

Peer-Led Melodic Dictation in the Aural Skills Curriculum

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Social constructivism learning theories propose that knowledge develops through social activities, in which students work collaboratively to relate new learning to pre-existing knowledge to construct new understanding. The benefits of cooperative and collaborative learning have been discussed in the context of written music theory classes, peer tutoring, and sight singing; however, little has been said about the benefits of peer learning on melodic dictation skills. In this paper, I outline a peer-led melodic dictation activity and a full peer-teaching unit that I have implemented in my aural skills classes, including the assignment sheet given to students, the benefits of allowing students to lead dictation, and the challenges. Ultimately, I propose that allowing students to bring in their own repertoire examples and work together on melodic dictation, the aural skills classroom becomes more inclusive and diverse while students are placed at the center of their learning and leverage the knowledge and abilities of their peers to improve their skills.



Music is an inherently social activity. Whether performing as part of an ensemble or attending a Taylor Swift concert as one of tens of thousands of spectators, the enjoyment of music for many people stems from sharing the experience with others. Even most solo performances typically involve the collaboration of a soloist and accompanist, not to mention the sort of “conversation” that takes place between a performer and their audience. And yet, traditional undergraduate aural skills curricula often remove the social aspect of music-making in favor of two individual activities: sight singing and dictation. These individuated activities not only cause student anxiety but also reinforce the teacher-driven, “banking” model of education, in which the instructor holds the power and knowledge and imparts it on the student.¹ In traditional sight-singing and dictation activities, the instructor provides the example, leads students through singing and/or dictation, and assigns a grade. While many

¹ In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire theorizes the “banking model” of education as one that “turns them [students] into ‘containers,’ into ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher... Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor.” He proposes that, in the “banking” model of education, “the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits,” and that “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (2000, 72). This model, according to Freire, is an oppressive model of teaching, which can only be reconciled by both parties simultaneously being both teachers *and* students.

instructors include group activities during class time,² like singing canons or duets, the majority of assessments continue to grade students on solo performances.³

The isolated nature of aural skills classes was compounded during the COVID-19 pandemic, when these courses were offered remotely over Zoom. In the online setting, latency issues rendered group singing nearly impossible, removing one of few opportunities for social music-making from the curriculum. When my institution shifted to online instruction, I brainstormed ways for the students in my aural skills classes to connect with one another and benefit from social interaction, all while continuing to develop their singing and audiation skills. My solution to this problem is an activity I refer to as *peer-led melodic dictation*, in which students take on the instructor role by picking a musical example and performing it while a small group of peers take dictation. In this paper, I propose that peer-led melodic dictation is one way of promoting social learning and group work in the aural skills classroom while building dictation skills.⁴

As an instructor, I constantly strive to ground my aural skills classroom in Universal Design, and peer-led activities have brought me one step closer to achieving this goal. One of the main tenets of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is “providing multiple means of engagement,” which encourages course designers to allow for student choice and autonomy in order to increase relevance and value, ultimately enhancing learner engagement.⁵ Giving students choice and agency ensures the learning process is accessible for a variety of learners with differing abilities, strengths, and interests, without providing individual accommodations for students. By allowing students to bring in their own repertoire examples and work together on melodic dictation, the aural skills classroom becomes more inclusive and diverse. This activity places students at the center of their learning, provides students with an opportunity to

2 Rifkin and Urista (2006), for example, outline multiple aural skills games that students play together, including “name that scale degree,” “growing melody,” and several others.

3 Timothy Chenette, Stacey Davis, and Stanley V. Kleppinger outline the activities that continue to pervade the aural skills curriculum in North America, with a critical focus on sight singing and dictation. Drawing on Michael Rogers, who proposes that as instructors, we are drawn to learning activities and assessments with “absolute right or wrong answers” (2004, 101), Chenette, Davis, and Kleppinger suggest that this mindset “discourages difficult-to-grade ensemble work, limiting our abilities to be relevant to students’ collaborative music making skills” (2022, 172). What I propose here is a middle ground of sorts; it includes traditional activities, but from a collaborative, social approach.

