

The one-person music department

KS3/4/5

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Introduction: why am I writing this resource?

Working as a one-person music department is an important topic, and one that's close to my heart. I have been in a one-person department for most of my career. At times I've had colleagues, but they were often working part-time or across schools. Even now, I have two days a week where I'm essentially on my own. This is far from unusual: music is a subject where you're often the only specialist in the school, something that's also true of other arts subjects such as drama, art and dance. Languages teachers may also be working in isolation, as well as colleagues in other small departments.

Being in this situation isn't easy, but in this resource, we'll be looking at some ideas on how to make it work for you, and things you can do to make yourself feel less isolated, even lonely. It's important to realise that you're not alone: we'll also look at ideas for building your network, because we're all part of a network of music teachers around the world.

The challenges we face

Working in isolation presents several challenges:

- 1 There's nobody to bounce ideas off before or after a lesson.
- 2 A lack of support with extra-curricular offering.
- 3 During exam season, you won't have someone on site to moderate with.
- 4 Working in isolation can be lonely, something that's not good for our mental health.
- 5 If you're a one-person department, you will have to do more work for key events such as parents evenings and open evenings, and when you're writing reports.

Clearly, this is something worthy of thought. How can we counteract the negative effects and overcome the challenges of working in isolation? This resource will be looking at all of the challenges mentioned above and more.

Planning

When you're working on your own, it's important that you plan your time wisely. You'll need not only to consider what you have to do inside the classroom, but also the extra-curricular dimension. Here are a few things to consider when planning your year:

- 1 If it's just you, then you simply can't do everything outside of the classroom. So plan your extra-curricular activities so that you can maximise the number of students involved, and therefore maximise your interactions. Engagement is important, and you need to plan for groups that will encourage students.
- 2 When you look at the year ahead, think about any pinchpoints where you're going to have greater workload. Flag this up in advance so that your senior leadership team have a chance to put in place some solutions for you. These times of heavy workload may come around the time coursework is due. Planning a recording day or a composition session is possibly the best approach. Ensure that you get the time to record students, otherwise you'll end up doing a huge amount of work outside the working day.
- 3 Plan when you can meet with other music teachers in your local area. If they don't already meet, then aim to organise a meeting. Make this regular, and plan for how you'll get the most out of the meeting. You could have a theme, such as curriculum or events.
- 4 If you have the budget, plan for visitors to come to your department, ensuring you spread them out across the year. This could be a visitor practitioner or a small performance group. You can't do it all, so getting others in can be really useful in a one-person department.

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MONKEY BUSINESS

5 At the start of the year, or (better still) the end of the academic year, make sure you find out what SLT will want from the music department in the following year. You need a plan so that you have music ready for key school events. If you're working on your own, then putting things together at the last minute is really not an option.

When you plan, remember you are just one person who can't do it all. That mindset is important, and you should share it with your SLT.

Performing arts staff

Assuming that your school has other arts staff, you're not alone in music. Working with other performing arts teachers is a way for you to feel less isolated and part of a team. You may need to form an 'unofficial' faculty in your school, or it might be that this structure already exists. The more you work with other arts staff, the more you'll benefit and feel less alone in your role.

One way to solidify relationships with other staff is to work on projects with them. You might work with your drama teachers to put on a small- or large-scale event in your school. The art department might help you provide posters and advertising for events, or maybe even set painting for school shows.

A school musical is a natural way to bring together all arts teachers as you attempt to teach students to sing, act and dance. A school show can also draw on business studies students, who can help with marketing, ticket sales and event management.

Community

Whether it's in your school community, or in the wider community, there's likely to be a source of support if you're working in a one-person department. Initially, it's always good to connect with parents to see what they can offer your music department in terms of time, skills and talents. You should then look further afield and aim to make partnerships with local business and arts providers. Most towns have a local arts centre or theatre, which can be a great place to find like-minded people who can partner with you. While connecting like this won't affect your day-to-day life, it will provide you with a chance to work with others during the year.

One way to form links with the community is to get out with your students. Finding events to perform at will show people that music is alive, and then you can discuss with them how they can support you.

