

Encouraging Undergraduate Music Education Students to Read Professional Literature

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Project Summary

Music education students typically believe that everything revolves around reading *music*; they are ensconced in playing an instrument or singing, and they do not see the value of reading theoretical course material. A music education professor designed a project to raise students' accountability and produce effective discussions and applications of the reading assignments.

Background

The course I teach is MEMT 420, Teaching Elementary and Secondary General Music Methods. This is an upper-level methods course for juniors and seniors. Twenty students were enrolled in the course for the Spring 2008 semester. In this course the students have great exposure to contextual learning: They learn about learner and learning characteristics of preK-high school students; design and deliver lesson plans to peers and elementary general music classes; work with and conduct the KU Youth Chorus; complete observations of music classrooms in area schools; and design a preK-9 general music curriculum that identifies major concepts, includes appropriate scope and sequence of those concepts, presents a philosophical statement driving the curriculum, identifies specific literature directly connected to each concept at each grade level, and integrates particular software at designated grade levels to reinforce conceptual learning.

The focus of the course is twofold: 1. to have students read assignments that offer background information and discussion of pedagogical strategies in different contextual settings, and 2. to use classroom meeting time as a laboratory in which we utilize and apply the ideas of the readings within the context of specific methodological approaches to teaching peers, with elementary children in area schools, and in rehearsals with the KU Youth Chorus.

It is essential that the students complete the reading assignments, for these offer theoretical background for the practical issues we rehearse in the classroom. For instance, they are assigned to read a book and three articles related to effective classroom management. Following these assignments, they teach both their peers in class and elementary children in a general music classroom in which I "set up" discipline problems to occur during their teaching. They do not know what the problem will be, but are required to attend to it assertively so that it has little chance of reoccurring. This is to be done without a loss of effective pacing, so it requires speed in problem-solving while teaching. The readings offer discussion of classroom management issues, the problems that exist, and specific strategies for resolution. When the students read, they are mentally prepared for the physical reality of the problem during their teaching. Both the theoretical and practical aspects work in tandem; therefore, the reading is critical to their success.

The teaching questions that drove this project were:

- Why is it important to read during a methods course?
- What should the students be reading during this course?
- How will the readings contribute to their becoming more knowledgeable about methodology and pedagogy?

Implementation

The syllabus specifically stated that the students were responsible for all readings and would be held accountable for these by leading discussions that would be assessed in each class. The readings generally consisted of two short articles per class (we met three times a week) or an article and a short book chapter, all of which directly related to the topic of the day. The topics ranged from pedagogical approaches in teaching to classroom management to philosophical positions supporting music education in American schools.

As the instructor, I used ten minutes of each of the first three class sessions to model/instruct the class about my expectations for successfully leading discussions. Using one assigned reading per day, I focused on the basic premise(s), led the class in questioning them about elements of the reading, and then asked them how this information related to their future classrooms. This last question was essentially the “so what” question or “why bother to read this” question that was the most important aspect of the assignment. I gave a copy of the rubric I would use to grade the discussions to the class and showed them how each criterion might be met through examples.

Rubric and Course Goals

The rubric was designed to assess students’ command of the reading material, ability to identify major points of an article, ability to lead discussion about the material, and ability to connect the information to practice in a classroom. The readings served as background information for the practical aspects of teaching and classroom management that we did in class. Because students taught their peers in class as well as children in a public school general music class, it was essential for them to have background information before I rehearsed strategies and applications in class; after this, their teaching assignments included practical applications of the readings.

The following course goals were considered to be important in the development of the rubric:

1. To gain a working knowledge of and utilize the application of the components of music learning and pedagogy in preparation for the P-12 music classroom.
2. To acquire skills in planning and executing lessons for the general music classroom complete with objectives, meaningful learning experiences, and appropriate assessments.
3. To procure knowledge and application of classroom management and discipline skills in tandem with meaningful learning experiences.
4. To gain knowledge about and integrate the application of a variety of music methodologies and pedagogy.
5. To create an awareness of professional behaviors and attitudes, to rehearse these in this MEMT course, and to carry these into the music education classrooms (practica, KUYC, student teaching, and interning).
6. To enhance conducting, rehearsal, keyboard, and classroom management skills through practical application in preparation for and with the KU Youth Chorus (KUYC).

This is the first rubric devoted to reading assignments that I have designed for a methods course. The rehearsal of the strategies for reading, recapping, paraphrasing, identifying major premises, and connecting these to real practice was very necessary. I found that my undergraduates were not necessarily skilled in how to do this, and the nudge of the assessment rubric helped to communicate the importance of reading assignments and their application to practice.

