

The Mini-lesson: Active Learning and Engagement in the Undergraduate Classroom

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This article presents the “mini-lesson,” an assignment in which undergraduate students teach classmates theoretical concepts in excerpts of their own choosing. By presenting and observing mini-lessons, students actively engage with course material, start to grasp the relevance of theory study, and encounter a diverse corpus of examples including some familiar music. In this article, I address the problems mini-lessons solve, describe procedures for implementing them, enumerate benefits, and finally consider potential pitfalls for instructors who choose to include them in their own classrooms.



Introduction

You walk into the classroom, take a seat among the students, and direct your attention to a student at the front of the room. He hands out two pages of a score and says, “I found an example of a common-tone modulation in Charles Wood’s anthem ‘[Hail, Gladdening Light](#).’ The music modulates around measure 40 from E major to C major, two keys related by chromatic mediant. I’ll start the recording around measure 34 and play through the fermata in measure 51.” Your class listens while following along. The presenter continues, “Even though there’s a three-sharp key signature, it’s in E major at the beginning of the excerpt, because of all the D-sharps. It comes to a big half cadence on the word ‘shine,’ and then after a rest, we hear just the note B. In E, this is ‘sol,’ but then it resolves as ‘ti’ to a C-major chord. That’s why I think this is a common-tone modulation. It stays in C until measures 50-51, where the second tenor part has ‘E-F#-G#,’ landing on an E major chord. The music is going back to the main key, A major, so that E chord functions as V of A.” Classmates, about half of whom know the piece from singing in choir, ask a few questions: why is the chord in measure 46 spelled so strangely? How did the presenter find this example? The presenter doesn’t know the answer to the chord-spelling question, but in response to the second question, he says that he noticed the modulation while working on the piece in choir rehearsal. As a section leader, he was coaching other students and thought that learning the solfège would help them to audiate the pitches in the passage. His classmates, satisfied with the answer, briefly look down and type on their mobile devices as you switch places with the presenter, turning to the topic of the day.

This essay presents the “mini-lesson,” an assignment in which undergraduate students teach classmates theoretical concepts in excerpts of their own choosing. By presenting and observing mini-lessons, students actively engage with course

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material, begin to grasp the relevance of theory study, and encounter a diverse corpus of examples including some familiar music. In the remainder of this essay I examine the challenges mini-lessons address, describe procedures for implementing them, enumerate benefits, and finally consider potential pitfalls for instructors who choose to include them in their own classrooms.

Challenges

Music professors often bemoan students' apparent inability to apply concepts taught in the classroom to other settings. Students seem to divide their knowledge into little boxes: in the theory classroom, they spell and identify chords; in the applied studio, they memorize scales and mark phrasing; in ensembles, they listen for and adjust intonation; and in the music history classroom, they remember dates and style periods. Called "silo thinking" in a recent essay on music-history pedagogy, the problem has long existed across disciplines.¹ For music majors, such compartmentalization invariably accompanies a view that academic classes serve as hoops to jump through, as necessary but irrelevant tasks that students must "get out of the way" in order to spend time on activities they deem important for meeting professional goals, such as individual practice. Try as they might, faculty members sometimes fail to help students overcome these habits of compartmentalization.

Many students may find music theory irrelevant in part because we do not always include enough music they know, like, care about, or encounter outside the classroom. We spend hours selecting music that most clearly exemplifies topics, balancing theoretical content with considerations such as visual clarity, and thereby introduce our students to repertoire while teaching harmonic, formal, and rhythmic concepts. Yet our students' unfamiliarity with the common-practice repertoire from which many examples are drawn can cause disconnection. Students enter college with disparate backgrounds: a pianist who has studied privately since early childhood sits in the same classroom as a clarinetist who played in public school bands and a self-taught guitarist who barely reads musical notation. The excerpts found in textbooks

¹ Haefeli (2016, 13). Non-integration of curriculum is also addressed in the recent and controversial "[Manifesto](#)" issued by the College Music Society's Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major, but music- and non-music students have long compartmentalized their studies. Nearly six decades ago, for example, Richard Byrns (1960, 46) wrote about a "pragmatic barrier," represented by a student's asking, "sometimes resentfully, 'just what good is this course anyway?' ... Whatever the form of the question, it arises from the student's reluctance to study a subject for which he can see no 'practical' value."

