

ACM-Teagle Collegium on Student Learning
Final Conference Report

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October 2, 2010
ACM Teagle Collegium Project

1. **Summary.** *In a paragraph or two, what was the main teaching/research question of your project?*

Research question: “Through reflective responses to their own piano playing, can students learn to pose useful questions that can be applied to improving their musical abilities?”

I have worked with my piano students to encourage them to take more ownership of their learning. I had three main goals in approaching this project:

1. To have students be cognizant of applying the musical and pianistic skills they have already acquired,
2. To have students consistently apply creative processes to their learning of new repertoire,
3. To have students discover where to look if they need help in dealing with an interpretive and/or technical issue.

2. **Context.** *Briefly describe the teaching environment in which you investigated your question (level of course, number of students, course goals, time frame, etc.).*

I have been assigning this project over the past three semesters (Spring 2009, Fall 2009, Spring 2010) and I will continue to re-work the assignment for future years. I teach one-on-one piano studio lessons to approximately 25-30 students each semester (with an even balance of First Years, Sophomores, Juniors and Seniors). The level of experience and proficiency varies among the students, with some being advanced Bachelor of Music in piano performance majors, others being BA music majors with piano as primary instrument and others taking piano lessons as an elective. The amount of lesson time varies from thirty minutes a week (with five hours of practice) to sixty minutes (with anywhere up to thirty hours of practice). My entire class of students also meets as a group once a week in a studio class.

3. **Teaching Practice.** *How did you use your teaching question to inform your teaching practice? What were the main metacognitive strategies and interventions that informed your practice? How did your project change over the course of the Teagle Collegium?*

The project that I originally titled, “*Learn a Piece by Yourself*” has since been changed to “*How Do I Learn This Piece?*” There have been several substantive changes as the project developed (You will find a copy of the Spring 2010 iteration of this assignment attached to

this report). Students were asked to go through numerous steps in order to learn a piece of piano repertoire. They researched the historical context of the piece, recorded the piece several times and listened to several professional recordings of the same piece. They also wrote numerous reflective commentaries about how their work was proceeding. Students were asked to post recordings and commentaries on Moodle so that I could keep track of their progress.

As part of the process, I had students explore several different artistic variants of specific musical passages. In their lessons and in studio class, I had each student play the same section of a piece in at least three diverse, yet musically valid interpretations. By having them experiment with various artistic possibilities, I hoped to have them think creatively about the music they were playing.

In the Spring of 2009, I wrote very specific preparation guidelines, but I did not really help students prepare the piece and I did not assign a grade. In the Fall of 2009, I offered some assistance, but I still did not assign a grade. By the Spring 2010, I decided to offer more artistic/technical suggestions in order to give students an even broader range of input and I also assigned 25% of their semester's grade to the preparation and 5% of the semester's grade to the performance of their piece. I would liken this experience with that of editing a paper; therefore, I decided that it was essential that I give clear editorial advice during various stages of preparation.

At the end of the project, students were asked to complete a Post-Performance Reflection that helped them to identify specific learning strategies that they had employed during the preparation of their piece.

4. ***Conclusions and Evidence.*** *What conclusions have you reached about your main question? What assignments or performances provide evidence of changes in student learning or understanding in response to your practices? Please offer some description of your evidence and how you collected it.*

From the evidence gathered, it is apparent that students gain tremendously from reflecting at each stage of a thoughtful and gradual process of learning new repertoire. Students posed a wide range of 'questions' of themselves as they began to become more familiar with the repertoire they were studying. These questions ran the gamut from straightforward, well-structured questions to higher-level ill-structured questions. At all levels of questioning, I have been interested to note that these students have transferred these same learning processes to other repertoire they study.

In the initial stages of becoming familiar with the music, students commented on the formal structure of the piece, they looked into external influences on the composer and they translated all foreign language terms. As I have taught students in the past, I noticed that these sorts of banalities were often overlooked (or rather, that the teacher supplied the answers). In the current semester, I have noted that every student who took part in this assignment last term has come to realize the importance of structural analysis and each one came to the first lesson on a new piece with English translations of foreign language terms

(this time without being asked). It has been interesting for me to observe my new students this fall as they come to lessons without having researched these basic musical elements in their new repertoire.

Once students made a first attempt at recording their repertoire, it was clear that the reflective comments dealt almost exclusively with well-structured problems. They commented on such things as establishing a steady tempo, playing the correct articulations, differentiating between melody and accompaniment and “being able to play all the notes at the right time”.

Higher level, ill-structured questions were more common after the second recording the students made. They noted details of melodic shading, long-range musical structure and artistic interpretation. Nonetheless, these sorts of comments were not universal among the students at this juncture. About half of the students were still writing reflective comments that showed a continued focus on ‘getting it right’ and nothing more.

Interestingly, around 90% of the students made very perceptive observations in reaction to professional recordings of their pieces. They wrote long, detailed commentaries regarding what they perceived as strengths and weaknesses of various artists’ interpretations. Apparently, it was easier for these students to ‘hear’ the details of the music in the playing of others than it was to hear these same details in their own recordings and in their own inner perceptions of the pieces. Most of these students were then able to bring some of the musical depth they heard in the professional recordings into their own performances.

