



# Teaching in a Different Key

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by Ken Robinson

There are many people who work in other professions who can work alongside teachers and bring their energy, enthusiasm, and specific expertise to education. To do that, they don't have to be trained as teachers. They do need to

have dual passions: a passion for a particular discipline and a passion for sharing their enthusiasm with children. Neil Johnston is one such person. While he was still in college, he started his company Store Van Music as a vehicle for his musical compositions and productions. To generate the extra income a start-up always needs, he began teaching music in a nearby school two days a week.

“The school was in quite a deprived area,” he told me. “There were two kids out of a school of six hundred learning guitar. That was the only one-to-one music program the school had.

“I love the way digital changed the music industry,” Neil said, “but the love and passion I had for the music industry wasn't reflected at all by what I saw in the classroom. The bit that really struck me was that the groups of learners we had the most difficulty with were the same groups of learners that would sit during break time and lunchtime with their phones out listening to music. They all loved music, but they hated music lessons.”

With limited time and limited resources, Neil tried to bring a fresher and more relevant approach to music to his students. He was working on commercials and doing scores for video games, and would bring his work into the classroom to get his kids involved in the process. Those who could not see the point in learning about a centuries-old composition began to perk up at the idea of brainstorming for something that might show up on their PlayStation or Xbox.

At the same time, he started talking to the kids about music from their perspective, by using the songs they were listening to on their phones during breaks. “Everyone has an opinion about

music, whether they love it or hate it. I'll play Britney Spears in a classroom and there might be thirty kids who adore it. And there will be however many that hate it—and they're prepared to voice their opinion about it. But it gets the conversation started. They're engaged. They're not desperate to go on their phone and look at Facebook while we're in class. They're not getting distracted.”

Seeing the connection he was beginning to forge between the kids and music education, Neil started bringing bands into schools for one-day rock and pop workshops. Predictably (at least at this point), the workshops were hugely popular, and this drew the attention of a number of corporations fascinated with what he was doing. Apple contacted Store Van Music to begin a conversation about how they might be able to work together, but while there was mutual interest, there wasn't a clear opportunity.

Then Apple released the iPad and everything changed. “It really caught my eye when the iPad came out. I thought that this was brilliant and just what I needed to teach music—a touchable interface with some great apps so the kids don't need to know a musical instrument to take part. When the iPad 2 launched, they launched a GarageBand app, and I got straight on the phone to Apple and said, ‘Can I borrow a ton of these? I want to try something.’”

Neil wanted to try a program designed around teaching students music from the inside of the experience by having them play songs rather than simply study songs. Prior to this, such a program would only have been available to students who had access to instruments and had the interest and discipline to learn the rudiments. With GarageBand on the iPad, this was no longer necessary. The tablet and the app turned students into guitarists, drummers, saxophonists, and more, with just a few clicks.

“The thing about using tablets is that there are no barriers to entry for kids. We can get a group of kids who don't play anything to exercise the listening skills that a band needs to succeed. They don't need to know a scale. We can set the scale on the iPad, and they only need to use the same skills a kid would use to tap on a triangle to keep in time. It doesn't exclude the kids that are doing great, either. You can give them a lot of challenging tasks as well.”

The students responded to the program with great enthusiasm, much more than Neil had anticipated. Soon, Store Van was doing workshops with a large number of schools in the south of the U.K. “We made a video in June 2011 demonstrating the use of this as a teaching tool. Up until then, we had had a relationship with fifty to sixty schools in a focused area. When the video

went up, we started getting invited all over the world. Education is 60 percent of our business now. We did a U.S. tour back in 2012.”

While the success of the program might have been part of Store Van’s expansion plan, there were some considerable surprises as well, maybe none more than seeing a song he recorded with the four hundred students at Gaywood Primary School hit No. 1 on the iTunes charts. Meanwhile, a video of Neil creating the song “You Make Me So Electric” with a group of students has been viewed hundreds of thousands of times on YouTube.

Neil is quick to note that he has certain advantages with his one-day workshops over the teachers that work with students every single day. It’s a bit like the divorced dad who sees his child once a week and showers the kid with treats. When Store Van Music is around, every day is a holiday.

“Because we don’t come from a straight teaching background, we probably throw things at kids that others might not. We’ll challenge them. We’ll give them forty minutes to come up with a piece of music for a TV commercial.” However, he notes that “We’re also there for the teacher. What we’ve learned is that we’re inspiring teachers as much as we’re working with kids.” By giving his workshops practical relevance—showing kids how to play a song, write a jingle, and release a tune into the world—Neil engages students, whether they are interested in music as a profession or not, at an entirely different level than if he were simply trying to get them to appreciate the great masters.

“Linking industry to education makes learning relevant. Things have moved on so much from the textbook. Information is just as relevant as it always was, but it needs to be put across in a more up-to-date way. If kids can see this in a real-life example, that’s what makes a difference.”