and anthologies—indeed at times in our classrooms—may well be familiar to only a few students. To be sure, exposure to canonical repertoire does enrich students’ lives, but a student who rarely encounters familiar pieces receives a subtle message that may be interpreted in several ways, such as: “My music isn’t valued here”; “These concepts don’t apply to my music, therefore my music is considered deficient by this program, and further, my musical experiences are deficient”; or “what I am learning in class has little-to-no relevance to the music I am most interested in.”

In recent years, music scholarship and pedagogy have made great strides toward relevance and diversification.² Advocates rightly argue that opening new avenues for musical research promotes inclusion and equity in our fields; it is vital for students and scholars to see themselves represented in order to imagine their professional futures in music. But a wider-ranging repertoire of study also brings specific pedagogical advantages. If examples come from a mixture of styles and sources, our students will more likely encounter music that they already know and care about. In turn, this familiar music can help students see how theory relates to everyday experience.

Furthermore, to the extent that students already know pieces, they can concentrate on the topic at hand rather than having to divide their attention between the sounds and the theoretical concepts. Stuart Folse, for example, suggests incorporating well-known popular songs to facilitate learning: “students find it easy to recall musical patterns that aurally resemble other works *familiar to them*. ... since students are *exploring a familiar genre*, they are able to perceive and discuss musical concepts unencumbered by details of musical styles that are often distant (historically and sometimes, aesthetically) from their personal experience.”³ Melissa Hoag takes a different approach to using music that students already know, incorporating both popular examples and music from departmental ensembles’ concerts.⁴

Many contemporary textbook authors agree that the lack of diversity in repertoire and concomitant use of unfamiliar music diminish pedagogical effectiveness; in fact, some authors distinguish their textbooks or anthologies specifically through music choice.⁵ Approaches to broadening repertoire vary. For instance, one textbook

2 Just a few examples would include the well-attended session on “Mentorship and Diversity” at the 2017 Annual Meeting of the Society for Music Theory and the blog [Musicology Now](#) from the American Musicological Society.

3 Folse (2004, 66, emphasis added).

4 Hoag (2013, 11-14).

5 For example, see the “Preface” of Turek and McCarthy (2014, xxi): “The average student entering a college music program is less familiar with the repertoire that is the focus of the traditional theory

intersperses common-practice and post-tonal excerpts with vernacular styles that range from jazz standards to twenty-first-century R&B, while a recent anthology that encourages in-class performance contains music for nearly all instruments commonly studied in universities.⁶ We may celebrate the spectrum of music found in these publications, yet no single book can fully combat the problem; any excerpt—whether by Ferdinand David or Dave Matthews—may or may not be familiar to any given student. Since music departments serve a range of students, music faculty almost by definition will understand relevant and diverse repertoire differently, depending upon the population they are trying to reach. A conservatory student knows different music than does a liberal-arts or community-college student; all three deserve a suitable experience in the theory classroom.

The Mini-lesson as Solution

If we accept the premise that repertoire affects students' perception of music theory's relevance, and acknowledge that even the most diverse instructional material invariably falls short, a question still remains: how can we increase the likelihood that our students will encounter music that they care about? The obvious solution is to ask the students themselves. Readers of this journal may open each semester with a survey that includes a question such as, "name two pieces that you know and like."⁷ Though a good start, this still obligates the professor to track down the music and analyze it for appropriate theoretical content.⁸ Surely it would be better for students to find their own examples. With this in mind, I have formalized the task into a required assignment. Students examine their own music for theoretical content, and share their findings during class time in brief **mini-lessons**. This assignment guarantees that at least some students will be familiar with the musical examples, gives students valuable presentation and peer-teaching experience along with opportunities to

course then we all would wish. And the traditional theory course does a less-than-perfect job of proving its relevance to these students. As a result, too many students 'compartmentalize' their classroom learning [...] without fully realizing its value or applying it in the pursuit of their personal musical goals." Among the recent group of instructional materials with a focus on musical diversity, we might single out Bribitzer-Stull (2014), Snodgrass (2015), and Holm-Hudson (2016).

