

*Carnegie Scholar Project: Using the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning to
Transform a General Education Music Course*

Transformation Theme: Assessment

Summary of Significant Findings

by

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Assessment continues to be one of the thorniest challenges for me and, I suspect, for most teachers. In fact, I would not be surprised at all if amidst all of the data and analysis present in this course portfolio, you clicked on this section first! Many of us hope that some day we will find a quick and easy solution to the assessment challenge but I suppose like learning itself, assessment will continue to be a messy and complex business. This summary will simply present a current snapshot of my thinking and problem solving in this area.

Was This An “Easy” Course?

As I began this course portfolio, I was plagued with the fear that the reason my students loved the course was that it was “easy.” One of my first objectives, then, was to see if I could determine if this was the case. I turned to both the Student Investigators and to students generally and asked them this question:

“How does the amount and quality of work you’re doing in this course compare with what you would do for other general education introduction survey courses?” Not a single student responded that the course was easier than their other courses. The following are representative comments:

“...this course requires a lot of writing. Writing is one way of learning the material. Worksheets, for example, are a lot of work. Questions are constructed the way that the student must know the text. It happened to me a few times that I did not quite understand the text. In order to answer the question right I had to read the text again. After finishing the worksheet and participating in the quiz, I can say that I know the module.”

“Before taking this class I talked to students who already took this class. Everybody said that this class would be a lot of writing but I could choose the speed of accumulating (sp) the points. I haven’t found one student who would say that this class was easy.”

I think that this is not just an easy “A” class. There is a lot of writing, and with each worksheet we are essentially outlining the chapter. What I do like is being in control of which modules I choose to do a lot work on and which ones (for lack of interest or time) I can do less on without suffering in the end. Since I don’t feel pressured from within the course, I find I am pushing myself to achieve as much as I can and I’m probably learning more in the process. Aha! This must be Professor Barkley’s ulterior motive for her low pressure approach!”

“I think the amount of work in this class is comparable to other classes, maybe even more. However...I enjoy it so much and find myself wanting to learn about the fascinating history of music in multicultural America. I don’t mind spending 12 hours outside of class answering questions, doing quizzes, watching movies, and so on. It’s kind of like got to a job you love everyday. You can’t believe you get paid to do what you’d probably do for free just because you like it so much.”

Interestingly, I did not receive a single comment that it was an “easy” course. Yet I was still not satisfied. I decided that “easy” could be defined in two ways: either the workload was easy, or it was easy to get “a good grade of an A or B” and that the way I had structured the assessment (“empowering” students to determine their own grade

through accumulating points) was confounding the issues. I decided this quarter to survey the students in another way. I therefore sent out the following question:

As you know, your final grade is determined by the number of points you have generated at the end of the quarter. I am interested in getting your opinion on the workload in this class.

Using the following scale:

- 1 = Very Light Workload
- 2 = Light Workload
- 3 = Moderate/Average Workload
- 4 = Somewhat Heavy Workload
- 5 = Very Heavy Workload

would you please rate how much work it takes to get an A, B, or C?

Specifically, I am asking this question:

In comparison with other general education introductory survey courses you have taken or are currently taking, how would you rate the workload to earn the final grade of

“A” (1500 points by the end of the quarter)

Please rate from 1 to 5

“B” (1000 points by the end of the quarter)

Please rate from 1 to 5

“C” (750 points by the end of the quarter)

Please rate from 1 to 5

This time my answers were more varied. As might have been predicted, as carefully as I attempted to craft the question, many students were confused. But the majority of students answered “4” or “5,” and a handful of students answered “3” or “2”

so I started to get a sense that students really did feel that the workload was linked to the grade. (It might have been even clearer if I had managed to ask the question better. Any suggestions?) Over all, though, students who were striving to earn an “A” for the final grade felt that the workload was “Heavy” to “Very Heavy” while the few students who were just trying to do the minimum to pass the course, generally felt that the work load was “Moderate/Average.” But another variation came in: students with more advanced academic backgrounds or students in the sciences appeared to be the ones to say that the course workload was lighter. Two examples are:

I took my general ed courses at a university in Texas, so my answers probably aren't that relevant for your survey. But I would say to get a B or an A it is a 2 (Light Workload) in comparison with my other undergraduate courses.

I am a botany major and I think the work load is light to average. If the class were not so interesting to me I might find it average . I think your grading system is good. One can determine how hard they wish to work.

But these comments were in the minority. Most other comments emphasized the heavier aspect of the workload, such as the following:

Dr. Barkley, I was hoping that you would change the grading system this quarter because we do all this work and yet it's still hard to get enough points to pass. For instance, the worksheets are quite lengthy (some of the questions have two or three questions within one) and we only get 50 points for that. They should be at least 100 points. Please consider this. My grade depends on it as I am sure others do too. This course requires way too much work and I was hoping you'd change your grading policy now. Thanks for your time.

