

FLEXIBILITY IN THE THEORY CLASSROOM: STRATEGIES FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF DIVERSITY

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Josephus, whose lively pursuit of music's foundations is documented in Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum* (1725), shared an admirable and congenial rapport with his teacher Aloysius. Notably absent from their interactions is a timetable for completing each species of counterpoint; the two are willing to continue until a concept is understood, rather than until a specified date. Though we should not assume that student/teacher relationships were maintained in quite so pleasant a manner throughout the Baroque, we may well imagine that Fux would reject our modern classroom format for theory instruction as hopelessly unresponsive to students' needs.

It would be absurd to suggest that all performance majors should be subjected to the same level of artistic and technical demands on their instrument or voice, even if they enroll under the same course number. Some are ripe for mature and challenging works; others require selections that build a foundation for those works. At most of the world's conservatories and universities, private instruction in performance is the norm. Students are offered engaging and appropriate repertoire chosen to accommodate their backgrounds, talents, and aspirations. Why, then, has this strategy been neglected in the teaching of music theory?

Though significant previous training in theory is uncommon among entering music majors, several factors—including innate talent, motivation, fluency in both treble and bass clefs, and keyboard facility—affect student success. Whereas weak performance in a course on Renaissance music history may have little effect upon a student's progress in later terms of a history sequence, problems in theory tend to multiply as each successive term builds upon the previous terms' work. By the time chromatic tonal procedures are introduced, lingering insecurities regarding diatonic practice can be devastating, plunging students into a state of confusion from which they may never recover. In such cases, reporting a failure in the course is sometimes unavoidable. Admissions committees occasionally err in their assessment of an applicant's potential and motivation, while

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student declarations of interest in a music major are not always accompanied by the necessary commitment. However, the rigid apportionment of study into ten- to fifteen-week segments arranged in unyielding curricular schemes inevitably clashes with the learning patterns of some students and contributes to the frustration that unfortunately often accompanies the completion of undergraduate theory requirements.

