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Whose Music? Diversity in a First-Year Foundation Course

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> It's so interesting to hear how everyone comes together through music, everyone's backgrounds are different. Some come from musical families and talent that has been passed down through generations. Some love it on their own and have no professional or classical training, but have such a connection to it. Musical repertoire could be classical or contemporary, rock and roll or country - but pitch, rhythm and melodies bring us all together through music, in one way or another.
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> - *First-year student in a foundation course on diversity*

Students come to university with diverse tastes, experiences, and backgrounds, yet we often want them to embrace a body of aesthetics, philosophies, and ideologies that reflect the material we and our established disciplines value as central. However, by using their own backgrounds as a basis for exploration, discovery, and sharing, students can learn a great amount from each other's tastes and experiences. Two assignments designed for a first-year foundation course in music history and literature draw on personal backgrounds. Personal Music History and Music Repertoire Assignment allow students to bring the music they know and love, as well as their life experiences to the study of a new body of musical literature. Although music-specific, these assignments can be tailored to virtually any field of study within a first-year foundation course. Engagement on a personal level with course-related material makes the transition from high school to a university-level course smoother.

The Course: Introduction to Music History and Literature

Four years ago, I was charged with creating a foundation course that would teach students not only disciplinary knowledge (indeed, it was remedial to a certain extent), but also study skills, critical thinking and writing, research methodology, and how to write a sound research paper. It was a daunting task,

not only for the sheer amount of material to be covered, but also because the course would be delivered to students with wide variance in preparedness and training. Given that the first weeks of the first year of university introduce students to new ways of living, learning, and interacting, I wanted the course to connect and guide students while they dealt with this culture shock. I needed to find a way to make the students confident about their own level of knowledge and expertise, and the expectations and material I would be introducing to them.

The course was, and is, a required first-year core within the music history sequence, and along with theory courses, private music lessons, and membership in a musical ensemble, forms the primary introduction to the Bachelor of Music degree. This one-semester course attempts to be all things to all students, and also allows them to bond as a cohort to go through four very challenging years of music study together. The course is structured in such a way that students complete eight weeks of listening journals (in which they listen to, comment, and critique various pieces of assigned classical music repertoire), submit weekly written assignments of 2-3 pages, write a final exam based on the last weeks of lectures, and complete a research paper.

The Assignments

One of my first assignments in the course was to have students create a personal musical family tree. To allow students the most freedom to show their creativity, I made the assignment completely open in terms of content and style of presentation. I received everything from traditional Bristol board posters to Powerpoint presentations, CD compilations, and photo albums with commentary. Student were invited (although not required) to present their music history to the others at the beginning of class as we moved through the semester. Limited to five minutes, this assignment allowed each student to introduce him or herself to the other students from a completely unique and personal perspective, sharing the journey each had taken on the road to a music degree. Class members were free to ask questions of each student at the completion of the informal presentation. The assignment, as it appeared in the syllabus, is as follows:

> MUSIC 1201: Assignment #2
> Personal Music History
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> The purpose of this assignment is to provide a framework for your own musical identity. Where do you come from? Who has been involved in forming your musical personality and tastes? Go as far back as you can in your ancestry (your musical influences) to see where your musical roots come from. A historian should be able to unearth your "family tree" and write a history of you from this information. He or she should be able to make some correct assumptions and draw some accurate conclusions from what you have provided. We will informally present these throughout the semester, as time allows.
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> 1. Choose some kind of visual system to show your "musical family tree" - a flow chart, organizational chart, etc.
> 2. Include all the people who have influenced your musical training, choices, etc. These can range from family members and music teachers to composers, performers, and recordings.
> 3. Include important pieces of music, either attached to people, or as separate entities. *This is not about your real family, but about your musical influences*.
> 4. You may think that your musical heritage might be small, but go as far back as you can and think about influences as broadly as you can. You will find that your chart will be quite large.
> 5. Creativity will be rewarded as well as form and content.

The results from this assignment exceeded my greatest expectations. Although assigned within the first frantic weeks of term, I received polished, passionate, and creative assignments from virtually every student

in the class. Asked to reflect on the pieces, composers, and personal influences on their music development and interests, the students created beautiful testaments to their lives and those who had influenced them. Not only did this allow students to reveal their own tastes and histories, it made them feel that they already had a large amount of knowledge and expertise that they brought to the degree. Even those who had little background in classical music could relate their experiences and choices to those of other students who had more classical training. This allowed the students to bond earlier and more completely as a group, and also highlighted the diversity in the students' backgrounds without devaluing them or pigeonholing individuals into particular roles.