I am taking two other online courses, but this course has the heaviest workload with assignments due every week. The other courses only give out essay exams and a final, and it doesn't really leave a lot of room for mistakes. I believe that even though this course takes a lot out of me, it gives me a chance to make a few errors and still receive an "A."

Ultimately with all of the responses, I have concluded that the course is an appropriate workload level for the various grades. Obviously, the larger and deeper question is "how much are students learning?"

Assessment Focused on Learning

The transformed course had developed into one of the most popular courses on campus, regularly filling and waitlisting early in the registration process. Students were saying how much they were learning, but what were they really learning? In fact, what was I really trying to teach them? I decided to use a "Backward Design" curricular development model to see if I could improve my assessment of student learning

"Backward Design" is a curricular development model proposed by Wiggins and McTighe (1999) that is an alternative to coverage and activity-oriented curricular models. The model suggests working backwards in three stages, beginning with identifying deep learning goals and then identifying assessment strategies prior to creating the course curriculum. This exercise was much, much more difficult than I had imagined. What finally helped to clarify the deep learning goals was a technique that I picked up at a conference on diversity in higher education in a session led by Rakesh Bhanot, Senior Lecturer at the the Centre for Higher Education Development at the Coventry University

in England. This technique was to organize deep learning goals into three categories: attitude, skills, and knowledge.

I proceeded to organize my goals within these categories. Following are two examples in the “Attitude” and “Knowledge” categories:

Attitude

In order to understand and appreciate the multicultural complexity of American music and its role within an historical and sociological context, it is important for students to

- recognize the power of music as an expression of personal and ethnic identity;
- appreciate that music exists in cultures for a wide variety of reasons, that each of the five broad groups that constitute American society have complex and unique musical traditions, and that these variations are reflected in American music.

Knowledge

In order to understand and appreciate the multicultural complexity of American music and its role within an historical and sociological context, it is important for students to:

- acquire a vocabulary to identify and describe the musical elements such as rhythm, melody, and instrumentation that characterize that group's special musical traditions.
- know salient facts regarding each constituent ethnic group's unique history and experience in American culture and society.

I then proceeded to “Stage 2,” in which I attempted to determine the kind of evidence I would need to show me that students had achieved these learning goals and “Stage 3” in which I created the specific assessment tools. The followings is an example of my attempt to create an integrated assessment chart based on the “Backward Design” curricular development model.

Integrating the Three Stages of Backward Design in Music of Multicultural America		
Learning Goal	Learning Activity	Specific Assessment Strategy
Recognize the power of music as an expression of personal and ethnic identity	Self-reflection on personal importance of music and observation of importance of music in “other” ethnic/racial group.	Focused autobiographical sketch; Invented dialogue between “others.”
Appreciate that music exists in cultures for a wide variety of reasons, that each of the five broad groups that constitute American society have complex and unique musical traditions, and that these variations are reflected in American music.	Readings on the music traditions of the five broad constituent groups combined with listening examples.	Focused listing of role of music in various cultures; analysis of contemporary examples of American music for ethnic influences
Understand that cultural diversity is not a 20 th century phenomenon but rather is an historical characteristic of the United States.	Readings on the historical and sociological experiences of the five broad constituent groups.	Worksheets requiring demonstration of knowledge of historical and sociological experience of five constituent groups. Identifying examples of current news items pertaining to race/ethnicity issues and doing ‘backtrack’ research on events leading up to that specific event.
Realize that each large constituency (e.g., Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, European-	Presentations by and/or dialogues with representatives of diverse subpopulations	Multiple viewpoint ethnic biographical portraits

Americans, and Native Americans) is not homogenous, but rather is itself a collection of heterogeneous and diverse subpopulations.		
Recognize that current problems and issues related to race and ethnicity have deep historical roots.	Readings on the historical and sociological experiences of the five broad constituent groups.	Historical analysis of current news item regarding racial/ethnic strife
Apply the vocabulary of music elements such as rhythm, melody, and instrumentation to identify those elements in an aural music example.	Guided listening followed by practice identifying elements in small groups and individually.	Analysis of an aural example of music for elements such as rhythm, melody, and instrumentation.
Recognize examples of ethnic and racial bias and stereotyping in the media	Guided film observations.	Small group and individual identification of ethnic and racial bias and stereotyping in a media example.
Acquire a vocabulary to identify and describe the musical elements such as rhythm, melody, and instrumentation that characterize that group's special musical traditions.	Guided Listening followed by practice identifying elements in small groups and individually.	Analysis of an aural example of music for elements such as rhythm, melody, and instrumentation along with identification of ethnic style origin.
Know salient facts regarding each constituent ethnic group's unique history and experience in American culture and society.	Readings on the historical and sociological experiences of the five broad constituent groups.	Worksheets requiring demonstration of knowledge of historical and sociological experience of five constituent groups.
Have a conceptual framework that will enable them to identify the similarities and differences between the aesthetic,	Readings, lectures, guided listening on the similarities and differences between the aesthetic, expressive and functional qualities of each	Small group and individual application of conceptual framework to media example