6 See Turek and McCarthy (2014) and Bribitzer-Stull (2014).

7 See, for instance, Jimenez (2016, 10).

8 An unfortunate anecdote: I used to include such a question on a survey at the start of each semester, and invariably lacked the time to analyze the pieces, thereby relegating to the category of busywork my students' efforts to answer the question.

engage actively with music theory concepts, and affords many other benefits that I detail below.

The idea of having students find examples in their own music is not original to me.⁹ Some textbooks include related suggestions, as in Miguel Roig-Francolí's chapter on modulation:

Modulation is one of the most essential harmonic processes in Western tonal music. It provides tonal variety necessary in complete compositions, it provides both a harmonic drive and tonal goals for long-range formal designs, and it contributes to creation of a tension between tonal definition and tonal instability, a basic element in formal generation of large movements. You have played many modulations in your life as a performer, and any of the compositions in your repertoire can illustrate modulating processes in one way or another. Find several of these modulations in pieces you perform, and bring them to class as examples. Specifically, try to find the following cases of modulation:

1. A modulation you especially like, perhaps because it leads from one key to another in an imperceptible, smooth way; or because it is very well crafted and perhaps you had always noticed how beautiful and effective the passage was; or because it is very surprising and you had always been struck by the boldness of harmonic motion in that passage; or for whatever other reason you may like it. [...]¹⁰

Unfortunately, such prompts typically appear in sections that seem ancillary or optional, for example under the heading "Review Questions" or in shaded boxes titled "Practical Application and Discussion," from which the previously quoted passage is taken.¹¹ Given the wealth of content in theory textbooks and the limited time we have with our classes, it seems likely that students will simply skip over these passages, and instructors may do so as well. Roig-Francolí implicitly acknowledges this danger in his Preface, suggesting: "Students are encouraged to discover and discuss the practical application of the harmonic concepts studied in each chapter [...] The importance of these sections, which will help students make the connection between what they study in theory class and their performance experience, cannot be sufficiently emphasized."¹² In an effort to sufficiently emphasize this vital interconnectivity between theory study and my students' other musical endeavors, I have developed the mini-lesson as a required assignment that students do not have the option of bypassing.

⁹ See, for instance, Rosenberg (2014, 168).

¹⁰ Roig-Francolí (2011, 485).

¹¹ "Review Questions" appear in Clendinning and Marvin (2016). "Practical Application and Discussion" boxes are in Roig-Francolí.

¹² Roig-Francolí (2014, xii). Note also that the discussion refers only to harmonic concepts. The Preface is presumably directed at the instructor, as it is followed by "A message to the student."

Procedure

My undergraduate students are required to present several mini-lessons per semester, each of which counts for three percent of the semester grade. Each mini-lesson lasts about five minutes and focuses on a single theoretical idea. Since one goal of this assignment is to give students presentation experience, they must arrange any logistic preparations, including copying handouts and cuing up recordings.¹³ I schedule mini-lessons at the beginning of the period so that students can set up before class. Students sign up in advance, and I allow a maximum of two per day, except during periods with a major exam or special event scheduled.¹⁴ In a typical mini-lesson, the student briefly introduces the piece and summarizes the concept it exemplifies, and then either plays a recording or performs the excerpt live. The student might subsequently comment about the piece or concept (for instance, noting an atypical resolution or harmonic progression). At this point, I solicit questions and comments from the rest of the class; if none are forthcoming, I offer my own. Using the rubric given in **Appendix 2**, I grade the mini-lessons using criteria of correctness, clarity of presentation, and preparation. Classmates also fill in the rubric and provide comments.¹⁵ Doing so requires them to attend to the presentations, and I believe that students will take the presentations more seriously if they know that their peers are listening closely.¹⁶

In my four-semester theory sequence, I require students to present two mini-lessons in each of the second and third semesters, and three in the fourth. My first-year students often find the transition to college stressful, and some would be unduly intimidated by having this requirement, so I do not require mini-lessons during Theory

¹³ For further details, see **Appendix 1**, the assignment prompt I give to my students.

