Let the Students Decide! A Student-Centered Approach to Music Appreciation for Honors Students

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Can honors students create their own General Education course? I suspected that they could, and last semester I decided to put it to the test.

The idea occurred to me when I read a batch of lukewarm to negative evaluations of my music appreciation class. This is a middle-core course that is taught by music faculty of various specialties, and is often used to fill up a teaching load. The enrollment ranges from 45 to 300, depending on the room. There is no standard format or content, and each instructor approaches it differently.

Textbook publishers find that courses like this generate quite a bit of income, because almost every college and university offers some sort of music appreciation course. In the past, publishers typically marketed textbooks that offered a superficial survey of Western classical music, and that gave most of the attention to big-name European composers such as Mozart and Beethoven. Recently, however, music appreciation authors have begun to include information about folk music, popular music, and world music. In some of these newer texts, the discussion of non-Western and non-classical music is found throughout the book, integrated into many of

the chapters. This is the type of textbook that I used until last semester, when I decided to do without a book entirely and let my honors students design their own course.

Was I dissatisfied with the textbook? Not exactly. I appreciated the fact that it used music from all over the world, and in a great variety of styles. But I experienced two problems with that book, which would have arisen no matter what other text I might have used. First, the book contained a great deal of material, and we were only able to cover about half of it—so the students were not getting their money's worth. Second, I didn't always use the CDs that came with the book. I felt that some of the audio and video selections in my own library were better suited for illustrating certain concepts, and I often ended up departing from the chapters and using my own examples.

The last straw came in December 2006, when I was reading my teaching evaluations. I had just finished teaching an honors section of the class, with enrollment capped at 25—a small number compared to my more usual enrollment of 45. Because these were honors students, I had expected a high level of student engagement and a high quality of work. I modified my approach to include more discussion and more assignments. But when I read the evaluations of the class, I felt very discouraged. A few students

commented favorably on my enthusiasm, but on the whole the evaluations from these honors students were no more positive than the evaluations I had received from larger sections comprised of students from the general population. Further, I got the impression that the students did not find the material in the textbook relevant to their own interests or experiences. I realized that I needed to move in a different direction.

In fall 2007 I was again assigned a section of 25 honors students, about half of them sophomores and the rest juniors and seniors. I immediately decided to eliminate the textbook and base the class almost entirely on the musical interests of the students. From informal surveys I had done in past semesters, I already knew that many Gen Ed students enjoy one or more of the numerous sub-genres of rock music. I also knew that, in any given music appreciation class, a large number of students will love country music and/or rap and/or jazz, but an equally large number will dislike those same three styles. As it happened, the textbook I had been using said very little about rock, country music, and jazz, and had no information about rap music.

After I resolved to abandon the textbook, I decided to give my new students as much input as possible into their educational experience. Not only would they teach most of the sessions by giving presentations on their

own interests, but I would even let them write the quizzes, make decisions about assignments, determine the basis of the final grade, and create one or more rubrics. I wanted to give them that much input for two reasons: first, so that they would feel more "ownership" of the class, and second, because many of them were studying to be teachers. I wanted these future educators to design their own course in a friendly environment, in which they could receive feedback from me and from their peers.

Even though the course was supposed to be a collaborative effort, I did need to make a few unilateral decisions. First, I decided that students would each make two presentations, group or solo, on topics related to their own musical interests. The presenters would meet with me at least twice during the course of their research, would prepare a handout for their classmates, and would write quiz questions based on their talk. My second decision was that everyone would attend several live concerts and write a report about each. My final decision was that the first weeks of the semester would be devoted to lectures by me on fundamental musical concepts, and to class discussions and resolutions about the content, assignments, examinations, and standards.

Because so many decisions would be left up to the class, my syllabus was short (<u>you will see it in your packet</u>). During our first meeting I asked

students to tell me which musical topics they wanted to learn about, and I wrote these on the board. Some of the topics that they proposed fell into one of two general subject areas: "Music and the Mass Media," and "Music and Technology." After I pointed this out, we settled on those two subjects as our themes for the semester. I then assigned the students to give the matter a bit more thought over the next two days, and to write on a piece of paper the title of one or more potential topics.

During our next meeting, I collected the topic sheets and read them to the class so that students who wished to work in a group could join others who were investigating a similar topic. Some of the proposed projects did not, on the surface, appear to relate to either "Music and the Mass Media" or "Music and Technology," so I explained how to make a connection. I then circulated a sign-up sheet to collect information about which students planned to work on which projects.

After reviewing the sign-up sheet, I decided to begin the presentations in Week 5 because the first project, which dealt with the process of scoring for film, was too complex to be ready any sooner. (See the "Tentative Schedule of Class Presentations," in your packet.)

Now that the content had been selected by the students and scheduled by me, I spent part of the next three weeks lecturing about fundamentals of

music such as rhythm, melody, and harmony. The rest of those first weeks was devoted to class discussions about the assignments, examinations, and standards that would affect the rest of the semester.

One of our earliest such conversations concerned the basis of the final grade, and it developed into a spirited debate. After class I typed up a handout that documented what the students finally decided, and you will see this handout, titled "Basis of Final Grade," in your packet.

During another early class meeting, I led the students through a discussion of what makes an effective oral presentation. I wrote down their comments and then prepared a form that could be used as a tool for grading a presentation, though its purpose was primarily to summarize our discussion and serve as a guideline. That form is also in your packet, and is titled "Guidelines and Rubric for Presentations." In retrospect I realize that I probably shouldn't have used the word "Rubric" in the title, since this is not actually a rubric in the usual sense.

