

Individualisation vis-à-vis Community in Reinventing the Teaching of Musicianship

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Introduction

The first of Music Theory and Musicianship courses at any institution likely has the reputation of being a regimental experience – almost literally, as “drill exercises” are common. Memorization is often emphasized (*E major has a key signature of four sharps*) with very little on the conceptualization (*Why does E major have four sharps? How many ways can we use to figure this out?*) The impact of online teaching due to the pandemic influenced adjustments in this regard as one channel of building community spirit, in line with peer-to-peer engagement highlighted in Michael G. Moore’s theory of transactional distance.

Reference: Moore, M. G. (1993). Theory of transactional distance. In D. Keegan (ed.) Theoretical principles of distance education. New York: Routledge.

Traditional Aim: Assessing Precision

Syllabi survey: seven tertiary US institutions have syllabi of this course publicly available. Only two included a creative component within the grading: a composition project worth 10%. An average of about 70% of assessments are related to exams.

Occasionally, assessments can include singing in groups, which enables some level of community-building in the preparatory process. However, this does mean the repertoire is prescribed and teacher-centric, and each individual is still assessed on accuracy in relation to the rest of the team, rather than any individuality in the creative process.

Convention

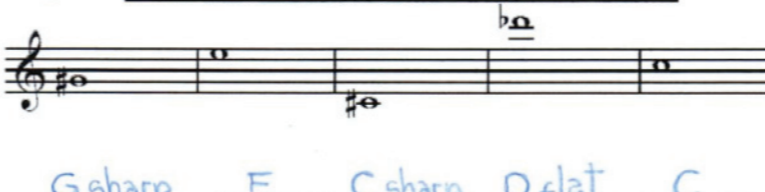
THEORY & MUSICIANSHIP

Drills | Quizzes | Exams

These are written assessments, as seen in the sample test on the right.

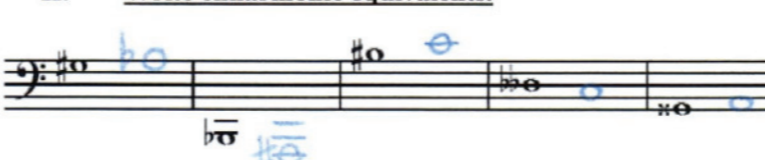
SECTION 1

I. Name the following pitches using letter names.



G sharp E C sharp D flat C

II. Write enharmonic equivalents.



Sample test from Agnes Scott College, Georgia, USA

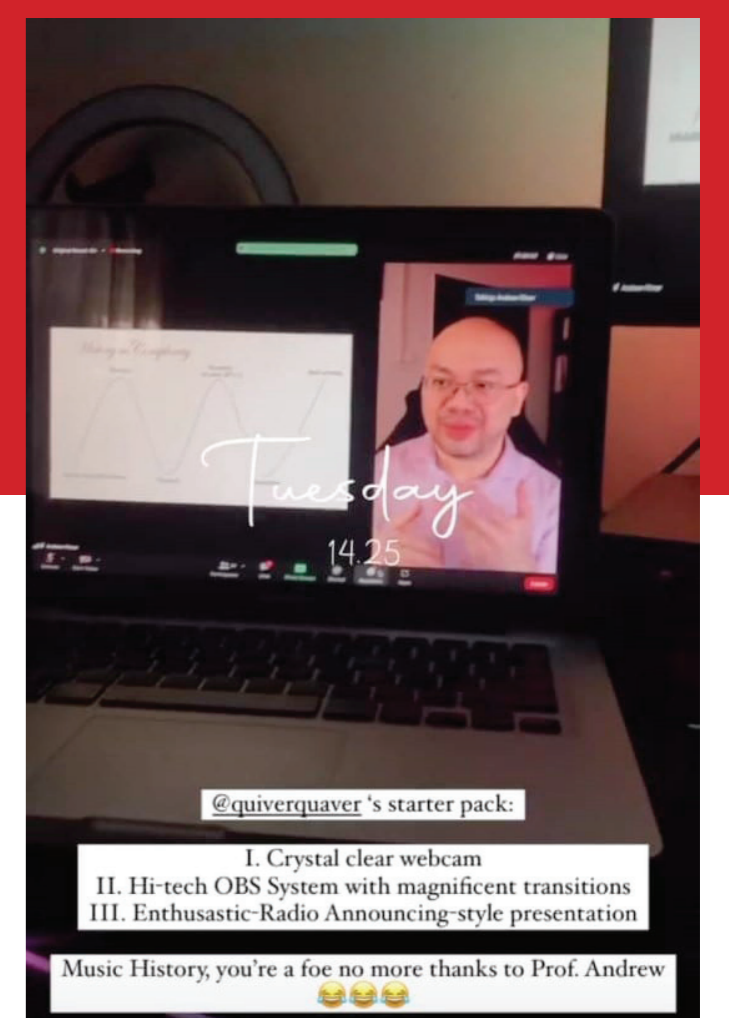
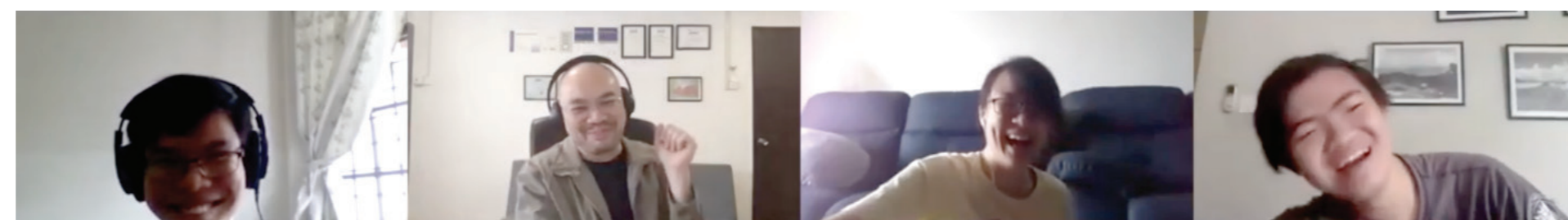
Individual Tests | Group Tests

