A Justification for Synthesis of Writing into the Curriculum of Music Appreciation
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From the liberal arts perspective, eloquent yet concise and effective expression should be expected within every discipline. However, when considering writing practices within the realm of the fine arts, the expectations of the neophyte student and the experienced professor often neither agree nor are reconcilable. The student may only have a vague understanding of the content or context related to a given subject, and the professor is so accustomed to the practices and vernacular of the specialized context of the discipline that s/he can’t see the assumptions (Bartholomae).

In the appreciation of music, yet another difficulty exists, as the medium of music involves a fundamental level of abstraction. While the artist/professor may have an ingrained comprehension of the essence of musical qualities, these essential elements often are not obvious to the uninitiated student. Therefore, the linguistic and experiential gaps between the student and the instructor set the stage for an experience that, unfortunately, is frustrating for both: the student uses vocabulary but doesn’t demonstrate deeper connections between terminology and learning objectives, while the teacher finds out too late that many definitions may have been “learned,” but the essence of the definitions has not been grasped. Although the

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All AUCC courses in Categories 3B, C, D and E of the core must satisfy the following requirements regarding writing. These must be clearly stated on the syllabus for the course.

1. Goals for writing in AUCC courses:
   There are two goals for writing assignments in AUCC courses:
   1. To improve students’ comprehension of course content and,
   2. To improve students’ proficiency in writing.

   * Note: Both of these goals are best achieved when students receive feedback on their writing assignments and have an opportunity to make use of that feedback.

2. Writing requirements:
   1. At least 25 percent of the course grade must be based on written work that satisfies the following:
      a. At least one writing assignment must be an out-of-class piece of written work.*
      b. In-class written work, such as on exams, must be in the form of essays.

   * Note: Instructors should use their own discretion in communicating to students the relative importance of the various expectations in their own writing assignments in terms of how they will be graded.

3. Plagiarism Statement:
   More writing in AUCC courses also brings the risk of increased incidents of plagiarism. It is strongly recommended that instructors have a statement in their syllabus that clearly states that plagiarism in not acceptable and is a form of academic dishonesty. An example is:

   Plagiarism is a form of academic dishonesty. As per university policy “Any student found responsible for having engaged in academic dishonesty will be subject to an academic penalty and/or University disciplinary action.”

   See Section 1.6 of the General Catalog, where plagiarism is defined as follows:

   “Plagiarism includes the copying of language, structure, ideas, or thoughts of another, and representing them as one’s own without proper acknowledgement. Examples include a submission of purchased research papers as one’s own work; paraphrasing and/or quoting material with properly documenting the source.”

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Guiding Principle
Learning to write is a complex process that takes place over time with continued practice and informed guidance. While qualified writing professionals help students learn writing skills and knowledge of writing conventions, written communication competency is developed as students apply this knowledge across the curriculum.

Definition
Student demonstrates the ability to write clearly and concisely.

Criteria*
1. Information Acquisition
   • Find, select, and synthesize information from appropriate primary and secondary sources.

2. Application
   • Apply knowledge of syntax, grammar, punctuation and spelling in writing assignments.
   • Use appropriate vocabulary, formats, and documentation for different writing tasks.

3. Analysis
   • Critique own and others’ work.

4. Synthesis
   • Integrate own ideas with those of others.

5. Communication
   • Convey a primary theme or message in a written text.
   • Use a variety of research tools, including current technological resources.

6. Evaluation
   • Clarify ideas and improve the quality of a written paper by using feedback.

* The above bullets represent the full spectrum of criteria that may define this competency. For the purposes of qualifying a state-guaranteed general education course that requires this competency, the institution must demonstrate that the course substantively addresses most, not necessarily all, of the stated criteria.
term of line in music becomes evident if one takes into account perception of line versus presence of line. While the term "line" may refer to something as mundane as a sustained section of melodic content, often writers will describe the empathic reaction inherent to the perception of line. In terms of musical perception, perceived line is the listener's empathic reaction as triggered by perceptions of a performer's intention or through expectancy of an eventual musical direction that gives both variety and unity to a phrase. While a discussion of the shortcomings of musical language is not the purpose of this essay, one may easily see the potential for difficulties for the student writer in using musical terms.

Another problem with writing about music is that the expression of time and structural form in music is frequently more like a narrative than like an academic text arranged around an argument or thesis. Because of this, students are prone to using a narrative form when discussing their observations. However, students must make a transformation if they are to write successfully in academic settings about music. While the writer may have in mind a context for their own observations, such as, “there was a really loud part,” or “that part that made me feel sad,” student gleanings from their musical experience will often be less meaningful for a reader because the reader cannot hear the music and therefore will have no sense of the context of these observations, much less the scale and scope of the work. Any stream of simple observations that lacks a strong sense of cohesion will often, therefore, seem juvenile, even if the observations are correct.

