

Theory Pedagogy: An Experiential Approach

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In a theory pedagogy course I taught recently, one of my goals was to introduce, model, and have the class practice with, a variety of teaching and learning modes. Of course there also had to be what we cavalierly call “content” too (as if the message and the medium were somehow separable). One of our problems as teachers is that we assume the content of our lessons and classes is merely information about music. I suspect that the real content, for any given student, is more like: “Gosh, I hope this course won’t require too much writing.” Or, “I really screwed up in that last lesson.” Or, “I didn’t really understand that thing about unequal fifths, but I don’t want to appear stupid and ask.” So perhaps the principal message of my pedagogy course was: try to figure out where the students are at any given moment, and how to reach them, and how to make sure they are really solid on the material. Content, without a clear-eyed vision of how to communicate it, reinforce it and check it out, doesn’t mean much. The reality is that focusing entirely on content makes it very difficult to observe process.

The secret goal of the course was simply to make the students individually aware of the multitude of hidden messages and agendas floating around any given classroom, and the many ways these can short-circuit learning. What I hoped to accomplish was to get everyone into the *present*, aware of these agendas and messages. Most students, in fact most people, have a hard time being and staying in the present; and you can’t learn (or teach) unless you are in fact truly *there*. It seemed that the efficient way to begin to focus the class on this secret goal was to remove all the ostensible content. The best way to do this, I felt, was to just shut up. I share the subversive attitude that says, for God’s sake stop talking and let them learn. So I just sat and read, Calvin Trillin I think it was. Very uncomfort-

able, for all of us. They, of course, came in expecting to be told what the course was about and what to do to get an "A". I hated this exercise, as my main bad habit as a teacher is trying to make it all happen, to take excessive responsibility for everyone's success, and as a consequence to talk too much rather than just stand back and let the learning take place. Anyway, they just sat nervously in their rows of chairs, which I had made no attempt to rearrange. And sat. And sat. It was Awful. Finally I broke down and wrote a few words and phrases on the board: "Expectations." "Assumptions." "Content." "What's going on?" And so on. Before the second class meeting I wrote on the board the instruction "Talk about it," and sat in the back of the room and listened. They gradually began making observations about how they had felt during the first class, about expectations, assumptions, what roles they usually played as individuals in a group, and how they felt about me, which I didn't necessarily like hearing.

This experience, uncomfortable as it was, worked to disrupt the usual set of attitudes and behaviors students bring into a classroom. It helped to focus their attention on *process*, not merely content. What this little exercise can do is to interrupt the usual passivity of students, to allow them to be aware of themselves as learners, and their power to influence the outcome of their learning. The bottom line, maybe, is that the less responsibility we as teachers take for the learning, the more the students will, if allowed to.

In the interests of full disclosure, I must admit that this particular group tended to be unusually passive, compared to most of our graduate classes at Peabody. It was not easy for them to stay in charge, and I had occasionally to remind them to observe what was going on *now*, and to stop generalizing about education, or about music. They tended to filter all observations through me, and to focus their attention on me, rather than on each other, even after they decided to meet in a circle. This power and authority stuff is very old and very powerful; it's seductive for both students and teachers, and hard to break out of. There's also a lot of gender and ethnic content in this, as you probably know. There was more seeking after my approval, at least early on, than I had expected, and more willingness to fall back on the "let the teacher do the work" model. But we worked on it, and improved at least our awareness of the issues.

Progress in this area is slow; what is being contradicted is many years of learned behavior. What do you learn in school? You learn studenting. You learn how to student. If you successfully student, you get little pieces of sheepskin that allow you to have a nice house and a VCR. This is all very attractive. It's easy to fall into the required patterns of uncritical passivity that are too often rewarded in our schools, and our society. So, when we as teachers try to change the entire model, it's scary, and probably seems unfair to the students. No one likes to have the rules changed mid-game.