4 While this article focuses on the implementation of peer-led activities in the aural skills classroom, the approach could work just as well in the theory curriculum.

5 For more on Universal Design for Learning, see CAST 2024.

practice teaching, and allows all students to benefit from the knowledge and abilities of their peers to improve their skills.

In this article, I will first outline the basic tenets of social constructivism—a theory of cognitive development—as a theoretical underpinning, and review the ways in which music theory and aural skills pedagogy literature discusses cooperative and collaborative learning. I will then explain how I have implemented peer-led melodic dictation in my synchronous online classes and in-person classes, including an overview of assignment expectations and requirements, benefits and challenges of allowing students to choose repertoire and lead dictation activities, and my assessment strategy. The article will end with a discussion of how this activity has evolved over the past two years into an entire peer-teaching unit in my aural skills courses.

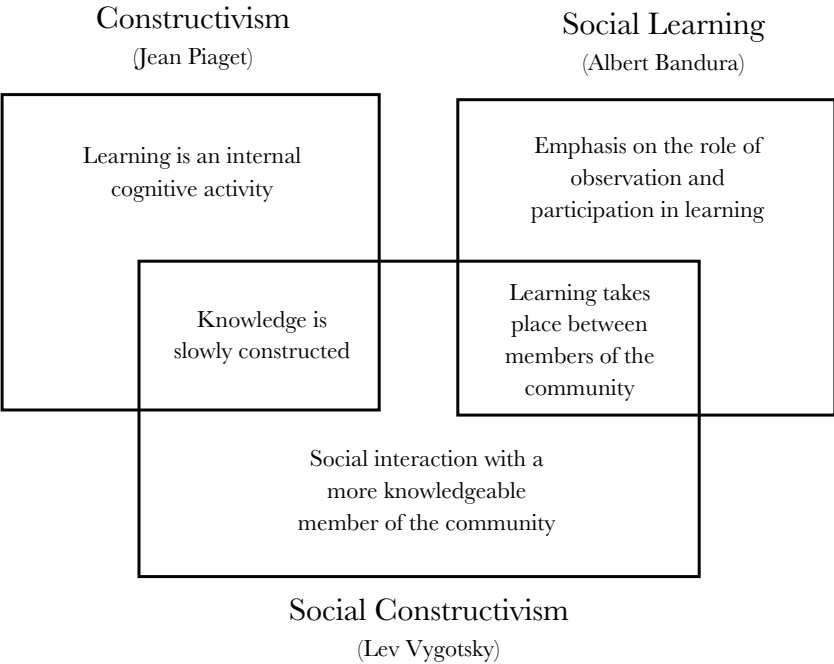
Social Constructivism in the Aural Skills Classroom

Learning theories are a framework for understanding how people acquire knowledge and skills. Although they are an integral aspect of teacher training, explicit reference to these frameworks is often missing in music theory and aural skills pedagogy scholarship. Three prevalent and overlapping learning theories are relevant for this article: constructivism, social learning, and social constructivism (see Example 1). Constructivism, a theory of cognitive development put forth by Jean Piaget, hinges on the belief that knowledge is individualized and slowly constructed. This theory proposes that learning is an internal cognitive activity rather than a social one. Social learning theory, by contrast, emphasizes the role of observation and participation in learning; however, actual *interaction* between a learner and another member of the community is not required—an individual can observe and build knowledge independently. Social constructivism coalesces two theories by emphasizing dialogue and interaction between a learner and someone with more expertise (either the instructor or a more skilled peer), as well as the importance of culture and context.

First introduced by the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky in the first half of the 20th century as an extension of Piaget's theory, social constructivism proposes that knowledge develops through social activities, in which students work collaboratively to relate new learning to pre-existing knowledge to construct new understanding.⁶ Under this theory, learning is viewed as neither an individual nor passive process: knowledge and reality are constructed rather than discovered, and can only be constructed through social interaction with more knowledgeable members of the

6 Chand 2023.

community. Learning is situated within a particular community of practice, and learning in the classroom is related to authentic, real-world applications of their knowledge and understanding outside of the classroom. Social constructivism decenters the traditional power hierarchies in the classroom, placing the instructor as the “guide on the side,” and centering students in their own learning process through interactive group work and shared ideas.⁷ In these scenarios, everyone brings their personal strengths to the table and plays an important role in the development of knowledge and understanding of the larger group.



