropriate; however, the evaluation was developmental and descriptive, and it did not include quantitative outcome measures of student learning gains. The findings therefore support the module's plausibility and implementation readiness rather than establishing causal effects on achievement.

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The needs analysis has strongly exposed the desire for practical and enjoyable learning experiences, leading to a grievance against the current state of many music education programs. Students demand performance, contact with professional musicians, and cultural insights into the music, indicating a clear shortcoming of conventional teaching methods. These sentiments reflect the literature on the role of genuine learning experiences in motivating and engaging students (Thomas, 2000). Considering the emphasis on practical projects, community engagement, and artistic work, the PBL module adequately addresses these demands and affords students a more comprehensive and fulfilling educational experience.

This demonstrates the successful design and development of the unit based on expert agreement through the Fuzzy Delphi Method and reflects the collaborative and empirical approach of the curriculum. FDM defended the design of the module to be based on evidence of sound pedagogy and the practical knowledge of seasoned schoolteachers/ethnomusicologists, and musicians. The endorsement of the module by the experts on its essential components of the integration of research, performance, and composition; fieldwork; and community engagement provided ample credibility to the design of the module. The process guaranteed that the module was not only pedagogically sound, but also culturally and contextually relevant, which is essential when working with intangible cultural heritage.

Overall, the formative evaluation provides supportive evidence for the module's usability and feasibility. Expert reviewers judged the module to have clear learning goals, coherent projects, and alignment with core PBL principles, and classroom observation indicated sustained participation during the project activities. Implementation challenges (notably fieldwork logistics and access to materials) were identified but appear manageable with institutional planning and, where appropriate, virtual or hybrid alternatives (Xiao, 2022).

This study contributes to the project-based learning literature by offering one of the few detailed, practice-oriented descriptions of PBL module design for undergraduate folk music education, specifically in the Hunan context. It also demonstrates how Hutchinson and Waters' Needs Analysis Model and Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory can be operationalised within a DDR process to support culturally responsive curriculum design. Practically, the paper provides a replicable module structure (projects, activities, and formative review steps) that educators and curriculum developers can adapt for other folk-music traditions and related arts-and-humanities contexts.

Despite the encouraging developmental evidence, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study involved a relatively small sample from a specific region and cultural context, limiting transferability. Second, the evaluation did not include quantitative measures of student learning outcomes; instead, it relied on expert review and classroom observation. These qualitative data provide insight into feasibility and learner engagement but do not allow statistical estimation of learning gains. Future studies could incorporate larger and more diverse samples, pre- and post-testing of targeted competencies, and longitudinal follow-up to evaluate learning outcomes and the durability of the module's effects.

CONCLUSION

This study has implemented, evaluated, and developed a PBL course module focusing on Hunan folk music and has accurately demonstrated the need to move away from a teacher-centred approach to pedagogy while also providing a solution to the dormant question of how to revitalise folk music pedagogy in the higher education context. This study has developed a module focused on student-centred inquiry, experiential learning, and immersion in PBL, which has been able to address the need for an approach that is both realistic and usable in the context of education to develop/understand a significant repayment of folk music and PBL.

This research emphasises the importance and impact of PBL on concluding the disconnect between theory and practice, and between the classroom and the community. The module has enhanced the students' musical skills and facilitated deeper and personalized connections and appreciation of the students' culture by allowing them to fully engage in meaningful and authentic projects. The study's conclusions are of great value to educators and practitioners at all levels, to the developers of educational programs, and to policymakers and other members of the community working to promote and protect elements of intangible cultural heritage in a globalized society. The study advocates for the integration of technologies and innovative pedagogies in the classroom to inspire the new advocates for culture and heritage.

Given these constraints, future research should build on the present module by testing it across additional institutional settings and by extending evaluation beyond formative feasibility evidence. In particular, combining iterative design with clearly specified learning outcomes, pre/post assessment, and longer-term follow-up would strengthen claims about educational impact. At the same time, the present study's main contribution is to document a workable, culturally situated PBL pathway for engaging students with Hunan folk music in higher education.

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