Class Discussions

Students were responsible for reading and digesting the material as theory before they actually put it into practice by teaching lessons to their peers and to children in a public school classroom (during this course). As they read the assignments, they were asked to identify the major premise(s), present the major ideas verbally, and then to lead conversation in class by posing questions about the applicability of the material to their future classrooms. In other words, the discussions were meant to forge theory into practice. I felt it was quite beneficial for this conversation to occur in the classroom so that it would become interactive as opposed to each student writing about it on an exam or quiz. The interactivity allowed for a variety of viewpoints and often led to very lively discussions. Most discussions required approximately 8-10 minutes for each student to complete. I had decided not to assist in their discussion unless the point of the reading had been misinterpreted; rather, I occasionally posed questions to the “leader” and prompted additional conversation. Typically each leader identified the major issues within the reading assignment and could ably paraphrase those points. He/she often asked questions of the class about specific tactics that might be supported or refuted in terms of their classroom applications. This worked quite effectively. Almost all leaders took a particular stance with the argument in the reading and spoke to it. What I did notice is that each leader was so focused on getting the larger meaning of each reading that the specific details were frequently identified only when the leader posed questions to the class. In other words, the class would complete the picture with those details. In most instances, the class members related those details to the particular music disciplines, e.g., band, orchestra, choir, or general music, and this was precisely what I hoped would occur.

In subsequent classes, the teaching assistants and I took turns drawing one or two names out of a hat to determine who would lead the discussion, each for one reading assignment. The teaching assistants then completed the rubric to evaluate each student (see link under “Student Work”). Each student had two opportunities during the semester to lead the discussions and received the assessment rubric at a subsequent class after points had been recorded on the class’s grading sheet.

Student work

After I modeled the manner in which the reading assignment assessment would be conducted (three class rehearsals of 10 minutes for each class), the students were then in charge of the discussions for the remaining portion of the semester. Readings were not assigned during the last three weeks of class due to students' involvement in teaching in area schools during class meetings. Each student had two opportunities to lead discussions and to be assessed via the rubrics. (For examples of graded rubrics, see Discussion Rubric 1, Discussion Rubric 2, and Discussion Rubric 3.)

Overall, student performance greatly improved, as did students' ability to lead discussions and pinpoint salient issues in the readings. Comparing the first rubric assessment with the second one for each student demonstrated that one student's assessment remained essentially the same, three earned the maximum points for both assignments, eight improved from the first assessment to the second, and three did not improve. Given these data, there was a very satisfactory performance by 85% of the students, a remarkable increase in accountability and performance.

Among other examples of work were the take-home midterm exams in which the methods students were asked to synthesize information that had been read and discussed and to connect that information with the observations that were in progress for the KU Youth Chorus, the elementary students in their field experiences, and their peers as they were teaching each other in class. What I found quite remarkable was that they were beginning to demonstrate practical knowledge that was more realistic than what I'd noticed at the beginning of the semester. I was forcing the issue in having them defend/justify their statements, thus creating a need for them to rely on their readings, their observations, and the work that I had modeled in class. No longer did I read comments such as "my band director always did this, so I thought that was the way to teach xyz." Rather, the students were reviewing different perspectives about given topics, presenting a wealth of information, and demonstrating that they were in the midst of assessing the information before becoming locked into a particular approach.

There were exemplary (see Midterm 1 and Midterm 2) and lower-quality examples (see Midterm 3) that were quite telling. The exemplary papers demonstrated true synthesis of content and thoughtful responses that reflected both positive and negative effects of that content; the lower-quality example showed comprehension of the content, but not necessarily any additional thought about alternative approaches or possible effects on the classroom. Perhaps this was indicative of a level of maturity or perhaps because the writers of lower-quality papers did not yet realize that this information would impact their future classrooms.

One of the great advantages of having the students read about the assigned topics was to mentally prepare them for their application in their teaching to peers and children. They had read, discussed, and then reflected on the feasibility of applicability in the classroom. All of this seemed to translate into greater confidence in their teaching, in less frustration when musical or discipline problems arose, and in faster pacing in lesson delivery.

Reflections

I believe that the consistency of our approach and our modeling of the expectations easily and effectively set the boundaries for the students. They knew what was expected and rose to the challenge. The students appeared to gain greater comfort with the readings, took more risks in contributing to the discussions, and understood that the topics were real issues in the classroom.

The only part of this that was problematic was keeping everyone accountable as we reached the end of each round of assessments. Some students thought they were finished once they had led discussions for both rounds of the readings. I was prepared for this and interjected both announced and unannounced quizzes to keep students on task, but would do so more frequently in the future.

I believe that the students were a bit frustrated in the beginning because they thought there was too much work involved. Music education majors are far less convinced they need to read than that they need to play or sing, so this was a challenge. But, as time went on and they became more interested in the applications to the classroom and understood these were about issues related to preK-12 education, everyone relaxed, interjected more commentary, and assumed greater ownership in the discussions.