Example 1
Social Constructivism learning theory overlaps with some aspects of both constructivism and social learning.

Group activities such as peer teaching are rooted in social constructivism. While many core undergraduate music theory and aural skills classes remain fairly traditional—and instructor-centered—in terms of learning activities and assessment strategies, the past decade has seen an increased push toward more opportunities

⁷ King 1993.

for cooperative and collaborative learning. In the context of written theory classes, Lawrence M. Zbikowski and Charles K. Long were among the earliest proponents of cooperative learning, with more recent frameworks proposed by Christopher Segall.⁸ These authors all argue that cooperative learning environments can result in a more positive attitude from students toward their learning, foster inclusive classroom discussion, encourage critical thinking, and allow for immediate feedback.

Collaborative and cooperative learning opportunities have also been explored in the aural skills curriculum. Allison Wente and Timothy Chenette both propose group activities for sight singing, with both approaches assessing *process* rather than the end result: while Wente's "search-solve-sing" method outlines steps for identifying and learning challenging portions of a sight-singing melody, Chenette notes that he grades his projects based on individual student reflections on what went well in their group, and what should be improved for next time. Megan Lyons presents yet another approach to collaborative learning in the aural skills curriculum: peer tutoring. While this method uses collaborative learning outside the classroom, many of the same benefits of peer learning were observed during an evening Aural Skills Lab drop-in center; struggling students benefitted from extra support, encouragement, and explanations by working with a peer, rather than an online resource. Lyons reports that students who regularly use peer tutoring not only see an improvement in their grades and their confidence, but also build a relationship with their peers that allows them to make mistakes and learn without judgement. Tutors also benefit from working with other students, giving them an opportunity to practice problem solving and begin building their own teaching philosophies and methods.⁹

As a whole, these articles outline several ways in which an instructor might leverage the benefits of peer learning in the written theory classroom and for sight-singing activities in the aural skills curriculum. Although none of these authors mention social constructivism explicitly, the activities outlined in each article align with a social constructivist approach in the classroom. In each case, the instructor steps back from the traditional role of leading the class through an activity or discussion, and allows students to take the lead. The activities outlined in these articles propose activities for students to work together to improve their knowledge or skills with the help of the others in their classroom community. One significant omission from the activities outlined in the literature is the benefits of peer learning on one of the most

8 Zbikowski and Long 1994; Segall 2015.

9 Lyons 2015.

prominent aural skills in higher education music programs: melodic dictation. In this paper, I outline a peer-led melodic dictation activity that can more actively engage students in the dictation-taking process, with the help of other students in the class.

This activity aligns with Anna Stephan-Robinson's concept of the "mini-lesson" in music theory classes.¹⁰ The main point of departure, of course, is the classroom context in which the lesson takes place—while Stephan-Robinson's "mini-lessons" occur in a theory class and focus on theoretical concepts throughout the undergraduate core, my activity takes place in the aural skills classroom and moves the focus from theoretical concepts to aural teaching more broadly. Despite this difference, many of the same benefits and pitfalls Stephan-Robinson discusses resonate with my own experiences including peer teaching in aural skills courses.

Peer-Led Melodic Dictation: Benefits and Challenges

I originally created peer-led melodic dictation for the fourth-semester musicianship class that students are required to take at my institution. The course focuses on changing and asymmetrical meters, modulating and chromatic tonal melodies, alto and tenor clefs, play and sing in two different clefs, B-flat transposition, arpeggiated chord progressions with chromatic chords, improvisation, and two-part dictation with chromatic melodies.¹¹ For the peer-led dictation activity, students are tasked with finding a short musical excerpt to teach to their peers in small groups (see Appendix 1 for the assignment sheet outlining the requirements). I emphasize that students should find repertoire that they enjoy outside the classroom—it could be from the classical music tradition, pop music, film or video game music, or something from another musical tradition with which they are familiar, so long as they like their chosen excerpt. Besides a genuine interest in the musical selection, there are three guidelines for choosing an excerpt: 1) it must be polyphonic (i.e. some sort of melodic line and some sort of "bass line," broadly construed), aligning with the 2-part melodic dictation learning objective in the Musicianship IV curriculum; 2) it must be a phrase

¹⁰ Stephan-Robinson 2018.