All of these data were collected from students’ recordings of their practice, from their reflective commentaries given on Moodle and from the video recording of the final recital performances.

5. ***Implications.*** *How can this information inform future teaching practices (both yours and others’)? How did collaboration with colleagues affect your project and practices?*

By having students reflect on the work they do at the piano, they can become more cognizant of the skills they already possess so that they can apply these skills to a wider variety of repertoire.

By taking an active role in the creation of a definitive interpretation of their repertoire, students can develop a level of originality that they had not realized before.

Have the students in this study managed to discover where to look if they need help in dealing with an interpretive and/or technical issue? I would venture to state that 90% of them have made significant progress in this area; however, luckily my job is still in place as I continue to guide their searching into new areas of inquiry.

6. ***Looking ahead.*** *What future modifications in your course, assignments, or approaches along the lines of this project could be made to further improve student learning? Where do you go from here with this project?*

As recommended by my colleagues in the Collegium group this summer, I am going to try to clearly identify the three goals mentioned at the top of this report at the outset of my new students' work. I am curious to see whether they will be able to make any better progress by having these goals laid out more explicitly in front of them.

In probing further into the second goal, I wonder whether it can be proven categorically that creativity studied in the area of piano performance can be brought into other fields of study that the same student explores. This would perhaps warrant further examination by professionals in the field of psychology.

As this assignment moves into future classes, I have given it a new structure that is reflected in the new title, "How Do I Learn This Piece?" (again, this was suggested by members of the Collegium group). I intend to become much more actively involved in pointing students towards specific interpretative approaches that can advance the creative learning process.

7. ***Bibliography.*** *What were the key sources that informed your project and that might be useful to fellow teachers and researchers?*

I would not recommend any particular resources other than the extensive resources suggested to the Collegium group. I found that these articles were of particular and immediate interest:

Bass, Randall. "The Scholarship of Teaching: What's the Problem?" *Inventio*, vol.1, no.1
<http://www.doiit.gme.ude/Archives/feb98/andybass.htm>

Bernstein, Dan and Bass, Randall. "The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning" *Academe*
July-August, 2005

<http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/academe/2005/JA/Feat/bern.htm>

Learn a Piece by Yourself Guidelines

The following are steps to help you prepare for the performances we will all enjoy at the "Learn a Piece by Yourself" performances on April 19 and 20, 2010.

First and foremost, I would like you to perform a piece with high artistic standards. By the time of the performance, I want you to feel your piece has been thoroughly studied and is completely ready for performance. This assignment is NOT a sight-reading exercise; instead, this assignment will ask you to draw on your musical background to create an excellent performance.

In order to make this possible, I will help you to pick a piece in a style with which you feel comfortable. For example, if you have played two Bach Preludes and Fugues, then obviously you'd feel at home learning another one. If, on the other hand, you had never in your life played a Debussy Prelude, then choosing a Debussy Prelude would not be a good choice for this assignment. The length is not to be overly long, but the quality of the performance needs to be high. With this assignment, I am not looking for quantity, but I AM looking for quality preparation.

Grading: 5% of the semester grade will be given for the performance of this piece, while 25% of the semester grade will be given for the many preparatory steps you will take in the learning process.

After we have agreed on the repertoire, then you will proceed learning the piece using the following steps:

1. Once you own the original music, make a photocopy that you will mark up extensively and eventually show me after the performance. Since this copy will be for educational purposes only, it is a legal photocopy.
2. Fill in a **'Repertoire Research Guide'** and **post it to Moodle sometime between March 1 & 7**. This guide will help you to take a careful look at the piece and get a macroscopic view of it. The guide is included to the bottom of this document.
3. Play through the whole piece once (and only once) to get an overview of it.
4. A. Dig in and learn it carefully. Focus on one element at a time, in this order: counting, notes (including key signature & accidentals), articulations, dynamics.
B. Remember that the overriding leader in all of this work is the **expression**.
C. Fingerings – work out all of the fingerings in a tempo that approximates the final tempo, so that you are certain that they will work at that speed. If you choose to use fingerings than are different than in the score, **then carefully mark in your own fingerings**.
D. Make careful notes in your score to reflect all of the details worked out so far.
E. Double check to ensure careful attention to stylistic considerations.
F. At this point in the process, **sometime between March 8 & 14, post a reflective summary on Moodle** of any successes and challenges you have had in step 4. Tell me whether you feel there are specific sections that you feel will be particularly beautiful, difficult, charming, lyrical, etc. in your final performance.
5. Work through small sections of the piece slowly, then gradually work through larger sections until you are able to play through the entire piece fluently.