¹⁴ Since the signup (handled through our course blog) is time-stamped, I enforce a first-come, first-served rule, which in my classroom seems to encourage a bit of healthy competition.

¹⁵ I recently started using an online version of the rubric using Google Forms, which expedites the task of distributing comments to the presenters. Often, I can give feedback to students on the same afternoon as their presentations.

¹⁶ Though the main purpose of the peer rubric is to keep the audience members focused on the presentation, an additional benefit may accrue. The rubric gives students practice making “evaluative judgements,” defined as “the capability to make decisions about the quality of work of self and others” in Tai, Ajjawi, Boud, Dawson, and Panadero, (2017, 5). Tai et al. identify two complementary tasks in evaluative judgement: students must recognize elements of quality work and must assess whether any given work meets the appropriate criteria. The peer rubric gives students experience in applying these skills.

I. By the time they reach Theory III and IV, though, students are more comfortable presenting to their classmates. Many of my students clearly enjoy introducing music they love to others, garnering a feeling of expertise or authority from doing so. Peer feedback reinforces this; on several occasions a student has complimented another on his or her “good find.”

The specific technique I have developed for the mini-lesson assignment works well in my program, but with some adaptations, mini-lessons will work in a wide variety of instructional settings.¹⁷ For example, teachers with larger classes might require fewer lessons overall; in lecture classes, mini-lessons could be offered as an extra-credit opportunity with required advance vetting by the instructor. Alternately, in programs that emphasize technology, students might create electronic mini-lessons that could be compiled into a video library and uploaded as a student resource. Conservatory professors might require that all mini-lessons feature live performance. I allow students to present on any concept covered in class and encourage them to choose repertoire from any source, but other instructors might wish to limit allowable topics or genres. Mini-lessons could also be adapted for other courses in a typical music curriculum, such as ear training or music history.

Benefits

My students have reaped many benefits from mini-lessons, both in theory class and more broadly. Students are more engaged when learning about music they know and like, and I can revisit the music to further support this engagement. Mini-lessons bring serendipity into the classroom, as students encounter extra-curricular or understudied theoretical topics. Students who have presented mini-lessons also appear to attend more closely to theoretical content in their own music, thereby discovering the relevance of theory and better understanding the music they study. Indeed, the score study, listening, and presentation involved in mini-lessons all represent the kinds of active learning that many professors aim to foster. Additionally, presenters gain valuable public-speaking experience and practice using music-theoretical terminology. Finally, mini-lessons can lead to problem solving. I will examine each of these positive effects in turn.

Increased engagement paves the way for other benefits, and mini-lessons

¹⁷ I teach at a primarily undergraduate-serving, public, regional, comprehensive university. My classes range from 10-15 students and meet for three hours per week. All music students take the entire theory and ear-training sequences with me.

invariably increase engagement by bringing in examples of music that at least some students care deeply about. Though on occasion the presenter is the only person in the room who knows the music, students often draw from their applied repertoire or ensemble music. The latter strategy guarantees some degree of familiarity.¹⁸ Some students enjoy presenting popular music; I have had students discuss mainstream songs like the Beatles' "Yesterday" and "Guns and Ships" from *Hamilton*, as well as fairly obscure ones like Twenty-One Pilots' "House of Gold."¹⁹ Well-known examples, whether popular songs, large ensemble literature, or solo repertoire, often elicit positive comments such as, "I love this song!" or "Great song!" (usually including at least one exclamation point).

Not only do mini-lessons increase engagement while students present them, they also give me a better way to learn about the music my students are studying.²⁰ Moreover, repertoire chosen for mini-lessons often includes additional concepts beyond the presenter's specific point.²¹ By knowing their music, I can help make theory class engaging and relevant for my students by revisiting pieces both later in the semester and with future classes.

Mini-lessons also impart a benefit that I had not anticipated when I started requiring them: they can touch upon secondary concepts that typically receive little or no emphasis in a theory curriculum, but are important nonetheless. A sampling of extra-curricular topics my own students have encountered would include tablature, melisma, piano pedal markings, and notational conventions in percussion and

18 Since applied faculty often assign the same pieces to multiple students, solo repertoire is often known by several classmates.