¹¹ The learning objectives for the course, taken from my syllabus, are as follows: "By the end of the course, you will be able to: sing melodies with changing meters and asymmetrical meters while conducting; sight-sing modulating and chromatic tonal melodies; sing melodies in treble, bass, alto, and/or tenor clefs; play on the keyboard and sing excerpts from scores in two different clefs; transpose and sing B-flat instrumental lines into concert pitch using solfège; sing arpeggiated chord progressions, improvise a melody over a chord progression, and sing back the soprano and bass of two-part passages using solfège."

of around four measures long; and 3) the most important guideline, they must be able to sing both parts (of course, not at the same time). Students are asked to bring in a recorded version of their excerpt so their group members can hear what it sounds like in a broader context.

My aural skills classes consist of twelve students that meet for 50 minutes twice per week. I allot two twenty-minute time blocks for this activity, with one block on each class day (for example, twenty minutes on Monday, and twenty minutes on Wednesday). During class time, students are assigned to a group with three other students. Each student is given ten minutes to lead three group members through the activity by singing each of the two parts of their excerpt, while their groupmates take dictation.¹² Within the twenty-minute time block, two students take turns leading, and the other two students lead during the second class meeting of the week. The leaders provide the key and time signature, and give themselves a starting pitch on their own device (typically a keyboard app on their phone) before singing. I recommend that leaders start with teaching the bass line; only when their groupmates have dictated it successfully should they move on to the melodic line, as time allows.

I schedule peer-led dictation activities twice in the semester to give students two opportunities to choose excerpts. Every year, several overly ambitious students choose an excerpt that they like, but is too difficult to sing. Following the first attempt at this activity, I open the floor for large-group discussion, asking students to reflect on what aspects were successful, and what could be improved for next time. By providing students the opportunity to reflect, learn, and grow through their first performance, the second attempt at this activity is more successful for everyone.

In terms of assessment, these activities have been for participation grade only—students receive credit for participating as both the leader and the dictation-taker to allow students a low-stakes opportunity to practice dictation and teaching. Participation-based grading allows space for leaders who are too ambitious with their excerpt choice to earn credit for showing up and trying their best, even if the activity does not go as planned. This grading scheme also opens the door for learners to try out new strategies without fear of receiving a low grade, and to ask questions they might be afraid to ask when we practice dictation as a large group.

¹² Groups of four students and twenty-minute segments for this activity has worked well for me; however, the number of students per group and the amount of time students are given could be customized depending on the number of students in the class, the amount of class time dedicated to aural skills, and the strengths and weaknesses of the students.

While instructors could experiment with different group sizes, including pairs (one leader and one dictation taker) or larger groups with a 1:5 (or more) leader-to-learner ratio, I have found a 1:3 ratio to work well. Three dictation-takers in a group allows for support and encouragement from multiple students without the risk of quieter or weaker students getting lost. Dictation-takers in my class leave their group-work sessions with improved confidence and new strategies to use on summative dictation assessments.

This activity has yielded multiple benefits. First, it is a fun and engaging way to practice dictation skills. Over the past few years, I have become disenchanted with dictation, and dread practicing this skill in class. The traditional approach to dictation as an individual activity—with students sitting quietly at their desks, listening as I play an excerpt on the piano, and painstakingly trying to write down notes and rhythms—is neither social nor active, conflicting with social constructivist learning theories on how knowledge and skills are developed. Further, there is often a significant divide in dictation skill levels, between those who can already do it and those who struggle, so that some students are bored while others are stressed. Having students work in groups, singing the excerpts themselves and working as a team to figure out the notes and rhythms, is a more enjoyable way to approach this task, aligns with social constructivist models for collaborative and cooperative learning, and is a more productive use of class time.