6. **Make your first recording of the piece and post it to Moodle sometime between March 15 & 21.** This recording is not intended to be a definitive performance, but rather a work-in-progress. This recording should help you 'hear' your playing more objectively.
7. Listen very attentively to this first recording with your score and pencil in hand.
8. **Along with your recording, post a reflective commentary to Moodle** that gives a detailed account of what surprises (good and bad) you noticed from listening to this recording. What are you doing well so far? What needs more technical precision? What dynamic regions need more contrast? How is the tonal balance? Does the climactic area emerge clearly? Etc.
9. "Play" the piece through in your mind a few times without playing it at the piano. In this phase, I'd like you to really LISTEN to details of expression to make sure that you are hearing everything well without actually playing it with your fingers.
10. If you will be playing from memory, try this strategy – break the piece into sections and begin by memorizing the final section first. Work your way backwards through the piece, section by section, so that you are constantly reinforcing the familiar material at the end.
11. Find a few recordings of the piece and listen to each one very carefully with the score and a pencil in hand. Mark in any interpretative details that you notice in the recordings.
12. **Sometime between March 22 & 25, post on Moodle the names of the performers whose recordings you listen to as well as any personal preferences regarding particular recordings.**
13. "Play" the piece again through in your mind before going back to the piano to work through some of the details you have heard on the recordings. It is very likely that you will like some interpretations and dislike others. That's a good thing. Try to create your own interpretation of the piece.
14. Soon your interpretation will begin to crystallize. Practice in two distinct modes – 1. Performance mode (run-through) and 2. Practice mode (working through all of the details using the score as a constant reference).
15. **Make another recording of the piece and post it to Moodle sometime between April 5 & 8.**
16. **Along with the recording, also post a reflective commentary** that explores how you feel your performance has evolved since the first recording. **I will listen to your Moodle recording, read your reflective commentary and send you some feedback.**
17. Solidify your performance through multiple 'run-throughs' that imitate the stress of the concert performance. Work yourself up as you perform it for yourself and pretend that you are getting nervous before you begin. Try to do pretend performances several times by yourself before inviting a friend in to hear you play it.
18. **Make another recording of the piece and post it to Moodle sometime between April 12 & 15.**
19. **Along with the recording, also post a reflective commentary** that explores how you feel your performance has evolved since the second recording. **I will listen to your Moodle recording, read your reflective commentary and send you some feedback.**
20. Find another friend to play the piece for – repeat as often as possible.
21. By the time you arrive at the class on April 19 or 20, you should have 'performed' the piece through at least 15 - 20 times, either for yourself, a recording device or for friends. The goal is for you to be able to really make music at the piano as you perform your piece.
22. **Between April 19 & 25, post a reflective commentary on the process of learning a piece of repertoire in this manner.** Of course, the majority of you will not become concert

pianists who make a living exclusively from playing the piano. Nonetheless, with this assignment, I have asked you to learn a piece by yourself and bring it to a very high artistic level for performance. *From this assignment, I hope that you can learn a lot about learning.* In your Moodle posting, please comment on the process of music learning and also reflect on how the learning you did with this piece parallels the learning you do elsewhere in the College (and potentially in other facets of your life beyond the walls of the College).

Logistical details for your consideration:

- Memorization will be optional. I personally find that it is easier to play a piece from memory so that I can focus more on the music-making and less on looking up and down from the score to my hands; however, if you prefer to play the piece from the score, that is absolutely fine.
- You can include this piece as part of your end-of-semester jury if you'd like. If you do, though, I would like to see you play it from memory at the jury.
- Dates: everyone will be playing on EITHER Monday, April 19 from 6 to 7 p.m. OR Tuesday, April 20 from 8 to 9 p.m. Both events will take place in CHM 224. Please let me know which of these dates you would prefer.

Good luck with this assignment. I, for one, am really excited to read and hear the results of your hard work. Please keep me updated with your progress.

Appendix 2 Repertoire Research Guide

Title of Piece in the original language (if applicable, give the title of the Suite, Sonata or larger work as well as the number and title of the individual movement or movements). Include an English translation, if appropriate:

Identifying Number (Opus, Köchel, Kirkpatrick, BWV, Hoboken, etc.)

Name of composer

Nationality of composer

Birth year of composer (plus year of death, if appropriate)

Opening tempo indication (including an English translation)

Name the style period, if appropriate (Baroque, Classical, etc.)

Other significant works by the same composer

Name 2 other composers who are (or were) contemporaries of the composer of this piece

Tonality – give the key centre plus whether it is major, minor, modal, atonal, gypsy, etc.

Metre or Metres of the piece

Does this piece follow a specific formal structure? If so, elaborate (binary, Sonata form, Fugue, Rondo form, etc.). In the music, mark in the main structural points (exposition, 1st subject, 2nd subject, coda, etc.)

Are there any significant influences on this piece (eg., Does it represent a painting or poem? Is it folk music from a certain country? Is it a kind of dance? Is it programmatic?)

Is there a climactic area of the piece? If so, where?

List all of the foreign language terms and give English translations:

List recordings of this piece (hopefully at least 3, if that many exist) – for each recording, name the performer and any pertinent details that will help locate it (i.e., EMI, RCA, Deutsche Grammophon, etc. – I prefer that you stay away from no-name, online recordings such as can be found on Youtube)

Anything else necessary for understanding this piece?