Transformation Theme: Empowering Students as Architects of Their Own Learning

Summary of Significant Findings
by
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In the initial puzzling over problems in the baseline "Music History" class," I felt that a significant influence on the decline in enrollment and the lack of student engagement was a mismatch between student ethnic/racial diversity and course content. But I also felt that another influence was a mismatch between the younger students and the methods of course delivery. In terms of delivery, today's "digital generation" students have spent their lives surrounded by electronic media and learning through participation and experience. "Music History" had been taught in the sequential, passive, and pyramidal approach of traditional higher education curriculum.   Basically, the predominant "learning activity" (beyond reading thick, difficult textbooks) was to sit in a classroom while I lectured. Not only did this keep students in a passive role, but it also left them fairly powerless: they had no choice whether or not they took the exams, and the only control they had over their final grade was to do their best to prepare for the exams. Clearly this is the "norm" in higher education, but I felt that it was working less and less well with the younger students.

I chose to address these issues by identifying ways students could become more active and by shifting some of the authority and the responsibility to students to determine their own learning paths. I have since used the phrase "Empowering Students as Architects of Their Own Learning" to refer to this approach. As the first step in this approach, I divided the course into twelve modules:

Module 1:   Multicultural America and the Building Blocks of Music
Module 2:   Native American Music Traditions
Module 3:   The Roots of Hispanic Music
Module 4:   Euro-American Folk and Colonial Religious Music
Module 5:   Cajun, Zydeco, and the Urban Folk Revival
Module 6:   Country Music
Module 7:   The Roots of African-American Music
Module 8:   African American Traditions: The Blues
Module 9:   African American Traditions: Jazz
Module 10:   The Ethnic and Racial Roots of Rock and Roll
Module 11:   The Roots of Asian-American Music
Module 12:   Contemporary Latino Music

The first module is required, as it establishes the basic vocabulary and concepts for the course, but students may choose how many and which ones of the remaining modules they want to do to complete the course.   Within each module, students must read material which I have put together that provides an overview of that music and its development within an ethnic and racial context in the United States. They then complete a Reading Worksheet in which they define significant terms and explain important concepts and information in the reading. But beyond the reading and worksheet, they may choose to "mix and match" from a variety of "Learning Activities." These activities include:

1. Attending In-Class Face2Face Lectures and completing a "**Journal"** which includes notes and commentary.
2. Taking "On-Line **Quizzes**" (one per module)
3. Observing **Films** which include feature films (such as Smoke Signals) or documentaries (such as Primal Mind). For each film, students complete a "Film Report" which includes providing answers to objective questions as well as writing a subjective essay.
4. Attending **Concerts** of appropriate music and writing a "Concert Report."
5. Attending special **Lectures**, such as campus lectures by guest speakers during African American Heritage month, and taking lecture notes.

6. Attending **Special Events**, such as a Native American Pow Wow, and then writing an Event Report.
7. Visiting **Historical Sites**, such as exploring a California mission, and then writing an Historical Site Report.
8. Visiting **Museums**, such as to the Stanford Cantor Museum which contains collections of Native American and African art and historical artifacts, writing a Museum Report.
9. Conducting a **Web-Quest**, in which students search for websites that relate to a module. They then write an essay in which they summarize the information available in that web site; evaluate the accuracy of the information and attempt to identify the vested interest of the group producing the site; and rate and rank the sites in terms of usefulness and interest.
10. **Research** a pre-approved module topic, ranging from relatively simple to extended and complex projects. This research may be presented in either regular written format and/or as a presentation to the class.
11. **Miscellaneous** Category, which includes such activities as writing themed autobiographies, conducting focused interviews, participating in small group projects, learning to perform a specific style of music, etc.

Students earn up to 50 points per activity (except for the research project, which may earn more), and points are awarded based on the quality of the work. Depending on the number of activities students choose, they can earn anywhere from about 50 points to 300 points per module. Their final grade is determined by the number of points they have earned. 1500 points are required for an A; 1250 points are required for a B; 1000 points are required for a C; 750 points for a D.

Thus students are empowered by their freedom to select which learning activities they prefer, and they are empowered to determine their final grade, as the Final Grade is a function of quantity (how many activities) and quality (the number of points based on the thoroughness and thoughtfulness of their work). I have heard from many students, especially the younger students, that they have very much appreciated this flexibility. Here are just two examples from two students under the age of 20:

"I think that the flexibility and the number of different options you have given us to earn points within each module gives a bit of power back to us and makes us more proactive. It keeps the format of the class new, being that we can pick and choose how we want to earn points for each subsequent module. Being that to earn max points for each module at least 6 assignments are required, this gives us the opportunity to really learn the material."

"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 going 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."

In doing the analysis for this section of the course transformation, I was most interested in finding out from the quantitative data if the course appeared to attract and retain younger students. I was therefore very pleased to see the significant increase in students who are the youngest:
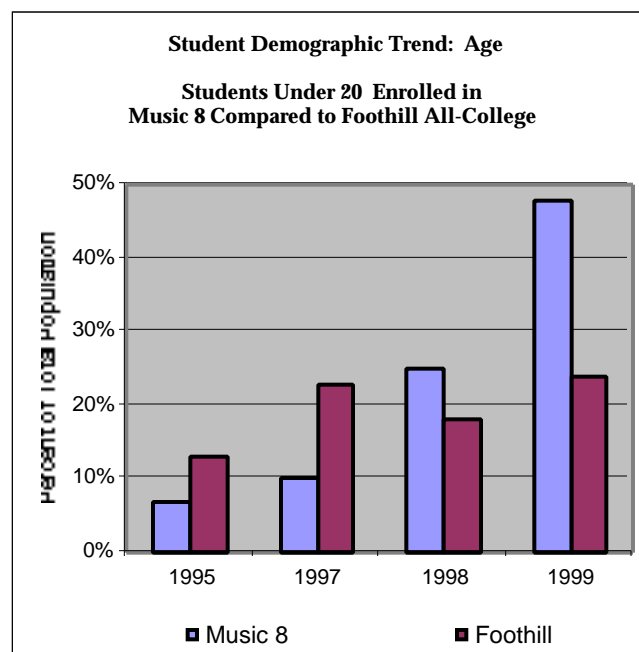
In terms of percentage, this is an increase from 6.67% to 48.37% of the students enrolled in the class. To place these statistics in an institutional context, the "all-college" percentage of this population has remained fairly consistent and between about 12 and 23%. This seems to me to indicate that as I began to incorporate more student-directed activities as well as covering music that was more appealing to them, younger students were attracted to the course.

This analysis of the "course transformation" has concentrated on student empowerment, but an additional factor in this increase in the percentage of younger students may also be the shift to multimedia, including on-line. That aspect will be the focus of the next "Transformation Theme."