On a different day I asked the students to share their opinions about what makes a good team member in a group presentation, and based on the notes I took, I put together the double-sided "Confidential Peer Evaluation" form that appears in your packet. Students whose presentations resulted

from a group effort were then required to evaluate each teammate using this form.

During one of our discussions, a sophomore had the excellent idea of creating a simple half-page form on which classmates could write informal, anonymous comments about each presentation, for the benefit of the student presenters. You will see the resulting form in your packet; it's a half page, and is titled "Informal and Confidential Feedback Form."

So how did things go during the rest of the semester? Well, some of the students were indeed responsive to the structure of the class and enthusiastic about their projects. Certain presentations were quite interesting and imaginative, and were enlivened by a variety of devices including games, props, costumes, unusual video clips from YouTube, rare audio examples, creative PowerPoint slides, and the like. Other presentations, however, were less memorable.

In November I told the students that I was interested in collecting written input about the format of this class. I requested suggestions about what questions to ask on a feedback form, and the form that resulted from our discussion is titled "Confidential Student Opinion Survey," and you will see it in your packet. Please note that it is double-sided. Not long afterward, I used this form to collect the feedback I had been seeking.

Was my experiment successful? Can honors students create their own General Education course? If so, will they automatically be happy with it? The answer to these questions is yes, and no.

Based on my experience with this class I can confidently say that yes, honors students can create their own General Education course, if it deals with a subject, like music, about which they already have some knowledge. I can also say that honors students are competent to write quiz questions, create evaluation tools, and determine the basis of their final grade.

Turning to the question of whether students will be happy with a course that they themselves helped to create, the answer is not necessarily. When I asked students for verbal and written feedback, I learned a few interesting things. The most surprising was that they would have appreciated hearing more lectures by me, and fewer by their classmates. Their reasons were threefold. First, our discussions during the early part of the semester had consumed class time that would otherwise have been spent on lectures by me about music fundamentals. Thus later in the semester, when students wrote reports about the live concerts they had attended, they felt disadvantaged by their limited knowledge of music concepts and vocabulary. The second reason for preferring to have more lectures by me, was that some of the student presentations were not engaging, particularly

when a presenter simply read from notes or a handout. Third, students felt that there were too many presentations related to music and the mass media, and that consequently the subject had lost some of its appeal. To correct all three of these problems, the students suggested that, in the future, every student should give only one presentation.

What did I learn as a result of this experiment? First, I learned plenty from the presentations themselves. My own musical tastes are very different from those of my Gen Ed students, and because I do not have children of my own, I am not entirely familiar with the latest trends and artists. Hearing my students speak about their own musical interests helped me become better informed about their generation.

Another thing I discovered is that many honors students are eager to learn unfamiliar material, as long as it is somehow relevant to their interests and seems to have some usefulness. This is illustrated, for example, by the fact that so few of the presentations actually dealt with familiar and favorite musical styles such as rock, rap, and country. It is also illustrated by the fact that the students wished that I had spent more time on music terminology, which contrasts with the more usual grudging attitude of Gen Ed students toward learning unfamiliar material.

Finally, I discovered that my students appreciated being taught by an experienced instructor as opposed to their less experienced peers, even though the peers might be talking about more interesting topics and illustrating their presentations with more technology and gimmicks than I customarily use.

I did experience some pleasant outcomes as a result of my novel format. Because the class was small and because I met privately at least four times with each student (that's twice per presentation), I was able to learn not only everyone's name, but also something about the students themselves. The students, in turn, got to know each other fairly well as a result of class discussions, presentations, and group collaborations. They enjoyed chatting among themselves before class, and even teasing one another good-naturedly. This may have been a factor in the strong attendance, somewhat unusual for a Gen Ed class in which roll is not taken by the instructor.

I did have a few rude awakenings, however. I discovered that, although honors students have a high grade point average, they are not necessarily more mature nor are they necessarily better writers than the general student population. To be fair, I did have several brilliant, articulate, and courteous students. But I also experienced some disappointments. For one thing, there was considerable disparity in the quality and quantity of the

research. For another thing, the little anonymous feedback sheets that the students completed after hearing a particular presentation often contained comments that were not at all helpful because they were either vague, or downright rude. Regrettably, a few students had a negative attitude toward the class, which they didn't bother to conceal. Finally, I was appalled at some of the concert reports, which were disorganized, poorly written, and inappropriately colloquial in spite of the very specific guidelines I had distributed. The students were surprised at my reaction to their writing, and tried to convince me to lower my standards.

Do I intend to repeat this experiment? Yes, but with modifications. I still intend to do without the textbook and let the students research and present on topics that they themselves have chosen. Each student, however, will give only one oral presentation, and will do a written assignment on a different topic. Further, I plan to group the students' presentation topics into more than two general subject areas, for the sake of variety. When possible I will introduce each new subject area with a few lectures of my own, again for the sake of variety. I will also spend more time at the beginning of the semester talking about the elements of music. Finally, in accordance with student feedback, I will give the class a bit more time to select presentation

topics, and will spread out or shorten the discussions that establish the course requirements, standards, and the like.

I'll be teaching this course again beginning next week, and am eager to see whether my modifications will result in a more satisfying experience for both the students and myself. Eventually I hope to discover, based on my experiences and those of colleagues who may have tried something similar, whether this is a viable method of designing honors Gen Ed courses for other disciplines. Thank you.