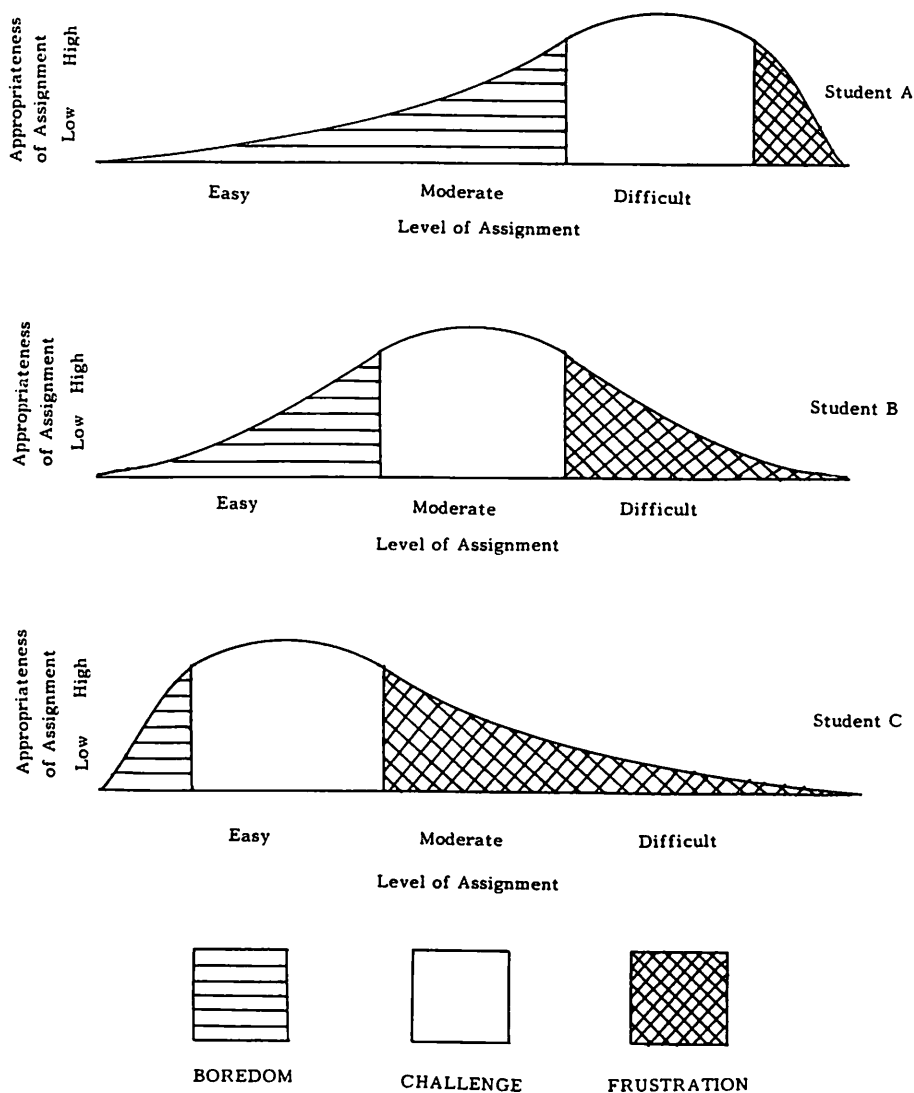
THE BASIC PREMISE

After several years of observing student frustrations mount over the weeks of my course on chromaticism and after grading countless disastrous tests, I began to challenge the pedagogical tradition that fosters uniform accomplishment among all students through identical homework and test requirements. I rebelled against establishing a syllabus consisting of some assignments that my most advanced students would regard as simplistic (and therefore useless) and others that my least advanced students would find unattainable (and therefore both useless and demeaning). Were I to maximize the number of appropriate challenges for some students, I would directly counter the prescription for improvement I should be offering to others. (See Figure 1.) By acquiescing to a pervasive yet horrendous pedagogical situation, I was guilty of mismanaging my students' time resources—of requiring a part of their effort to be devoted to work that neither challenged nor rewarded, but instead bored or frustrated and inevitably countered my vigorous attempts to promote a positive regard for the study of theory.

The mind can attain states of intense concentration during which minutes—even hours—pass swiftly as the mental energies are fully (but not excessively) absorbed. An instructor might experience this phenomenon when presenting a lecture, which might seem to pass in only a few minutes and to offer a synthesis far surpassing the prepared lecture notes. I propose that this state of peak mental utilization is desirable both for learning, for creativity, and for motivation, and that the strategies with which one organizes and conducts a course can foster it and thereby maximize the benefit derived from study and participation. Frustration and boredom are the chief antagonists of this positive state (as well as factors in the deterioration of general mental and physical health) and therefore should be minimized.

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Figure 1.



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STRATEGY 1: ADMISSION TO A COURSE

An important step in coping with diversity is to distinguish between the inevitable variability of potentials among students and an avoidable panorama of student abilities caused by careless attention to standards of preparedness. One should not condone in the name of diversity those remediable handicaps that a more dynamic program of advising or more rigorous set of prerequisites could eliminate. For example, if keyboard instruction ("Class Piano") is required of undergraduates, it should be a co-requisite of the first year of theory—with the regulation all students will possess a rudimentary capability for hearing their homework creations and text examples by playing them at a piano; without it some of them must cope with a pointless lacuna and increased frustration. Likewise ear-training and sightsinging should not be postponed. Not only does "saving" skills courses for later years make them more difficult, it also denies students useful supplementary exposure to the materials of the theory course and delays the assessment of their endowments in one of the *sine qua nons* of artistic success. Finally, the capacity to monitor student progress in the various terms of a theory sequence should be guaranteed through judicious grading (including "D" and "F" evaluations when warranted) and through careful assessment of transfer students' capabilities.

STRATEGY 2: COURSE SCHEDULE

The rigidity of university calendars is a primary deterrent of student success. To accommodate the many thousands of students who seek collegiate degrees, scheduling offices have established a variety of systems whereby the year is chopped into semesters, trimesters, quarters, and the like. Common to each of these systems is the expectation that every student in a course will attain proficiency at the same pace and be prepared for examination at the same time. Students have few options: if they withdraw from a sequence of courses, it is usually a year before they may reenter it; and by exiting they confound the exacting system of pre- and co-requisites upon which most music curricula are dependent and may deny themselves, in the process, the opportunity to enroll in other courses or even to graduate when they had anticipated. It is surprising, then, that few students who experience problems in music theory voluntarily withdraw and repeat a course later?