Throughout the course we worked on developing the habit of making observations about group process, affect and so on, looking carefully at whatever might result in potential blocks to learning. This led, finally, to a lot more risk-taking behavior and a lot more frankness than one expects in a classroom. People became unusually open about what they wanted out of the course, and about what was and was not working for them. I didn't have to work hard to get useful feedback, making my job tremendously easier. Students then were able to decide on what they wanted from the course, and on exactly what activities and assignments would best accomplish that for them, with only a little prodding from me. They decided on circular seating, peer teaching, classroom teaching, videotaping, and the topics they wanted to be sure we covered. They came up with a list of what to look for in good teaching, and a teaching reporting form to be used in their observations of faculty theory teachers and of each other. They decided individually what theory material they wanted to peer-teach, whose classes they wanted to observe and for whom they wanted to do their actual classroom teaching. They all observed a variety of undergraduate courses and teachers, and reported with great insight on what they observed, not only in terms of theory content but of teaching technique, the learning process and group dynamics.

The peer teaching was videotaped, at their request, and was immediately critiqued by the class and by me, in a frank but kind way. Their classroom teaching, for a variety of theory faculty, was critiqued in writing and verbally by the faculty member. The students went over these critiques with me. They also shared with the class their observations of undergraduate theory classes. Also shared with the class, and with me, were their teaching and learning jour-

nals, which I asked them to keep. These consisted of informal observations about their own experiences in classroom or private instruction, either as students or as teachers. They often ended up using the journals to work out issues in their own lives, and to make observations about themselves and their own values and goals.

There were also a good many traditional theory pedagogy activities. We learned Mike Rogers's fine book, *Teaching Approaches in Music Theory*, writing detailed chapter-by-chapter outlines and discussing and critiquing everything. There were many handouts, including a variety of articles and chapters on learning and teaching, by Kenneth Eble, John White, Harvey Jackins and me. These were likewise outlined and critiqued, and discussed in class. I tried not to lead the discussions, which was hard for me with my usual teacher patterns of being too active and verbose. We assigned ourselves areas of theory for which to make up bibliographies, and annotated these in writing and verbally. We brought in the books and had a look at how they were organized.

Like content and procedure, course grading was handled democratically. We discussed the nature and problems of grading, the various grading systems, and ways of maximizing useful feedback to both students and teachers. They settled on a contractual system, in which any work which I felt was under a "B" level was redone. Pass-fail grading is not an option at Peabody, but I had no resistance to assigning grades on individual assignments. Students deserve to know exactly how they are doing. At the end of the semester they critiqued in writing their own work, and assigned themselves a course grade, based on their assessment. I retained editorial control over the grades, as I informed them, and ended up tweaking one grade up half a letter, and one down half a letter. Otherwise I found their self-grading remarkably accurate and insightful. The only acceptable reason for grading, after all, is improvement, and we had worked out a variety of ways of maximizing specific and helpful feedback on their teaching, writing and outlining. Grading always seems to me a somewhat hostile act, so I'm always looking for ways to humanize it and make it a more positive part of the learning process.

I am certainly far from ecstatic over the course. For instance, I found the theory preparation of several students inadequate, so had

to work at length with them on the content and organization of their peer and classroom teaching. Two students said they hoped the course would review undergraduate theory course content. I told them I felt that was not possible in a one-semester course, though we did discuss curricular design and content, and the design of syllabi and lesson plans. Probably I should have spent more time modeling the teaching of specific theoretical items, but I was very hesitant to impose my own views of both theory and its pedagogy on the class. Individuals have their own natural way of teaching, flowing from their values, personality and musicianship, and it's not our job to get in the way. The best way of learning to teach may well be (1) to observe carefully and intelligently a variety of good teachers, and (2) to teach, preferably in a setting that maximizes helpful feedback to you as a teacher.

Finally, teaching the course as I did made me far more aware of what was going on in my own theory classes. It made me, I hope, better able to diagnose quickly and deal with glitches in the learning process, and with students who were clearly not learning on their own highest level. It certainly made me much more self-critical and self-conscious in my own teaching, for better or worse. It helped me to lighten up, be in the present, be more conscious of group process and of students as individuals. It helped me to interrupt those nasty old teacher patterns: talking too much, not listening, taking too much responsibility for the learning process, not having enough fun in the classroom. The anonymous course critiques, which I always ask for, made me feel good. A couple of students said that they had been changed permanently as students, and as human beings. I think they meant for the better. That was nice to hear. We are after all not merely teachers, but mentors and models. It's good when someone notices.

RANDOM THOUGHTS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING¹

General Ideas

Assumptions about people (how they are doing, feeling, thinking, etc.) are always wrong. Never assume—check it out!