19 As part of my post-mini-lesson discussion, I often ask whether students know the piece just presented; only one student other than the presenter knew "House of Gold."

20 Students choose theoretical topics for mini-lessons, and I encourage them to construe their own repertoire very broadly to include listening repertoire and music they encounter off-campus; as a result, I have added many interesting examples to my teaching repertoire. To name just a few concepts I have learned about from students: compound melody in the Partita in A minor for Solo Flute, BWV 1013 by J.S. Bach; the Neapolitan in the theme from *Thunderball* by John Barry; chromatic mediant relationships between minor keys in Vaughn Williams's song "The Vagabond"; motivic augmentation in Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy*; the mediant triad in the theme from *The Office*; and 2+2+4 sentence structure in "The Love of L'Histoire," a multi-percussion solo by Charles DeLancey.

21 For example, one of my students discussed closely-related modulation in Bellini's aria "Malinconia, ninfa gentile," and I noticed that the introduction also featured a prominent Neapolitan chord, which the class had not yet studied.

classical guitar music.²² In addition, mini-lessons often reinforce subjects that form part of a curriculum but receive minimal emphasis. Examples of these from my recent experience include text-painting, instrumental transpositions, and the importance of fluency in reading C-clefs. Extra-curricular topics often arise from classmates' questions. A student who successfully fields such questions gains a safe opportunity to be the local expert in some area of music, a position in which all students will find themselves in the future. Therefore, I always deflect questions to presenters, even if other students direct questions to me. If necessary, I clarify confusing answers. Instructors who fear relinquishing any classroom control will find it difficult to refrain from jumping in with answers, but I believe the benefits to students outweigh any possible confusion. By embracing these serendipitous moments, an instructor can model curricular integration rather than compartmentalization.

Mini-lessons further resist compartmentalization by helping students understand that the concepts they learn in theory class apply to their solo repertoire, ensemble music, and other music they perform, listen to, and care about. Put another way, mini-lessons show students the relevance of music theory to music study. This may seem an obvious point to readers of this journal, but I have heard many student remarks to the contrary. Now, though, students sometimes express surprise to learn about this relevance in peer-evaluation rubric comments. Anecdotally, my interactions with students further support the notion that mini-lessons influence their views on the relevance of theory. After having required mini-lessons for several years, I find my students more likely to speak to me outside of class time, excited about finding a chord in their solo repertoire or a thematic transformation in an ensemble piece. My applied-music colleagues similarly relay anecdotes in which students discuss theoretical elements during lessons, often in the context of asking the applied teacher to confirm the student's proposed analysis.

The benefits of mini-lessons extend beyond the theory classroom. Countless studies show that active learning promotes longer-term knowledge than does passive absorption like reading and observing lectures.²³ Mini-lessons require students to actively apply their knowledge as they examine their own music. To present a successful mini-lesson a student must understand a concept well enough to recognize

22 For example, in percussion music staff position indicates instrument rather than pitch height. When first seeing guitar music, non-guitarists are regularly baffled by performance instructions such as uncircled Arabic numerals, circled Arabic numerals, and the italicized letters "*p i m a c*," which all have specific meanings.

23 See, for example, Cherney (2008) and Warburton and Volet (2012).

it unaided, either through score analysis or listening. The mental activities students undertake could almost be used to define Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive domain learning: they remember and comprehend concepts, apply theoretical knowledge, analyze musical content, and synthesize their understanding in order to present it concisely to classmates.

Students giving mini-lessons also gain practice speaking in public, both in general and about music in particular, skills that will serve musicians well. Though the main topics in my syllabi encompass the normative harmonic, rhythmic, and formal features of common-practice/post-tonal music, I would be neglectful if I refused opportunities to help my students develop these communication skills.²⁴ Beyond the general, mini-lessons give students practice using appropriate vocabulary to talk with musicians about music. As Sara Haefeli notes, "music students may be passionate about works or performances, but often do not have the skills to communicate their musical insights ... we want students to be able to not only identify, classify, and label specific musical phenomena, but to also appraise, differentiate, evaluate, and argue effectively about music."²⁵ A music history professor, Haefeli refers to written rather than oral communication, but her points apply broadly, and mini-lessons give students these valuable experiences.

