

Teaching Music Literacy Through the Guitar Elective: A Differentiated Approach

The guitar elective offers an access point to music education for students of all musical backgrounds, including those that may not have participated in a music class before. Students of all learning styles and needs are given the opportunity to explore the practice of musical interest, whether it be for personal or group music making. This is an especially amazing opportunity to empower students with special needs! However, when considering students with special needs, educators must be ready to differentiate approaches.

With learning an instrument comes learning forms of music literacy. While great resources, methods books will not speak to the needs of every student-or interests. Guitar actually lends itself to quite a few forms of music notation. Within those forms of notation are a range of adaptations to offer students and support their personal guitar playing goals. Most commonly, adaptations consist of adjusting three key points of notation formats: size, color, and pacing. Such adaptations will benefit students with vision impairment, specific learning disabilities, difficulty with executive functioning or working memory, anxiety, and more.

Standard staff notation is the most common form of notation used in music education, but requires a lot of decoding and memorization from our students. In fact, Tan, Wakefield, & Jeffries (2009) found that most untrained musicians had difficulty interpreting standard staff notation. Most often, participants misinterpreted notation to represent what it seemed to most closely resemble visually. For example, a whole note was thought to represent a rest, and spacing of notes thought to represent tempo (Tan et al, 2009). Staff notation is also often visually inaccessible to students with specific learning disabilities or vision impairment due to its color and organizational scheme. Various adjustments to the organization of music handouts, such as minimizing the amount of information being presented at once, can benefit students. Additional supports such as resizing, adding in fingerings, or color coding notes to match a color coded guitar fretboard are also highly beneficial in supporting a student with music literacy goals.

Staff notation is widely used for all instruments, but is not commonly used in online databases for guitar instructional material. Most online resources use tablature to notate popular guitar songs, enabling students to seek out songs of interest with their literacy skills. Tablature is a music notation specific to guitar, and it is more akin to graphic notation in nature. Lines represent the six strings of a guitar and numbers represent finger placement. Through color coding, tab notation becomes even more accessible in representing pitches on the guitar as they relate to frets. While the addition of colors to correlate with fret colors can support students in identifying pitches on the guitar, it does nothing to support rhythm reading. By modifying a color coded tab to be represented by blocks, rather than numbers, blocks can then be adjusted to visually represent a pitch's length of duration. This mode of rhythmic representation is akin to many Youtube piano tutorial videos, or MIDI notes in a music recording program. This Color Adapted Tab can be faded for practicality reasons when a student is ready.

Reading chord charts is another common form of music literacy for many guitar players. If a student finds the common chord chart accessible, but is having difficulty applying the information, then simplifying the chords themselves can be a helpful adjustment. If the chord chart is a source of confusion, then colors also prove helpful in the decoding of finger placement. Similar accommodations can be made to a chord chart that is represented in tablature for students that prefer this form of reading.

Many of these adaptations can be made in popular music notation programs. Noteflight is a web based platform that allows for a simple creation of staff or tab notation. With a free account, educators can adjust size and spacing of notes. However, adjusting the color of a note will not be available to free account users. Due to its web based nature, Noteflight does not work with plug-ins developed for adaptive notations. If a user does access the colored font feature, they are limited to Classroom Colors of seven different hues.

MuseScore is a free program that educators can download for unlimited use. Users can adjust the size, spacing, and font of staff and tab notation. Users can also adjust the color of singular and groups of notes to their choosing, from a panel of color choices. Plugins are possible in MuseScore, but fairly more complicated to execute on the user's behalf. Users also have the opportunity to upload a small amount of files to the online Musescore platform.

Finale is a paid program that many educators can purchase with a discount. Users can also adjust size and placement of notes in both staff and tablature notation. Color coding is available but is tied to pitch, which will make it difficult to use for fret specific accommodations. However, many adapted notation plug-ins have been developed with Finale in mind. Specifically, the Color Adapted Tab is accessible in Finale through a premade template. Users can simply open the Color Adapted Tab template to write their own original tab, and with a selection from the Plugin menu, the tab will translate to the Color Adapted Tab! Finale can be linked up with the online platform of SmartMusic for staff notation and standard tablature notation.

Instructional videos for how to create a tab in Noteflight, MuseScore, and Finale are available with this presentation, as well as a tutorial for creating individualized Color Adapted Tabs. Educators can access a free download and an instructional sheet for using Color Adapted Tab templates through this presentation as well. Educators can also access a variety of already made handouts for teaching lead and rhythm guitar through www.SarahFardMusicEd.com. These handouts are available in a variety of notation formats to ensure that all students can follow the same curriculum and fade into forms of notation if need be.

Most important is to have a variety of music literacy formats available to students. Music literacy can be a powerful tool, but can also be a barrier to music making if not appropriate to the student's learning style or musical goals. With a differentiated approach, each budding guitarist has a chance to lead their own guitar path.