Use your personality—anecdotes, real-life things bearing on music and music theory.

Only connect (the prose and the passion). E.M. Forster.

How do I know what I think until I see what I say? E.M. Forster. (Get students to talk about it—mirrors, dyads, questions, answers.)

Remember:

I hear and I forget
I see and I remember
I do and I understand

Visual, aural and kinesthetic reinforcement and experiences are crucial.

People are doing the best they can at the moment. Check out poor work right away.

Never confuse the person and the product.

Teaching is a performing art (Eble).

Teaching is a helping profession.

Remember the K.I.S.S. Rule (Keep it short and simple).

Don't just say it—play it, write it, check it out, make it into a question or an exercise, sing it, act it. Make it *vivid*.

Stay focused on process. Don't assume that the material is getting through just because *you* understand it.

Learn the piano. You can't teach optimally without it.

¹Many of these comments are discussed in my article, "The Learning Process and Teaching," *College Music Symposium* 22/2 (Fall 1982): 120-32.

Know the material—cold.

Teaching is not learning.

Talking is not teaching.

Be quiet and listen to your students. They'll tell you what they need, verbally or otherwise.

Teaching may be a sacred trust, but it's also a lot of fun. If it's not, figure why not and fix it.

Specific Teaching Strategies, Attitudes, and Techniques

Use tiny increments of new material, checked out immediately.

New material must be attached to previous material, in lots of ways.

Vary reinforcement modes.

Vary presentation modes (what does the *material* suggest?).

Contexts are crucial. Make them explicit (musical, historical, cultural, aesthetic, anthropological).

Practice the new material: listening, singing, analyzing, writing, talking, questioning.

Focus on one item at a time. Move on when it is thoroughly checked out.

Start from the music, not abstractions. Play it, sing it, then discuss it. Experiences first, concepts later.

Exercises—always as musical as possible; play it, hear it.

Ask specific, focused questions. Use listing questions, to avoid "wrong answers".

Model the open mind; don't know it all (even if you do). Model question-asking as a mode of thought. Model critical thinking. Insist on personality and thinking in assignments.

Focus your comments. Be precise as to measure number, exact voice, precisely what aspect of the music you are discussing.

Typical idioms first, exceptions later.

Separate out all aspects of new material. For instance: musical usage, meaning and function, spelling, resolution, doubling, part writing and contrapuntal aspects, atypical usages, history, literature, and so on.

When in doubt, check it out. Never assume a class understands anything.

Use the board a lot. Before class write assignment, menu for the day, examples, charts, maps, whatever. Beware handouts. Avoid using handouts when presenting new material (they won't be focusing).

Learn student names as soon as possible. Consider a Polaroid photo the first day.

Lesson plan—be aware of every step in the learning chain and go through entire chain.

Don't just say it—show it. Play, sing, write, analyze, perform.

Check out student backgrounds, expectations, wants, needs, fears on the first day of class, in writing or in discussion.

Assignments

You can insist on originality and musicality very early in the course, in most work. Watch out for the "technique vs. musicality" trap. If your comments in class focus on the music and what makes it work (the *principles*, not just the discrete technical details; matters of aesthetics and style and expression), that will encourage musicality in student writing and analyzing.

Be sure to explain each assignment clearly. If possible, model the working-out process together with the class at the board (using the piano and/or singing to check it out). Discuss process in terms of clear stages; you are modeling the compositional process.

Principles: In all work in class (analytic and written), focus on the basic musical principles: coherence, affect, style, confirmation of material, continuity vs. articulation, shape, drama, expression. Be sure to pay attention to student writing in these same terms, in addition to technical polish.

Be aware of how long assignments take. Ask students to write on each paper how long they took to do it; adjust future assignments as needed.

Return assignments as soon as possible. This provides feedback, and models promptness.

Check out with students how they are approaching the assignments, both analytical and writing. They may need more modeling of process in class, or individual attention from you if they are taking too long, or doing poor work.

Try not to take poor work personally. If there is a pattern from particular students, make time to consult with them on what's going on. There may be problems of concept or process, or just something going on in their life. You can usually diagnose these problems quickly and suggest solutions.

Be prepared to spend lots of time individually with students. The harder, more thought-requiring or creative the work is, the more they'll need extra attention.