In a similar vein, another assignment at the beginning of the course allowed students to bring their own knowledge to the body of music I wanted them to master. Each of the eight "listening journal" weeks was organized around a theme common to music of all eras: love and death, ritual and myth, power and politics, gender and ethnicity, among others, pulling together works from different historical periods and giving a point of comparison to classical works not as familiar to all students. The "Personal Music Repertoire" assignment asked each student to write down a piece of music in any genre, style, or period, that first came to mind when they considered each week's theme. This is how the assignment appeared in the syllabus:

> MUSIC 1201: Assignment #1
> Personal Repertoire List
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> Consider the following large topics or subject areas, and choose one piece of musical repertoire (any style, time period, genre) that first comes to your mind when you think about this subject or theme. It does not matter how long or short the work is (it can be one movement of a work) or whether it be popular or classical music. Write the title of the work, composer, artist, etc. below and hand in. Write these piece titles into your syllabus under "your piece." You will use this later in the semester.

1. Music, Meaning and Memory
2. New Beginnings
3. Ritual and Myth
4. Highbrow vs. Lowbrow
5. Music without lyrics that is about something non-musical (a narrative, situation, feeling)
6. Gender, Class, Ethnicity
7. Love and Death
8. Power and Politics

Students invariably picked something from current popular music to pieces they may have performed in band or listened to as children. I had them hand in this list so that I could get a sense of where each student was coming from, and the kinds of music that they listened to or knew quite well. In the following weeks, each listening journal entry would include the repertoire I had assigned as well as "my piece" – the work they had chosen in the first week of classes. By listening to and commenting on their own choices, students were able to bring to the assignment their own experiences to an unfamiliar repertoire, finding similarities and differences between the classical works and the (often) popular works they had chosen. Instead of facing a huge vista of unknown material, the students could bring their own knowledge to the topic at hand, making connections and demystifying the experience of writing about music. Because in each listening journal the student was required to relate each piece in the list to the week's theme, students were able to see that music in a variety of styles and periods addressed certain aspects of the human condition regardless of intended audience or musical style.

Assessment and Outcomes

Because these two assignments came in the first weeks of the course, the grading scheme was meant to reward and encourage rather than discourage the university neophyte. Although I considered peer or self evaluation, the very nature of the exercise – to let students wade into a new learning environment

– seemed to suggest an approach in which a new evaluator rewards the student and establishes that relationship positively. Personal music histories were graded on content, style, and creativity while the personal music repertoire was pass/fail. Simply completing it earned students full marks and gave them a good start to their academic careers in music history. As students moved through the semester, they were allowed to change their personal repertoire as they learned more music or had more time to reflect on the assignment. I was not concerned with holding them to their original responses, but more with allowing them to think broadly and deeply about the music to which they listened.

The outcomes of this assignment lasted long after the papers were turned in. Students, relying on gut feeling and free-association on each weekly theme, started thinking about course content and continued to engage with the material so that the course started to feel like a coherent whole, not a series of hurdles. Connecting with their passions and inner lives allowed students not only to open up to me as an instructor and to their classmates, but reminded them why they were studying music in the first place.

These aspects of self-identity and definition provided perhaps the first opportunity many of them had to explore their own tastes and backgrounds, especially in contrast to other students. Students, regardless of background, were empowered by adding something they already knew and felt comfortable with to something completely new. Because the assignment asked them to relate their pieces and the assigned pieces to the weekly theme, they were able to make these connections. Students got to know each other through something important to each of them: music. Because individual preferences and knowledge were valued and rewarded, students automatically respected the diversity that they found in their colleagues. One student, hailing from South America, entertained questions on his life at home, questions that students might not have felt comfortable asking under more formal circumstances. More importantly, diversity in cultural, educational, and musical backgrounds allowed students to understand that critical thinking involves engaging respectfully with a variety of different and often competing ideas.

Although this assignment clearly addresses musical tastes and backgrounds, it could easily be adapted to other areas of study. Students in first-year science could be asked to reflect on what aspects of science fired their interest in the subject – was it medical breakthroughs, environmental concerns, or a fascination with the scientific method that brought them to this major? Students in fine arts or humanities could reflect on literature, music, or other arts that attracted them to the study of a particular culture or art form. Social science students could reflect on aspects of social justice or cultural issues that have formed their research interests. Students usually know what interests them, but asking them to consider why or to what end helps them to commit and engage with their area of study at the very beginning of their careers as undergraduates or even graduates.

Diversity of taste and background, when shared, helps students to understand each other's unique perspectives and cultural diversity. In an increasingly global and international classroom, exploring and respecting that diversity creates a more humane and engaging world of learning for students in any discipline.

Biography

Elizabeth A. Wells is an Associate Professor of Music History and Musicology and Head of the Music Department at Mount Allison University, New Brunswick. Her scholarly interests include musical theatre, opera, and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.