Friends or PTA group

One of the best things I've done in my career is help in the forming of an official friends group that supports music. It all started with a raffle, and now it's a registered charity. Not only do they support me, but they also help to bring in money. Here are some of the benefits that this kind of group can have for the one-person department:

- ▶ They bring in money and support the music department directly.
- ▶ They can arrange the logistics around events, as well as providing volunteers at those events.
- ▶ They can be a sounding board for your ideas and vision, as well as asking the right questions and holding you to account.
- ▶ They can offer their time and services, and help you to develop music while you focus on the classroom and the rehearsals.
- ▶ They are a ready-made team and you can have a sense of working with others, albeit it often via email and WhatsApp. Meetings with a friends group are a great way for you to feel like you're not alone.

Start by pulling together a small group of parents/guardians whose children are heavily involved in music. Ask them if they'd like to start supporting you, and explain why you need their help. When they see that you're working on your own, they may be only too happy to make sure that you're not isolated. But remember to be honest and explain what they can do to help. Invite them to share ideas with you, and also give them tasks that you need help with. I've found this volunteering app (<https://volunteersignup.org/>) useful for my friends group, especially when we organise a school event.

Utilising senior students

In every school there are senior students: they might be in Year 6, Year 11 or Year 13. Whatever phase you work in, you will have older students who can support you in your work. Older students are not only experienced with music, but also know the department well. Here are some ways in which you could consider utilising students – you will need to assess which ones will work best for your phase of teaching:

- ▶ Encourage students to lead an ensemble or co-lead a rehearsal with you.
- ▶ Give students small leadership roles within your department. This could be a breaktime duty where they monitor your practice rooms or classroom, for example. Students can also be used to help tidy away after rehearsals or organise your sheet music library.
- ▶ More able students could be used to lead an entire project. This could be a junior musical or a concert or other event. Students can be assigned roles, and they will need to regularly meet with you to discuss how the project is going.
- ▶ Ask students to lead small sections of a rehearsal. This could be the warm-ups at the start or a small section of music. They can then build up to leading bigger chunks.
- ▶ Use senior instrumentalists to teach beginners. They will need support and guidance, but in the initial stages of learning an instrument it's all about inspiration and first steps. How to hold an instrument, make a sound and develop correct initial approaches can all be effectively led by senior students.
- ▶ When you put on a concert or event, give students specific roles for that event. Students can help with setting up tech, lights and music stands, for example, or with general backstage or front-of-house responsibilities. You could get a student to announce performers, saving you a job. Having students compere is a useful way to reduce some of your workload – and, of course, it also give them valuable experience in public speaking and presentation.
- ▶ Make use of students with artistic skills by asking them to take care of your displays. It's a great feeling to be able say to anyone who visits your classroom that students designed everything on display.
- ▶ Forming a small student leadership team might be a suitable approach for finding out who wants to get involved. They can then take on projects and report back to you.
- ▶ If you're out for the day and setting cover, then assign a student to work with each class. That way, you can hopefully ensure that the cover work is as musical as possible, and that the senior student can support with any instruments or technology. (This is obviously more aimed at a secondary setting, but could work for primary teaching too.)
- ▶ Students can easily help with jobs such as writing newsletter articles, producing worksheets and maintaining a tidy and organised department. Those students who are most closely linked to the department will often be more than happy to help keep the department tidy and organised.

As the years go by and students move through the school, others will aspire to take on a similar roles. Always remember that they are students, not qualified teachers. They will need not only advice and support, but also a level of understanding that they are not adults. If a student conducts an ensemble, it will probably not be the same in terms of outcome or experience of other students involved as if you as the teacher had done it. That's fine: opportunity over outcome is an important mantra when using students. But make sure that you arrange regular meetings with the students involved, and keep an eye on rehearsals.

Alumni

Every year we wave goodbye to fantastic musicians and students. Some will go off to university, but others may be staying around closer to home for a gap year. That second group of ex-students can be a vital source of support, and of potential casual work.

Former students are not only invested in the school, but will also know your department really well. They are adults, and therefore they can now come back and offer their time and talents. It might be that they can run a club, or support a school production. They might have time to commit to supporting lessons, or they can offer technical support around the department. You will need to ensure that they have the relevant checks and that they attend safeguarding training. But your alumni might well be an untapped source of support for the one-person music department teacher.