Always play written assignments in class, at least those of a few students. Let the class hear and comment on work which is excellent in both musicality and technique, and also work which isn't (this is fine ear training, too). Identify the composers of the best papers only.

Assignments can be done in class, with you walking around to check the work. This is especially valuable with new materials, as a way of instantly checking on whether everyone understands it (and letting students know if there are any gaps in the learning process).

Assignments can be done in teams, either in class or outside. This can help in building a peerness among students, and an atmosphere of being helpful to each other, rather than competitive.

Good assignments elicit good work, and vice versa (Eble).

Check on work in progress, in stages. This applies to term papers, large analysis and composition projects.

Elicit real answers to real questions (Eble). Trivial assignments elicit trivial, unengaged, work.

"Think about it" is far better than "look it up" (Eble).

Always give prompt response to assignments. Students need this for improvement, and your promptness is a mark of respect for them.

Stress independence and honesty. Try to minimize busy work.

Early assignments on new materials will need to be relatively short, simple and objective, until you are sure the material is thoroughly learned. These preliminary assignments do not always need to be graded.

Use feedback on assignments to improve your teaching. The main point should not be to *evaluate*; it should be to *diagnose* (both your teaching and student understanding).

Vary assignment formats. In theory, consider using every possible format: various types of analytic work, every possible type of written work (melodic writing and harmonization, figured and unfigured bass, all types of counterpoint, chord-phrase formats, given formal outlines, free composition within a specific style and/or technique). Make use of instruments and voices available in class.

Composition projects are very valuable. They are fun, challenging and can help to pull scattered bits of learning together. Leave plenty of time for them. Give such assignments clearly, with plenty of time ahead. Have student work in stages on all longer projects, showing you each stage (this is crucial).

Insist on personality and individuality in work, where this is possible. This pays off in terms of students taking responsibility for their work, which is after all the point.

Grading

Objectify the grading as much as you can. If a points-off system of grading is appropriate for an assignment, use it. If various components (i.e., technique, musicality, quality of manuscript) go into a grade, separate those out and average them.

Explain clearly your grading criteria. Make sure your correction symbols are clearly understood and helpful. Don't hesitate to suggest specific solutions to a technical problem.

Strongly consider having all work below a certain grade-level made up. Correcting one's work is an excellent learning tool, and improved grades can be averaged with the original, improving one's GPA.

Overall grading policy needs to be discussed and explained early. The exact grading mix (balancing of the components of the final grade) needs to be clear from the start.

Make up your final grades with care. It's best to use a simple arithmetical system in computing final grades.

Consider grading alternatives. If Pass/Fail is an option where you are teaching, that might fit some courses. In some classes, students can grade themselves, as long as you make it clear exactly what to base the grade on (and you may wish to retain editorial control over the grades, as long as they know this).

Grading should emphasize what students know, not only what they don't know. Grading should tell students how they are doing. People legitimately want to know this.

Always let students know what is good about their work. There is something good about almost all work, and you should specify what it is. Reinforce the good work. This will pay dividends.

Grade all work as specifically as possible. Be precise as to what the problems are, and what is particularly good, too.

Consider contracting for grades. There are many ways of doing this. This doesn't fit every kind of course, nor every class.

Students should think of grades as earned, not "given". They will need some help from you with this. Interesting, engaging assignments will help a lot, as will clear, detailed and helpful grading from you. Be as clear and consistent as you can about how a grade reflects a certain level of work, especially how excellent work is reflected in high grades. Be sure both individuals and the whole class are aware of this.

Many grades are much better than a few. Having many grades in a course minimizes the damage one poor assignment can do to a course grade. It also indicates that there is a variety of work being

done that is worth grading, and implies that students are getting a lot of feedback from you as to their work and their status in the course.

Try asking "How do you want to be graded?", either on a particular assignment or on the course as a whole. This may be very revealing as to student attitudes, needs, wants and expectations in a course.

Testing

Know why you are testing. Is it to help students think about and apply material; to provide you with feedback about them individually and as a class; to objectify your grading process?

Use both short-answer, objective questions, and larger, thought-provoking synthesizing questions, as the material and your objectives dictate.

Use lots of short quizzes. They work very well for feedback both to you and the students, and let you know instantly what needs work. They can be graded, or not, as seems appropriate.

To test only behavior can trivialize learning; test also the ability to synthesize, to abstract, to create, to think originally.