A group-learning approach to dictation also provides the opportunity to learn with the support of their peers. Group-work scenarios allow dictation-takers the flexibility to ask for clarification and sing things back to verify their listening. I frequently hear group members asking the leader questions such as “In the third measure, did you sing sol-do or sol-re?” These low-stakes opportunities to practice skills with a small group of peers alleviates stress and creates an environment where students feel more comfortable making mistakes.

The student leader gains a greater command of their knowledge and their singing skills through teaching. Stronger students in each group often help weaker students devise dictation-taking strategies, prompting group members with comments such as, “The melody line here is difficult, so maybe start by writing just the rhythm, and then listen for pitch after.” Although helping their peers devise dictation-taking strategies is not an explicit goal of this activity, it happens naturally when students are told it is “peer teaching”: not only do they lead their group through the activity, but they also step into the role of teacher and assist their peers with additional guidance unprompted. Students who are particularly engaged have gone above and beyond

taking on the instructor role, bringing in stickers for a job well done, or impersonating a grumpy music teacher, pacing circles around their desks as they sing their excerpt to elicit laughs from their group. While these situations are not directly constructive for learning, they illustrate the motivation my students have for this assignment, which leads to a better learning environment for all. These activities are the highlight of my classes every semester.

Allowing students to select their own excerpts and bring in music they enjoy to share with the class has led to another major benefit: increased student motivation. In traditional musicianship classes, I have struggled to maintain student motivation about the repertoire we are studying. Most aural skills anthologies include musical examples fabricated by the authors in order to align with the undergraduate students' skill levels, especially early in the musicianship sequence.¹³ Even those based on “real music” are often abstracted from musical contexts or modified to ensure they fit into the appropriate skill level and topic.¹⁴ While instructors may incorporate excerpts that are relevant to students, pop culture changes quickly. By giving students an opportunity to teach their own selections, we increase the relevance and interest our students have in class material, and increase their motivation to practice dictation.

Providing student choice not only increases student engagement but also accommodates variability in student skill levels. By having students select their own examples to teach the class, students are given the autonomy and agency to select an excerpt that they are able to sing comfortably, both in terms of skill level and vocal range. For some students in the class, this agency results in them picking an excerpt with a simple bass line consisting of sustained notes and limited harmonic motion, and melodies that are repetitive and mostly stepwise. Other students pick a song they know deeply, such as one they have been singing since childhood. For still other students, a more complex bass line or adventurous melodic line is well within their reach and they can take this opportunity to challenge themselves. By emphasizing singability as the most important criteria when selecting an excerpt, this activity opens the door to be inclusive to a wide variety of skill levels and interests.

Allowing students to bring in their own excerpts for this activity has also naturally increased the diversity of repertoire studied in my classes (see Example 2). Students have brought in excerpts they are currently playing, or have played in the past, in their studio class or in ensemble, moving the repertoire away from the piano-centric

13 Chenette, Davis, and Kleppinger 2022.

14 By “real music,” I mean music that was not composed by the instructor or the author of the textbook or anthology.

examples regularly used in aural skills classes; other students have brought in pop music, a song from their favorite video game, or a movie they enjoy; others have brought in songs written by their extra-curricular rock band; and others still have brought in music from other cultures, like Hungarian or Chinese folk songs they grew up listening to. By putting students in the instructor role, they have shared information and cultural context of their chosen repertoire and taught the class something that I know nothing about.

Example Repertoire	
Western Classical music (not otherwise studied in class)	• Classical saxophone repertoire • Cello concerto • Monteverdi madrigal
Video game music	• Theme from Legend of Zelda • Theme from Mario Bros
Film music or musicals	• Theme from Pirates of the Caribbean • “Memory” from Cats • “Maria” from West Side Story • “My Favorite Things” from The Sound of Music
Pop music and jazz	• “Lay Me Down” by Sam Smith • “Summer” by Calvin Harris • “Riptide” by Vance Joy • “What a Wonderful World” by Louis Armstrong
Non-Western music	• Chinese folk songs • Hungarian folk songs
Other	• Songs written and performed by extra-curricular rock bands

Example 2

A sample of the repertoire my students have brought in to teach their peers. This list is a cross-section of representative examples taken from several semesters, rather than an exhaustive list.