Blogs and podcasts

Although we all crave real-life interactions, we can still find a valuable source of inspiration and information from blogs and podcasts. Listening to another teacher or professional talking can give us a similar sense of learning and development to what other teachers gain from an in-school team. One of the benefits of working with others is sharing ideas and a range of perspectives. This is something that you can also get from reading a blog or listening to a podcast.

There are many blogs out there, and they cover a very wide range of topics. One approach to navigating your way through them might be to ask other music teachers what they read and listen to, and go on from there. It doesn't even need to be a teaching blog or podcast: it could be anything from the world of music, business or smart thinking. Blogs on a variety of subjects can help us to learn and develop our own ideas.

One podcast that you might want to start with, however, is *Teaching Notes*, a podcast from Music Teachers' Association (www.musicteachers.org/podcast/). There are now nearly 100 episodes, and they cover a wide range of valuable content.

Conferences and events

When you work in isolation, you don't benefit from the collegiality that other departments have. When you don't have anyone to plan with, you can fall into the trap of repeating and reusing ideas, and not innovating as much as you would like to. All of that is understandable, but there are ways of ensuring that you keep developing and build new ideas. For a teacher in a one-person music department, attending conferences and education events can be hugely beneficial on professional and personal levels.

Music Teachers' Association

Full disclosure: at the time of writing this I am President-Elect of Music Teachers' Association (www.musicteachers.org/), so clearly there is a potential conflict of interest in me writing about the MTA. But I am including these recommendations because I was once a 'normal' teaching member. I'm therefore including this section without my MTA hat on, so to speak, because I believe that it can help teachers, rather than because of my connection with the association.

The aim of the MTA is to support music teachers and music education. It provides CPD, publications, online events and conferences that equip music teachers and hopefully inspire them with new ideas. One strand of its work is about bringing music teachers together. It seeks to support those working in isolation and holds monthly Zoom meetings to create one big virtual staff team. It's a useful forum for teachers to share ideas with each other, and personally, I've made valuable contacts and wonderful friends over the years. If you're working in isolation for the entire year, then the MTA conference can also prove an excellent way of meeting other music teachers.

Quick one-person wins

- 1 Social media:** this is a valuable tool for making you feel connected. Consider following fellow teachers, and make sure that you share what you're up to. Social media might not offer the same experience as a personal connection, but reading a positive tweet can still make your day. And sharing what you're up to will inspire others in similar positions.
- 2 Staff choir:** if you're looking for a way of getting to know other staff, and a way to bring teachers together, then consider starting a staff choir. When you work on your own, you often don't get out of your department. So why not bring colleagues to you – and give them some songs to sing? It doesn't need to be anything too serious, and it could even just be a seasonal choir. Keep it fun and simple, and don't attempt to create a perfect SATB choir – unless you have the staff for it, of course.
- 3 Take a break:** don't stay in the music department all day. Get out for a walk when you can.
- 4 Get involved:** sign up to any staff initiatives around wellbeing. This could be anything from a staff football team to a night out at the theatre. The more you connect with other staff members, the less alone you will feel.
- 5 Keep in touch:** connect with other teachers as much as you can. A friendly WhatsApp group can be just what you need to get ideas and reassurances.
- 6 Involve students:** create a positive culture in your department so that students feel part of it, and don't be afraid to ask them for advice and ideas.
- 7 Train another teacher:** if possible, have a trainee music teacher in your department. It's crucial for us to be training more teachers, and they can also support your work. Trainee teachers will need to fulfil teaching objectives and can therefore help with all aspects of department life. There is some work in it for you, but the benefits outweigh the extra work.
- 8 Don't keep quiet:** ensure that you've articulated to your SLT what it's like to work in a one-person department. You could even offer to lead an inset session for other staff who are in the same position. This will help to show others that they're lucky with their larger teaching teams.

Conclusion

Even if you're working on your own in a single-person music department – as is often the case – you're not alone. Seek advice, look for solutions, but most of all remember that you are doing a great job, and you'll be changing the lives of your students through your music teaching.