Faculty can, in some instances, design curricula that offer options for those students furthest from the norm: accelerated sequences for the best

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qualified students; pre-established remedial routes for the least qualified. For example, schools with large enrollments often maintain an honors class that traverses core materials of theory at a quicker rate. This strategy not only provides the necessary challenge to generate maximum progress among the exceptionally gifted students, it also allows the instructor of the normal sequence to respond to a more homogeneous pedagogical environment.

The other end of the spectrum deserves even more attention: whereas the honors student can usually find other ways to utilize the time saved through swifter mastery of theory, the student who finds theory extraordinarily challenging often requires individual guidance and benefits from a "safety net" built into the curriculum. Again large schools are at an advantage in such situations. Most cases of severely deficient progress could be resolved, once detected, if two separate sequences, one lagging a term behind the other, were offered (often called the "trailer" option). For example, a sequence that normally transpires as Fall-Winter-Spring-Fall could be complemented by the same courses offered Winter-Spring-Fall-Winter. In that way a student enrolled in the normal Winter course, for example, would have the option of repeating the course the following term (rather than the following year, when much of the prerequisite knowledge will have faded), or could transfer to the preceding course of the sequence *during the same academic term*.

Even if, due to enrollment, or fiscal constraints, these possibilities are impractical in a given situation, instructors can retain some of their benefits by reserving one class session per week for more basic assignments and questions, excusing certain students from attendance if their homework record displays sufficient mastery.

STRATEGY 3: DIVERSIFICATION OF HOMEWORK

Homework is the battlefield upon which mastery of theory is won. Whereas tests allow students the opportunity to demonstrate their accomplishment, the preceding weeks of struggle and refinements are fought with students' lead and instructors' red ink.

Homework is useless if not confronted wholeheartedly. Students who view any homework submission—regardless of how carelessly completed—as a means for improving their standing in the class are neglecting the essential role that quality of achievement plays in the attainment of mastery. Yet instructors who assign work for which students lack sufficient facility are equally guilty of emphasizing quantity of effort at the expense of quality. Students confuse their preoccupation with filling in endless pages of

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assignments on the one hand with the perseverance and depth of penetration that produce true progress on the other. Keeping busy is easier than stretching one's limits.

One strategy for maximizing the usefulness of homework is to classify it according to three categories as follows: a) assignments of Type I reinforce basic, introductory concepts and are usually quite short; b) those of Type II are somewhat more sophisticated in their challenges and are of moderate length; and c) the most demanding and intense work constitutes Type III. The range of difficulty should match the facility possessed by students enrolled in the course. Students should be free to select assignments of any of these types, so long as they attend the class hour during which they are discussed. Some students may complete a large number of easier assignments over the course of a term, while others may prefer to focus upon a smaller selection of more difficult assignments. In any case, this freedom allows students to customize their workload in response to their individual needs and can result in a general improvement in the quality of submissions. Students who neither demonstrate proficiency on tests nor produce adequate results on homework should be put on probation and assigned specific exercises.

Coordinating with these gradations of assignments, one could establish specific contents for each class hour. Two sessions per week could focus upon Type I assignments, including, occasionally, exercises culled from previous terms of the sequence so that transfer students and others might benefit from a systematic review. Two sessions per week could be devoted to homework of Type II. One or two sessions per week could be reserved for Type III assignments. Though students should be permitted to attend any of these sessions, they will likely gravitate towards the three or four classes that focus on the types of assignments they are pursuing.

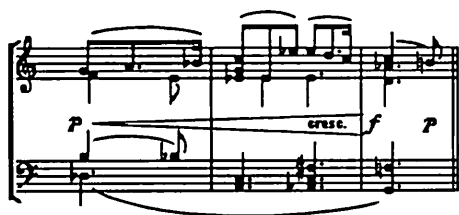
STRATEGY 4: TESTS WITH OPTIONS

In my view, students who acknowledge that their command of the material is not superior (and who therefore do not wish to stand as candidates for an "A" grade) might as well be spared the necessity of putting their weaknesses on display. My tests begin with basic questions and advance progressively to more difficult ones. I instruct my students to complete each page as carefully as possible before moving on to the next. In that way, any errors detected in their answers to the most straightforward questions can be attributed to insufficient mastery of the basic material, rather than to the time limit imposed.