Finally, peer-led dictation provides students with an opportunity to practice communicating about a piece of music in an aural format, a skill that is not often covered in the aural skills curriculum. Many music students will teach at some point in their careers, whether in a formally (as in a public-school music classroom, private studio, master class, pre-concert talk, or lecture-recital); or informally (by podcasting or through other media). This activity puts a student in the role of peer teacher, a topic that is further developed in the next section of this paper.

Despite the benefits of this activity, there were also complications to overcome. In the virtual teaching space where this activity originated, I could separate students into Zoom breakout rooms and everyone had their own quiet little corner of the internet to work in. The activity is much different in an in-person, physical teaching space. My students are still divided into groups of four, but now multiple groups give different dictation excerpts to their peers in different keys, all at the same time. On the first day we attempt this activity, it is met with quite a bit of resistance, because students have a difficult time focusing their listening on their specific group. I have found that students naturally find ways of working around this difficulty. Some classes intuitively negotiate a rotation among the groups. Other groups plow ahead, heads ducked in close together as they focus their listening on the leader. I find that if I do not mention how difficult this aspect of the activity might be, they figure out how to make it work.

The other difficulty surrounds having students choose a repertoire example that is within their abilities to perform. Grappling with repertoire choice is part of the learning process, and I emphasize the importance of singability when I introduce this activity. I account for this difficulty in my grading scheme by awarding participation credit only; as long as the student puts in a valid effort and is prepared, they get full credit. In the following section, I will propose a scenario where instructors approve students' choices in advance, but for this version of the activity, I leave it as a learning opportunity and do not interfere unless I am asked for my opinion or a suggestion.

Peer teaching unit

After integrating peer-led melodic dictation into my classes over several years, I considered how I could incorporate more peer-learning activities in order to further leverage the benefits of social constructivism. Although I was encouraged by the results of this activity, I wanted to allow students more flexibility in what aspect of the music they teach, give them more time to teach their excerpt, and provide multiple opportunities for teaching, especially earlier in the curriculum. By incorporating peer teaching at an earlier stage, students will have longer to develop their teaching methods and approaches, as well as to solidify their learning with fundamental topics—both as a participant in the class and as a teacher—before the material increases in difficulty. In Fall 2023, my colleagues and I launched a new modular musicianship curriculum in an attempt to decenter our ear training classes from the canon. Each module lasts three or four weeks, and each semester contains three or four modules focusing on a particular genre or style of music. The final three-week modules in the

second- and fourth-semester classes are now dedicated entirely to peer teaching. The activity description and instruction sheet given to students can be seen in Appendix 2.

The peer teaching module has many features in common with the original peer-led melodic dictation activity, with a few major overhauls that transform it into a multi-week unit (see Example 3). As in the original peer-led melodic dictation activity, the learning objective for the peer teaching unit is for students to teach a musical excerpt entirely aurally. Students are instructed to pick an excerpt to teach based on something they like. Unlike the previous iteration of the assignment, students have more agency about what aspect of their musical example they teach—they could focus on melody, or they could focus on harmony, rhythm, or anything else they think is an important feature. Again, the main criterion is that they must be able to perform the excerpt themselves; however, this requirement is now broadened to include singing, clapping, playing something on the piano, or playing something on their primary instrument. I also encourage students to be creative about what they ask the class to do in response to their teaching. The class could take dictation and write things down, as they did previously, but they could also sing or clap in response, work in groups, write on the whiteboard, or do anything else the student leader thinks would be a good use of time. The goal of students’ in-class teaching is to allow for meaningful