A good test can be fun to take!

Evaluation should work both ways. Be sure to work out an evaluation system for your teaching, via student written/verbal feedback.

Try having students make up tests.

Test to find out what they know, not just what they don't know.

Use what you find out in the test to improve your teaching. This may well be the main point of testing.

Grade tests promptly and carefully, and be specific as to both good work and problems. Return them to students as soon as possible.

Consider having students correct problems on tests and return the corrections to you. The point is to maximize the learning aspects of testing.

Not all tests need to be graded.

Trivial tests trivialize the material.

Be fair. Don't be tricky or too clever with questions or formats. Use familiar formats and familiar terminology.

Consider using practice tests, especially for final exams. Take-home exams are also possible. Let students know ahead of time about content, length and format. Practice for exams in class.

Be sure exams can be finished in available time. Err on the short side at first. Consider using extra-credit questions, too.

Pass/fail exams are good for simpler material (rudiments). Try competency-based barrier exams (with retakes as needed) for basic material.

Never teach only for the exam.

Creativity in Theory Courses

Assignments can call for creativity from the earliest stages. One doesn't need a lot of theoretical knowledge to be creative.

Creativity needs to be modeled by the teacher, by way of comments on the music being discussed, and on student written work.

Always emphasize the larger issues in addition to (often before) the narrower technical, detail-oriented ones. Think principles, not just operations. Some biggies are: affect, character, expression, style, idiom, genre; shape, flow, coherence, confirmation, concinnity, balance, logic.

Always put technical detail in a musical context. Not just "here's a German chord," but "how does this feel; why does it feel right *here*; what does it tell us about the historical or personal style of the piece; could it have worked equally well elsewhere; how is it set up in the preceding music; what is the linear and contrapuntal context for it" and so on.

Work out written exercises often in class, having students do most or all of the work, at the board. Be clear on the working-out process, and the *stages* in this process. Insist that the class play and sing all board-work, and critique it in terms of its musicality, not just "correctness".

In all corrections on written work, point out the musical issues, not just the "technique." Point out the musical problems, and praise specifically all good aspects of student writing.

Explore a variety of styles, textures, media, idioms, genres, and so on. Write for instruments and voices available in class. Try assignments in specific historical styles and/or genres.

Analysis can be approached creatively and open-mindedly, if you stress the larger principles involved, and are a model of flexibility and enthusiasm for the class. Analysis can be fun and engaging.

Try to do at least one composition project every semester. These are time-consuming but very much worthwhile. They excite students, and get them involved. Have them work in stages, and check out each stage. Insist on excellent manuscript and a fine performance in class. Tape the performances. Have students critique the results. Be positive and encouraging in your comments and grading.

Staying Fresh — Some Strategies

Vary your materials as often as possible. Use a different textbook or anthology every couple of years (if possible where you are teaching). If you are using the same book every year, try using different aspects of it, or different assignments from it. Better, develop your own materials from scratch. This is very time-consuming but makes you think freshly about the course materials and their best pedagogy.

Stay very aware of affect and process in class. This is not only crucial to good teaching anyway, but keeps you interested in what is happening *in the present*. Be aware of the roles students are playing, and of the nature of their interactions among each other, and with you. And be aware of how you are interacting with them one-to-one and as a group. Know your material so well you can keep your attention outside it and focused on what is happening with the students.

Vary the format of each class. Do activities in different orders, or in different ways. Vary the mode of presentation as much as possible (whatever seems appropriate to the material). Try various reinforcement strategies: each-one-teach-one, mirrors, students doing the teaching, students working at the board or performing. Get the focus off you and onto individual students. Kid around. Use humor to

make specific points. Tell stories, as they relate to the material (or sometimes just for fun). Try to keep it light but at the same time serious about learning the material. Model this attitude for the class.

Build a very fluid and informal atmosphere, if that is your style, where students feel free to jump in at any point with comments, questions, jokes (you may need to referee this). Student questions and comments are an immense help to you. They will tell you what's going on with the learning, will suggest new avenues of approach to a subject, will reveal gaps in the learning chain and so on. Create a model of questioning everything, and accepting nothing uncritically.

Enjoy yourself. Loosen up, lighten up. Nothing lasts, in the larger scheme of things. Have fun in the meantime!



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