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During my tests those students whose attainments warrant consideration for an "A" pass swiftly through the first page, on which they might be asked to spell and resolve a French augmented-sixth chord, for example, and proceed through various other questions, eventually reaching the last page, where they might be asked to analyze the augmented-sixth resolution shown in Figure 2. At the same time, some of their classmates might spend the entire period completing the first page or two. Students who cannot yet spell augmented-sixth chords need not devote some of their limited time to the exceptional Wagner passage. In fact, I advise them that making random guesses on the harder questions will be less beneficial to their evaluation than leaving them blank. By tolerating haphazardly conceived answers, one fosters neither artistic integrity nor scholarly responsibility; by requesting that students acknowledge their limitations, one replaces greed for an unwarranted high mark with increased self-awareness.

Figure 2.



Tests are, to a certain extent, an alienating situation for students. The experience is not replicated in their daily pursuit of knowledge. To remedy this condition I incorporate "take-home" segments to supplement the classroom tests. The first part of such a take-home might be a straightforward figured-bass exercise (Type I-II); the second a challenging melody for harmonization (Type III). As with the classroom tests, some students may elect not to complete both segments of the take-home. To assure that the work presented—rather than the reputation of its author—is being evaluated, I have devised a means for anonymous grading of all tests.

STRATEGY 5: BANISHING RIGIDITY FROM GRADING

Term grades, based on the questionable assumption that learning should be organized in chunks ending on specified dates, are inherently inimical to sequential courses. Students who earn a "C" in Term One are

not forever deficient in the materials of that course. By the time they have completed another term (with its further reinforcement of basic materials), one would hope that the attainment in the concepts of Term One would have risen to "B" level or even "A" level. Grades are, then, a representation of a student's level of accomplishment at a specific, yet arbitrary, point within a much longer program of study.

There are advantages to a straightforward numerical formula for determining term grades, especially for junior faculty, who may be more susceptible to abusive complaints and other hostility from individual students than would be their established senior colleagues. Yet preoccupation with points should not be a deterrent to student progress. Nor should the completion of homework for its point benefits replace, for some students, its role as facilitator of learning.

Having determined thousands of student grades using a precise numerical formula, I have recently turned to a less rigid system that offers me greater participation in each student's evaluation. Allow me to suggest the following scheme. Instead of recording numerical homework scores, develop a more vivid profile of each student's progress by monitoring three factors: 1) the number of assignments submitted; 2) the difficulty of the assignments selected (i.e., Type I, II, or III); and 3) the quality of accomplishment (which I rate using the symbols +, =, -, and o, recorded along with the type, as in III+ or II-, etc.). For each test award a raw grade and modify it in accordance with the homework record for that portion of the term. These modified grades can then be consulted at term's end in determining the final grade. The homework thus has a unique effect on each student's work. Someone whose raw test grade is "A" might retain that rating even if few assignments were submitted. But the same level of commitment to homework might lower a "C" grade to "D", since in that case the neglect of homework was injurious to progress. Each student should visit with the instructor after each batch of test has been graded to go over the results and receive advice on how best to make improvements.

STRATEGY 6: COPING WITH ENTERING TRANSFER AND GRADUATE STUDENTS

The dilemma of catering to incompatible needs can be ameliorated to a certain extent through the strategies outlined. Strong students become stronger, since they are not held back by a syllabus geared to the median student; weak students learn the foundational elements well, rather than everything poorly. At some point, however, the enormous differences of accomplishment among students must be reckoned with. Typically that

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point is the juncture between undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Students may satisfy one school's undergraduate requirements acceptably, but on advancement to what is often a more sophisticated graduate program, may find that various of their shortcomings in theory and skills are detected and deemed unacceptable. The review theory and review ear-training courses that are prescribed serve both to remedy lacunae in previous training and make amends for the years that may have intervened since the undergraduate course elections. Unfortunately review courses possess few of the components that might lead to a pleasant learning experience: students are often displeased by the additional requirement, which typically does not carry graduate credit; instructors are confronted with a dizzying array of backgrounds and aptitudes among their students in a course that must move at an extraordinarily rapid pace. Ideally these classes invite students to advance beyond their undergraduate accomplishments; instead they often promote frustration and self-doubt.

There is no easy cure for the deficiencies of some students. One can expect improvement; one cannot anticipate mastery. With the moral support of performance faculty, fiscal backing of administrators, and adequate staffing, one *could* devise a workable assortment of courses to accommodate the needs of graduate students. Yet none of these three prerequisites is to be found in abundance at most schools. So students must choose between a catchall review course of questionable efficacy and the humbling, yet often more effective, solution of returning to the undergraduate sequence for a second and more penetrating exposure to each topic.