Finally, mini-lessons encourage (or sometimes even require) students to develop creative strategies to solve problems they encounter while preparing their presentations. For instance, some students find examples through score analysis, but do not have recordings. Playing live in class has its own benefits, but some students pursue alternate strategies. Examples from my classes include a saxophonist recording a pianist playing a church hymn, and a vocalist recording himself and his accompanist rehearsing an aria. Other students conduct as their classmates sight-sing examples. Yet other students have encountered the opposite problem: having a recording but lacking sheet music. A percussionist in this circumstance produced a fairly detailed transcription of a popular song; his main topic was modulation to the relative major, but he also showed polyrhythms, which the students had learned in ear-training class.

Though not every mini-lesson is an unqualified success, occasionally students display remarkable creativity in relating theoretical concepts to their own music. In

²⁴ Oral communication skills consistently appear at or near the top of lists of skills employers look for. See, for instance, Portland Community College's "[10 Top Skills That Employers are Looking for In Employees \(2017 Edition\)](#)," *The Balance's* "[Top Skills and Attributes Employers Seek](#)," and the University of Kent's "[What are the top ten skills that employers want in graduates?](#)"

²⁵ Haefeli (2013, 39-40).

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "Blade" by Benjamin Finley. The score is annotated with various musical notations and handwritten notes. The notation includes treble clef, key signature of one sharp (F#), and multiple time signatures: 9/4, 7/4, 3/4, 2/4, and 6/4. The score is divided into measures, with measure numbers 115, 117, 119, 122, and 124 marked. Handwritten annotations include "D Hard-edged" at the beginning, "H.C." in the middle, "snare on" indicating a change in the drum part, and dynamic markings such as *p* (piano), *ff* (fortissimo), *f* (forte), and *P.A.C. Driving*. The score is presented on a white background with black musical notation and red handwritten annotations.

Blade, Benjamin Finley
TapSPACE Publications LLC, 2010

Example 1
Annotated score and video of Finley, "Blade" (student analysis).

one of my all-time favorite mini-lessons, another percussion student exceeded my expectations in this respect. I had taught the common-practice tonic/dominant phrase model, and my student applied this to a contemporary unpitched multi-percussion piece. He analyzed an excerpt of *Blade* by Benjamin Finley as analogous to a parallel interrupted period; specific instrumentation and rhythmic figures represented tonic, predominant, and dominant functions. Example 1 presents his annotated score and a video of him performing the excerpt. He shared his interpretation with classmates, adding that considering the piece in this way uncovered connections between two disparate styles of music. His classmates were convinced, and I believe his lesson gave them insight into percussion music in general. Hearing from a peer rather than a professor surely made the ideas more memorable and immediate.

Potential pitfalls

As with any teaching technique, mini-lessons can contain pitfalls. Instructors who wish to start assigning them should have a plan in mind for each of the following situations. Most obviously, students sometimes present incorrect analyses, and instructors must correct errors tactfully to avoid embarrassing the presenter. Students have less experience with time management than faculty have, and can ramble well past the five-minute mark. They also occasionally run into what we might call the “excerpt problem,” in which the example gives insufficient musical context for classmates to hear and understand the theoretical idea featured. Other potential issues include problems related to the use of classroom technology, and the occasional cavalier attitude to filling out the peer-evaluation rubric, on which students sometimes disregard areas for improvement or write gratuitously negative comments.²⁶ Some students might turn to outside resources such as Timothy Cutler’s [website of tonal theory examples](#) rather than finding their own examples.²⁷ Finally, just as with any other assignment, some students insufficiently prepare for their mini-lessons, and therefore do a poor job.

The effectiveness of a mini-lesson can hinge on which specific topic a student

²⁶ Of these two extremes, my students tend to be too nice, but once or twice I have had to redact a scathing comment.