expressive and functional qualities of each group's musical traditions.	group's musical traditions..	
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Ultimately, using “Backward Design” turned out to be an extraordinary amount of work on my part and I never completely applied it. I still rely primarily on students’ writing in worksheets and essays. I think I have a sense based on this when deep learning has occurred, and when it has not, and I assign points based on my judgment. Ultimately, my system breaks down into the following:

- A student can do a smaller amount of high quality work (work that clearly reflects deep learning) to earn an “A” or
- A student can do a very large amount of low to medium quality work (work that does not clearly reflect deep learning) and still earn an “A.”

Does “quantity” balance out “quality?” Am I truly assessing deep learning? I still struggle with these questions but feel comfortable that, by and large, most students are learning a good amount of knowledge and skills in this course, and some are even adjusting and changing their attitudes. Just this morning I received the following lengthy comment from a very good student:

I think that this class teaches an enormous amount, regardless of the workload. The material seems to have a deep and lasting effect on students by opening their minds to the positive aspects of other cultures. I am amazed at how much I've learned and how much the course has encouraged me to look at other peoples with a respectful, positive, and inquisitive attitude.

For example, where I grew up (near San Antonio, TX) people call Mexican immigrants "wetbacks" and speak very disparagingly about them. But through this class I have become very sympathetic to their condition and am constantly reading news articles or listening to NPR programs when I drive about their culture and other cultures as well.

For example recently I read some articles and heard a radio program about the Day of the Dead (I found out that this isn't a true Mexican celebration, like I'd always thought, but it was heavily influenced by Spanish culture and the Catholic religion, although it retains elements of Indian traditions). Before, I would have probably not have read the articles or would have turned the radio dial and not listened to the program, but this class encouraged me to find out about other cultures and it has gotten me in the habit of being more open-minded.

Some other things I sought out recently that I might not have paid attention to before are

- articles about Huerta, the UFW co-founder, who has been in poor health lately,
- radio programs about Native Americans on Veteran's Day (I found out that they are the highest percentage of minorities, not Blacks, like I had thought, enrolled in the American military; the interviewer said that this is partly because people wanted to escape bad conditions on the reservations, but (sadly) also because their culture places a big emphasis on young men defending their people.)
- a historical account of the invasion of the Aztecs and a description of Montezuma Xocoyotl
- an article about California's oldest native American woman dying recently (she was over 101 years old and used to know Ishi!)
- an article about two Native American tribes who are fighting with the FBI over ownership of a headdress that was thought to belong to Geronimo (a man was trying to sell it over the internet and the FBI seized it)
- some articles about Pat Buchanan's reform party parade on Columbus day that was disrupted by Native American demonstrators (Buchanan called them cultural Marxists!)

- an article about San Diego students, who recently voted to keep the Aztec mascot,
even though that is derogatory for Hispanic descendants of the Aztecs
- an article about how Hawaii recently sent delegates to the Pope to try to get a
1493
Papal slavery decree annulled ("The Inter Caetera, a bull decreed by Pope
Alexander VI on behalf of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, gave the
Spanish crown 'unlimited rights of dominion and enslavement over non-Christian
peoples and territories.'" Scary.)
- And I recently read Kidnapped, by Robert Louis Stevenson, and found out that
David Balfour, the main character, was sold into *white* slavery by his evil
uncle,
and was destined for the Carolinas to pick cotton at the plantations before the ship
was wrecked. (I hadn't realized that whites were sold into slavery before this.)

At first I just started paying attention to this kind of information because of this
class, but now it's become a habit and I'm really starting to be more interested in
other cultures. I've even developed an interest in jazz because of the class, and am
getting recommendations from a very knowledgeable friend about jazz albums.

So I think that this class does have a profound effect on students, regardless of the
workload. I hope that the course does end up getting incorporated in other
colleges
and universities. Also, I've really enjoyed all the material and the excellent
presentation. I guess I already have an A, but I don't want to stop the course now
because I'm interested in learning the rest of the material. Thanks for all the effort
you put into the course.

Needless to say, this student's unsolicited praise "made my day." I still struggle with
assessment issues, but I think it is also time to relax a bit and trust my own instincts and
the positive feedback I get from my students. Ultimately, my efforts to transform the
course have been effective. The course can always get better, but truly, it has come a
long way from the kind of curricular catastrophe it was a few years ago!