STRATEGY 7: RETHINKING SKILLS TRAINING

Another monster confronting instructors is the relationship, in terms of academic credit and contact hours, between theory and skills (sightsinging and ear-training). Students in my course earn what is probably the national norm—three credits in theory and one credit in ear-training and sightsinging. Yet certainly attaining mastery of skills is neither one-third as challenging nor one-third as time-consuming as theory. It is significantly more! As a result students tend to lag in skills proficiency and reach the termination of their undergraduate course sequence in a significantly lopsided state that favors the mental as opposed to the sound-oriented components of their training.

The rigidity of modern assembly-line educational practices produces some *bona fide* graduates barely functional in the most rudimentary of musical skills. Instructors can exert some influence in the name of quality control, but they would face censure were they to detain as many students

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in the initial terms of skills instruction as they perhaps should. The problem has less to do with quality of instruction or access to supplementary materials for drill than with the basic fact that too little time is earmarked for this essential study. The result, to which I can testify after having administered at least one thousand placement examinations to entering transfer and graduate students from a wide variety of schools, is that the American educational system is producing degree-holding musicians very few of whom possess what might appropriately be labeled "competence" in the skills component of their musical training.

Despite the grim situation, instructors can do some good. As in the teaching of theory, skills training ought to incorporate a variety of options and could be strengthened through multiple course offerings during a given term. For example, many students would benefit significantly from the option of following a weak performance in Skills I with a *concurrent* enrollment in Skills II (for credit) and Skills I (as an auditor). Students still incompetent in such basic skills as the discrimination between major and minor thirds should not be admitted to the later terms of a sequence. Their presence there would not fall within an acceptable range of diversity but instead would deprive the better-prepared students of the full attention they deserve. Their enrollment would represent a total collapse of an instructor's efforts to maintain quality through the occasional use of low grades.

The skills situation benefits from exercises completed outside of the classroom environment. For example, since most of the sounds will be generated by a piano during class, it is useful to develop a set of audio tapes containing orchestral and vocal excerpts. Students should listen to the selections as often as is necessary, while a wide range of difficulty levels among the selections would ensure that appropriate challenges are available for each student. In recent years, computer programs have been created to provide similar opportunities. As these machines' capabilities in mimicking acoustic sound improves, the medium will likely assume far greater significance.

Sightsinging is a refreshingly straightforward and wonderfully useful pedagogical device, yet the blanketing of the same assignments on all class members yields results that are far from satisfactory. Certainly when, in earlier times, the Guidonian hand guided the development of pitch awareness, the master saved some of the harder intervallic relationships for students he felt were prepared for the challenge. It is neither reasonable nor effective pedagogically to assign difficult melodies to students barely competent in singing the basic intervals. My students meet privately with an auditor seven times per term. The list of potential assignments is long: there are over thirty graduated sets of exercises. Upon completion of the

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first assignment, a score of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) is awarded. The student adds this rating to the number of previous assignments to determine which set to practice next. Thus the most adept students might study assignments 1, 6, 11, 16, and so on, earning a total of 36 points in sightsinging. On the other hand, a very weak student would advance more slowly (assignments 1, 2, 3, and so on). In this manner, each student practices *appropriate* exercises, while the incentive of the points encourages them to progress as rapidly as possible over the course of the term.

CONCLUSION

The instruction that Aloysius/Fux offered to Josephus has been displaced, not surprisingly, by efficient yet compromising teaching methods geared for training large numbers of students using a small number of instructor hours. Given the general state of American education today—and the low priority of the arts within most universities—significant improvements in student/teacher ratios are unlikely. It is therefore incumbent upon instructors to utilize their resources in the most effective manner possible. As I have suggested, a measure of indignation concerning the prevailing state of affairs can lead to some interesting alternative methodologies.

Some students will not succeed in their pursuit of music, despite their—and our—best efforts. Defeat, if inevitable, is better faced after a term or a year than after a degree has been earned and tuition funds exhausted. We can do no better than help each student realize his or her potential, regardless of its dimensions. Our ability to orient our instruction to individual needs profoundly influences our success in this endeavor. Indeed there is hope.