Peer-led Melodic Dictation Assignment	Peer Teaching Unit
• Must teach melody	• Can teach melody, harmony, rhythm/ meter, something else • Must also provide a “fun fact” about their chosen excerpt
• Each student gets 10 minutes to teach	• Each student gets 15 minutes to teach
• Occurs during the 4th semester class	• Occurs during the 2nd and 4th semester class
• Teach through singing	• Teach through singing, clapping, playing piano, playing primary instrument
• Teaching three other students	• Teaching the whole class
• Group members must write down melody/rhythm (take dictation)	• Rest of class can write things down, sing things back, work in groups, etc.
• No consultation with instructor when choosing excerpt	• One-on-one consultation with instructor when choosing excerpt

Example 3

A side-by-side comparison of the peer-led melodic dictation activity with the peer teaching unit.

and active engagement with their musical excerpt. Teaching slots are expanded from ten to fifteen minutes, so student leaders are empowered to choose what they think is an appropriate amount of music to cover in that time. They also teach the entire class (a section of twelve students), rather than their small group. Finally, student leaders share a small amount of cultural context about the song, or artist, or musical tradition from which their excerpt originates that goes beyond basic biographical information.

One final difference between peer teaching and peer-led melodic dictation is that students attend a one-on-one consultation with their instructor during the week prior to the demonstrations begin. In these meetings, the instructor reviews the chosen excerpt and lesson plans, and the student can ask questions. Since students are now teaching the whole class and have more flexibility with what they want to teach about their excerpt, I sensed students would be more likely to feel anxious about this assignment. A bit of instructor intervention has eased some of these concerns, and has also encouraged students to think about their teaching demonstration at least a week in advance.

The peer-teaching module has been successful. Students have chosen a wide variety of repertoire, and a variety of musical parameters to focus on within their excerpts. Some students had the class sing back the main melody of their excerpt in unison, such as the tune to the Italian popular song “Se Telefonando” by Ennio Morricone, Donovan’s “Mellow Yellow,” or the melody from a Chinese lullaby. Others had the class learn a canon; one student had the class sing Pachelbel’s canon, and another brought in a traditional German round. Others focused on metric considerations (having the class determine the meter of, and how they might conduct, the opening of Radiohead’s “Pyramid Song”), or harmonic considerations (asking the class to determine the bass line and harmonies of Aretha Franklin’s “Ain’t No Way,” while the student teacher played the chord progression on the piano). Some students taught the class using their voices, others played the piano, and others still taught using their principal instrument—one student focused on a melodic line from Mozart’s *Requiem*, which he played on trombone, while another played part of a Bach cello suite.

Students have been encouraging and supportive of their peers. They welcome each student as they go up, and applaud at the end of each presentation. The atmosphere in the classroom during this unit has been lighthearted and fun, and attendance has been unusually good for the final three weeks of the semester. Students want to be supportive of their peers and to learn about the music their classmates have chosen.

So far, this assignment has been graded based on participation only, with students receiving credit not only for teaching the class, but also for being present for other student teachers. The grade students receive for both aspects of this assignment total 15% of the course grade. When students were asked for informal feedback on the peer-teaching unit, several students noted that in the future, they would prefer to be graded on a more rigorous rubric that reflected the effort they put in to preparing for the assignment. Students suggested that they could be assessed based on their level of preparation, including their ability to put together a creative and engaging presentation, and the quality of the “fun fact” they share about their piece, and also that they could be assessed on the presentation itself, including their ability to manage time efficiently, and their use of different teaching methods. Students suggested that, in the future, they could also be asked to write a lesson plan with one clearly articulated learning objective to add additional rigor to the assessment. Along with their suggestions for improving the assignment’s assessment, students’ responses showed that they enjoyed the assignment, both in terms of the time they spent in front of the class teaching an excerpt, and in terms of learning the material their peers brought in to teach.

Conclusion

Student-centered activities like peer-led melodic dictation and peer teaching have transformed my aural skills classroom by giving students more autonomy and the chance to take on a leader role when sharing music they know and like with the class. Not only do these activities allow students to practice communicating and aurally demonstrating a piece of music as an instructor, but they have also increased the repertoire diversity, and allowed everyone to learn music that I would not otherwise have been able to include in my curriculum. This article demonstrates how peer-led activities can be used throughout the aural skills curriculum: peer-led melodic dictations can be incorporated as single classes, sprinkled throughout the semester, while a peer-teaching unit can shift the focus on to student instructors for an entire three- or four-week module. Peer-led activities allow for more meaningful and engaged interaction during class time, increase student motivation, and allow students to leverage the knowledge and abilities of their peers to improve their skills.

