

Composition and Performance in the Freshman Music Theory Classroom as a Result of Flipped Course Redesign

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Introduction and Background

With the generous support of a Center for Teaching Excellence Instructional Grant, I spent a year developing materials to “flip” the freshman Music Theory I and II courses (MTHC 105 and 115) I coordinate, which just became operational in Fall 2014. Music Theory I and II are required courses for all freshmen music majors.

Redesign Methods

Understanding the redesign process for this ecosystem entails understanding the student workflow that precedes each class:

- 1. Video:** A short (7–12 minute) video lays out the essential concepts, effectively replacing a textbook.
- 2. Comprehension Quiz:** A short (5-question) quiz tests their comprehension of essential concepts in the video.
- 3. Homework:** A short (30 minutes maximum) assignment asks them to apply what they have learned to real musical situations, either through composition or analysis.

Sample Assignment

This video-immersion format frees up class time to apply music-theoretical skills to composition and performance. After a video explaining the “period”—an 8-measure thematic unit common in 18th-century music (see [Example 1](#))—my students spent the class time composing a piano piece that utilizes this formal structure. I composed the four-measure “antecedent” phrase shown in [Example 2](#).

Using the knowledge they learned in my video, students worked together in “learning pods” of 3–4 to compose a “consequent” phrase in the style of Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven. [Example 3](#) provides a sample solution that follows these prompts to create a beautiful composition that expertly matches the norms of 18th-century style. The students who composed this work then chose a group member to perform it in front of the rest of the class, who provided constructive critique and feedback.

Redesign Goals

- Quicker and more effective transfer of basic skills for students with limited pre-college exposure music theory
- An in-class experience that fostered creativity through composition and performance

Example 1. Screenshot from instructional video on the 8-measure period

- exact repetition of BI most common; variations include figuration, rarely dominant version
- strong cadence at end, almost always PAC.

Example 2. Assignment prompt given for in-class composition activity

Example 3. Sample solution to in-class composition activity

Reflection

The student response to this kind of work has been across-the-board positive. Especially for an 8am class which meets 4 days a week, their increased level of engagement in these group active-learning exercises has been palpable. Furthermore, the group affords a space for the less advanced students to ask questions of their peers without being put on the spot in front of the class as a whole.