²⁷ By doing so, of course, students cheat themselves of the opportunity to learn about the connections among their various pursuits, so instructors may wish specifically to forbid this practice. I have not found it to be common in my classes, though. This may be in part because in my small department, I regularly observe students performing solo repertoire, and often speak with applied-music teachers and conductors. Therefore, I have some knowledge of the music my students are working on at any time.

discusses. Easiest for students to handle are those that can be dealt with atomistically, such as a specific chord or thematic transformation. Many of my students have found success with examples of phrase structure and cadences as well, but longer forms can present a serious challenge within the time constraints of a mini-lesson. However, some of my more ambitious students have made creative use of sound-editing software to produce excerpted recordings.

One last concern is enforcing the mini-lesson requirements. Every semester some students avoid making their presentations until late in the semester, especially in the lower-level classes. I think they are scared, either of public speaking or of making mistakes in their analyses.²⁸ To try to combat this problem, I regularly remind students of the importance of mini-lessons with respect to both their learning and their grades. I also emphasize that students need not understand every detail of a passage, just the main point of the mini-lesson.²⁹ Nonetheless, a few of my students have earned lower grades because they failed to present all their required mini-lessons. A possible solution would be to include a requirement in the syllabus that all course components must be completed to pass the course or a requirement that students must present their first mini-lesson by a certain date in the semester.

Conclusion

Many college instructors try to incorporate real-world examples into their teaching. Music theory instructors try to do so as well, but the size of our real world—all the music our students might ever encounter—makes this a daunting task. When our students find and teach their own relevant examples, they start to see the applicability of theory study, engage actively in their own learning, and encounter broader repertoire in our classrooms. Our students also gain valuable experience speaking in public, including specific practice communicating about music. By presenting mini-lessons and observing their peers, our students learn about interconnections among

²⁸ I refer here to the common discomfort with public speaking that many adults experience, which I believe can be alleviated with positive experiences such as presenting successful mini-lessons. Some students, however, might experience intense anxiety that can qualify them for accessibility services. I would urge instructors to discuss such cases on an individual basis with campus disability coordinators to work out alternate arrangements, such as allowing a student to pre-record a mini-lesson rather than presenting it live.

²⁹ As every theory teacher knows, examples with extremely limited harmonic content are rare; therefore, students in earlier levels are more likely to find examples with some concepts they have not yet studied.

theory and applied study, ensemble performance, and everyday music, whatever that may mean to them. Mini-lessons may oblige instructors to sacrifice a bit of lecturing time, but this is easily outweighed by the great and lasting benefits to students.

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Appendix 1: Mini-lesson Prompt

Background and overview

Concepts you learn in Music Theory class are broadly applicable beyond the specific pieces we study in the classroom. For example, you can find embellishing tones in popular styles, various diatonic triads in contemporary choral music, or thematic transformation in your solo repertoire. A great deal of research has shown that students learn more thoroughly when they actively engage with course material; two millennia ago, Roman philosopher Seneca the Younger wrote, “*Homines dum docent discunt*,” or “Men [sic] learn while they teach.”

In order to strengthen your learning and to encourage you to connect your music theory study with other aspects of your musical life, you will be required to present “mini-lessons,” in which you find examples from your own repertoire³⁰ of theory topics and teach them to your classmates. Each mini-lesson will be a brief presentation focusing on a single idea. As the teacher, you will decide upon the most effective way to teach the topic, but certain elements will be required. At minimum, the mini-lesson will contain a live or recorded performance of the excerpt to be analyzed, and copies of the sheet music for class members (with possible exceptions to be discussed below).

Specific requirements

- **Number:** Starting with the second semester of music theory, students are required to present the following number of mini-lessons per semester. Each is worth 3% of your semester grade.
 - Theory 2: 2 mini-lessons
 - Theory 3: 2 mini-lessons
 - Theory 4: 3 mini-lessons
- **Length:** Mini-lessons should be no longer than 5 minutes.
- **Content:** The mini-lesson should focus on a single theoretical concept that we have studied in class. Generally, it is a good idea to choose a topic that we have finished studying, so you can be confident that you fully understand it. You may go back as far as late in the previous semester, but recent material will be fresher in your and your classmates’ minds. Although your music may

³⁰ “Your own repertoire” is defined broadly. It may include solo music, etudes, or other music studied in your applied lessons; music performed or rehearsed in large or small ensembles; and music you listen to (including popular styles). If you have any questions about allowable repertoire, ask the instructor.

have some elements that are more advanced than your study thus far, you should have a good grasp on the specific topic of the lesson. The point is to teach your classmates rather than to figure things out as you go along.