These are practical assessments, with a focus on singing and playing a keyboard instrument.

The shift to online teaching and learning revealed two challenges. The first was evaluation, for which assessments were individualized. Instead of identifying a work of Mozart, they were asked to compose something in the style of Mozart. The second issue was engagement. With Moore in mind, we often focus on the student-educator connection and the student-content link, and at times overlook peer-to-peer engagement. Technology can play some role in engaging the student with both content and the instructor (as evidenced by the Instagram post by a student, right) but engagement with peers (image below) is sometimes the result of departures from assessed components, and even matters considered only peripherally related to the syllabi.

COVID

ENGAGEMENT & EVALUATION



New Aim: Building Community and Creativity

The Socratic Method was adjusted to be an avenue for community building. Students were asked to react to media with guided questions, and they were given the option to ask someone for help – rather than the usual Socratic approach of further tailoring the questions. This was extended to the assessments, where a stumble early on could be partially recovered with help from peers, and successes cheered on by that community. Engagement could be achieved with content distant from the assessments, or even beyond the syllabi. Overall attention and interest in subsequent, syllabi-related teaching can be achieved this way. Alongside this, individual projects where students chose their own pieces proved particularly effective. Presentations to the class allowed for individual creativity alongside engagement with peers.

Community & Creativity

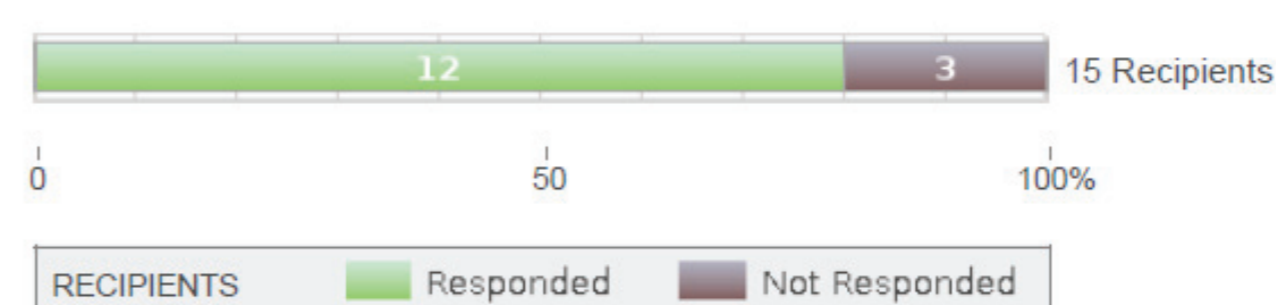
Self-Test | Conceptual Questions | Peer Support

Individualised Projects

THEORY & MUSICIANSHIP

Results

100% pass rate, with majority earning As, without adjustment through two levels of moderation. The External Examiner noted that “Students clearly demonstrate a solid understanding of foundational Western music theory.” In the university’s anonymous student survey, 97% of the responses were positive (see screenshot, right). The remaining 3% were neutral, and dealt exclusively with the online delivery method of one session held hastily as a large number of the students were Covid close contacts. Comments included an appreciation of the conceptual aspect of music theory, which in turn allowed the teaching to cater to both students with high and low preceding knowledge bases (see highlighted comments, right). Particularly significant was the departure from examinations. Students were provided an online resource and given the opportunity to self-test, with as many attempts as needed to achieve the minimum of 10 consecutive attempts at a 90% success rate. Given the autonomy, some kept going beyond the requirement– including one student who had 102 attempts, with a 100% success rate.



I think it's great that theory is taught beginning with the basic concepts. It helps those who have learnt already learnt theory to revise and relearn simple concepts, while ensuring that those who have no theory background can follow the class too.

Positive- The way assignments were conducted was very interesting

Prof Andrew Filmer is a nice lecturer

Students can understand Music Theory easily even if the student has zero background in music. Teaching is very detailed.

Understand why theory works

his classes are always fun and interesting

Conclusions

1. Peer-to-peer engagement is useful even when it departs from the syllabus.
2. Autonomy can encourage further engagement with the content.
3. The Socratic Method can be adjusted for peer-to-peer engagement.
4. Individuality allows for an emphasis on creativity that can lead to further engagement.