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Appendix 1: Instructions for Peer-led Melodic Dictation Activity

Twice per semester (Week 6 and Week 13), you are asked to bring in an excerpt that you can present to your peers as a 2-part melodic dictation practice. You must start thinking about this activity well ahead of time so you can pick something and learn how it goes. Your example can be in any style or from any tradition, as long as you can sing it. This activity is an opportunity for you to bring something from your own repertoire or a repertoire you like into the classroom, so be creative! You should limit your excerpt to only 4 measures, and there should be two prominent voices—a “melodic” voice and a more accompanimental “bass” voice. You should also bring in a recording (YouTube link, MP3, Spotify, etc.) so that your group members can hear how it sounds in context after completing the dictation.

During class time, your instructor will assign you to a group with 3 other students. On the first day of the week, 2 students will be the “leaders,” and 2 students will be the ones doing the dictation. Each leader will have 10 minutes to lead the rest of the group through their dictation exercise. The leader must sing both the accompanimental part and the melodic part of their excerpt (it is imperative that you sing it well enough for your classmates to learn it, so you must practice your excerpt ahead of time outside of class). As with the dictation tests, the leader should tell their group members the key signature and the time signature. You should then start with the bass voice, singing it for you group members to memorize and sing it back before writing it down. Once the group members have an accurate bass line, you can move onto the soprano line. If you cannot do both voices in 10 minutes, you should only do the bass voice. At the end of your time, you should play the recording of your excerpt for your group members so they can hear how it sounds in context.

After 10 minutes have passed, the second leader of the day will have a turn, following the same steps. In the second class of the week, the group members’ roles will switch – those that were doing the dictation will become leaders, and the leaders will do the dictation.

You are graded on participation only, including your readiness as a leader and active participation as a dictation-taker, totaling 5% of your final grade.

Appendix 2: Instructions for Peer Teaching Activity

Learning Objectives

In this assignment, you will *teach a musical excerpt through sound* (singing, clapping, performing, etc.) to your peers. You will choose a musical excerpt at an appropriate level of difficulty, activities of appropriate scope, and lead your peers through a 15-minute lesson.

Instructions

Choose an excerpt of any piece of music you like to teach to the class. This excerpt need not be from the Western classical music tradition (i.e. it can be popular music, or something from a non-Western music tradition, or something else). You can pick any aspect of the excerpt—melody, harmony, rhythm, something else—but you must be able to perform the excerpt yourself by singing, clapping, playing it on the piano, your own instrument, etc. The class will learn something about the excerpt actively through singing or “ta”-ing things back, writing things down, working in partners or small groups to sing harmonies, writing things on the whiteboard... be creative!

Bring in a recording (YouTube, Spotify, etc.) to play for the class so that everyone can hear it in context. You can play your recording at any point during the lesson (beginning, end, both), but your teaching should rely primarily on your own performance.

Each teaching demonstration will be 15 minutes long. Choose an appropriate amount of material and type of activity for this duration. Share one interesting or fun fact about the song/artist/musical tradition from which your excerpt originates. This fact should be something more substantial than basic biographical information such as date or place of birth—some research will be required! When you share your fun fact, also share the source from which you learned it. For example: “According to Daniel Beaumont (2011), Son House was originally hostile towards the Blues because he only liked religious music.”

An 8-minute consultation with the instructor will occur during Week 11, during which the instructor will review your excerpt to ensure that it is of reasonable difficulty, review your lesson plan, and answer any questions you may have. Your instructor will determine and announce the schedule for these meetings in advance.

Teaching demonstrations will occur over the last two weeks of the semester (Weeks 12–13). The schedule will be announced in advance.

In addition to your teaching demonstration, you will receive a participation grade for showing up for the remaining three classes in that unit. You will receive full marks for making a reasonable attempt at participating as both a student teacher and as a student for your peers.