- Single concept: You may NOT do a “double mini-lesson.” If a piece has two separate concepts that you wish to explain, do two different mini-lessons on the same piece. You may NOT do a “double mini-lesson.”
- Sound: The mini-lesson should include the musical excerpt played at least once, and possibly more than once. You may perform it live or play a recording. If you plan to play a recording, be sure you familiarize yourself in advance with the audio equipment (ask me or a music technologist if you have any questions).
- Handouts: Provide a one-page handout for each class member; identify the composer, title, opus number, and movement (if applicable). These should be handed out at the beginning of your lesson. The handout should show the excerpt to be played without extraneous information. If the piece is for some kind of ensemble, the handout should include all parts (a reduced score is acceptable). Similarly, a handout for an accompanied solo instrument should include the accompaniment. Annotate the music to show the concept (for example, you might provide roman numerals, circle motives, or label cadences).
 - Possible exception: if your lesson focuses on a piece for which the score is not available (such as a popular or electronic piece), AND the concepts are audible without notation, you may present your lesson as an “aural analysis.” This will be much more challenging for your classmates to grasp, however, and is generally not recommended. It will require you to guide your classmates’ listening carefully; done poorly, it will lead to frustration on your and your classmates’ parts.
 - Possible alternative: uploading the excerpt to the course blog would be an acceptable alternative way to provide classmates with sheet music. However, in my experience, these can sometimes be hard to read, and/or students can have technical challenges with image formats, etc. Thus, mini-lessons are sometimes less effective if handouts are not provided in paper format.
- Grading and feedback: The mini-lesson rubric includes criteria for grading. This rubric will be filled out by both the professor and your classmates. Your grade will be the average of the professor’s grade (weighed at 2/3) and your

classmates' average grade (1/3). General criteria include correctness (does the excerpt contain the concept as you said it does?), clarity (do you present the material clearly? Is your lesson easy to follow?), and preparation (was your lesson ready to go at the appointed time?).

- The rubric includes space for comments. I will transcribe your classmates' comments (anonymously) and put them in your Google Doc along with your grade.
- Signup: Mini-lessons are assigned on a first-come, first-served basis. A maximum of two per class period are allowed. Sign up in advance on the course blog. Under the blog heading, click on "Mini-lesson signup" and add a comment including the date, composer/piece, and topic of your lesson.

Appendix 2: Peer-review Rubric

Students receive one copy of this page, and several copies of the slip on the following page. They also have a link to an online version of the rubric.

(5) Content	5 The excerpt contains an instance of the concept, which is correctly analyzed at a level appropriate to the student's knowledge level.	4 The excerpt contains an instance of the concept; the analysis is not quite correct, but close.	3 The excerpt contains an instance of the concept; the analysis is incorrect.	2 The excerpt contains a related concept.	1 The concept does not occur in the excerpt, nor does anything remotely related.
(3) Clarity/ delivery		3 The following criteria are all met: a) Student speaks clearly and coherently. b) The example is easy to read and the instance in question is clearly marked/annotated (unless student uses directed questions). c) The student explains the concept well, or uses directed questions effectively.	2 Two of the criteria listed are met.	1 One criterion is met.	0 None of the criteria are met.
(2) Preparation			2 All elements are ready at the appropriate time (e.g., recording is cued, sheet music is quickly handed out or posted on the blog before class time). The composer and title (and title of the larger work, if appropriate) are clearly indicated.	1 Some elements are ready at the appropriate time, but others require waiting/ downtime.	0 Few to no elements are ready. The class must wait a long time.

Date: _____ Your name: _____
 Presenter: _____ Composer: _____
 Title: _____

Content [5]	5	4	3	2	1	
Clarity/delivery [3]			3	2	1	0
Preparation [2]				2	1	0

Total: _____

Comment: _____