In short, then, students will struggle to find language to convey their experience in a manner that meets conventional expectations for academic writing. A key approach may be for students to provide explanation of their sense of the organization and context of the music about which they are writing. In doing so, students introduce readers to the essence of their experience, which by its very nature will involve the passage of time and the organization of musical “events” in that space.
The abstraction of listening

Beyond the difficulties of becoming familiar with terms to describe abstract musical phenomenon, there is the additional difficulty of the abstract nature of musical perception itself. While the physical presence of sound as an expression of energy in waves is without dispute, the realization of sound in terms of the auditory experience of humans is entirely dependent on human physiology. As our perceptions of sounds are actually the interpretation by the brain of neural impulses caused by the transference of vibration through membrane, bone, and cochlear fluid to hair cells, and finally into neural impulses, one may begin to see the potential for different musical experiences based on simple physiological variability even within the community of the non-hearing impaired.

An awareness of the physicality of listening deepens our appreciation for the difficulty of capturing the musical experience in words and provides explanation for additional difficulties in understanding between reader and writer. Quite simply, a student, through no fault of his or her own, simply may not “hear something that way.”

Assign Writing Anyway

The difficulties of teaching writing in the context of introductory music appreciation are many, but we should not allow our fear of these difficulties to prevent us from trying. In the large lecture classroom, the simple recall of terminology becomes more important than connecting the listening experience with the concept. Therefore, the essence of the concept becomes a trifle, and academic training in recollection becomes the emphasis. With this method, a student can have success even if s/he is confused by the essence of the content or unable to experience music in the way musicians do. It seems that writing about music may be one of the few windows that teachers have into the actual musical experience of students at the introductory level. Through writing, students may demonstrate their level of proficiency in comprehending musical concepts.

And, as discussed, here, articulating the abstract experience of music brings quite specific challenges and benefits to the student. But let’s consider other challenges as well: To be able to successfully write about a musical experience, one must be able to relate abstract concepts and experiences into comprehensible language. One must be able to concisely and subtly organize a temporal experience. One must be able to not only adeptly use musical terminology, but demonstrate a thorough understanding of the connotations of the terms. One must be able to balance emotional, aesthetic, and technical understandings of an experience and relate them together. One must be able to justify claims or observations relating to a new language, music. One must be able to convey the substance and sentiment of an experience without resorting to listing. Most importantly, one must be able to conjure an accurate image of an experience in not only oneself, but within one’s reader.

The student writer must not only “understand” the music but must also grasp what readers need for comprehensibility, an understanding that will advance student potential for effective communication in any subject.

Suggestions for incorporation

Given the difficulties of writing about music, some of which have been described, it would seem that a combination of low stakes assignments and high stakes assignments (Elbow) may provide greatest benefit to the general education of students in a Music Appreciation class.

Low stakes assignments that probe student understanding allow for an immediate assessment of student comprehension. For instance, students could be asked to quickly describe a piece of music they have listened to in class, analyzing it in terms of form, texture, melodic contour, expression, harmony, rhythm or any other number of qualities. By limiting the scope, the instructor is able to ascertain what the student understands of the individual qualities, even as the student’s effort at description helps him or her grasp the finer points of the concept. Further, with low stakes writing, students could practice articulating their understanding of abstract concepts and justify their observations, a practice central to academic writing.

In turn, high stakes writing in Music Appreciation might ask students to organize more complex and developed ideas after study and rehearsal with low-stakes writing. These combinations of exercises, involving both description and synthesis, when coupled with feedback from the GTA or faculty reader, offer potential for helping the student writer make great strides as a college thinker.

Works Cited


Fall 2010 GTA Comment

About Grading & Responding to Student Writing

I think the most important factor to remember about feedback is that the person receiving the feedback is indeed a person. It is important to me to be nurturing. The last thing I want to happen is for the student to feel discouraged by the feedback they receive from me. I want them to feel encouraged, to want to do good work and improve.

—Greg Batchelder
GTA Anthropology

Thank you to Vaughan Cardona for his essay on writing integration in Music, the second piece of GTA scholarship published in the gtPathways Newsletter. See Volume 3, Issue 2 for an article on writing integration in Psychology by doctoral student Chris Rowland. Visit the gtPathways website for these ideas and others:

http://writing.colostate.edu/gtPathways