

DEVELOPING NEW DIMENSIONS TO PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES THE COMPOSING TOGETHER PROJECT

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Overview

Composing Together is a nine (9) credit certificate of advanced study in teaching music composition. The three courses within the certificate program, *Composing Together Levels 1-3*, are designed to develop the teacher as a composer and as a facilitator of children's compositions in P-12 music classrooms, private and group lessons, computer laboratories, and rehearsal settings. Teachers enrolled in the program learn to design, implement, and assess composition units that they lead within their own school systems or other teaching settings.

Rationale for Composing Together

While some creative aspects of music making are nearly always present in the study of music, instruction specifically designed to engage students in the creation of original music compositions did not receive much attention until the publication of the National Standard for Arts Education in 1994. Interest in composition as a tool for teaching is now growing. At the 2005 Eastern Division Conference of National Association for Music Education nearly every workshop time slot had at least one, and sometime two, sessions addressing composition instruction or featuring the works of P-12 student composers. Many music educators appear to be seeking ways to enhance instruction in two specific settings: 1) students in performing ensembles who benefit from a broader understanding of musical processes that will enhance their achievement in performance, and 2) students who do not elect to participate in performing ensembles, but who are passionately attracted to music in other ways.

The advent of portable technologies and software suitable for the personal creation of music has created new opportunities for music making, and therefore, a new educational market. People have always wanted to create their own music. Now they can compose with tools that produce higher quality sounds than they themselves can perform. While music composition has and continues to flourish both with and without the use of digital

technologies, teachers recognize that these new tools may be very beneficial to specific instructional aims. As such, they are eager to explore the full range of learning potentials that digital technologies offer and which students find intensely engaging and intrinsically motivating. Courses such as those outlined in this paper prepare teachers to meet these new and exciting challenges.

Practitioner Needs

Teachers need experience with teaching composition to become comfortable designing and implementing composition in music settings. Increasing this comfort level should begin with the teachers themselves having successful compositional experiences. However, many teachers equate composing with the exercises and etudes they did in theory classes as part of their pre-professional training. For the lucky few who participated in formal composition classes, there still can be a disconnect between those personal compositional experiences and the ways to implement composition in P-12 settings.

We have integrated some composition experiences into our own undergraduate music education methods classes (see sidebar), but these are rarely available to practicing teachers. This sequence of courses includes repeated opportunities for personal compositional explorations and an audience, if desired, for the teacher's individual work. Repeated group creation opportunities are also a part of the sequence.

Another goal of each level of coursework is the creation of composition curricula appropriate to the teacher's instructional setting with the opportunity for coaching from the composer/instructors for the class as well as for collaboration with, and feedback from, one's peers in the class. Models of compositional practice are presented, critiqued and practiced within the class. The teachers are then encouraged to include these models and their own adaptations of them in their own work with their students.

Professional Needs

If compositional practices are to become part of the accepted ways of teaching music there is a very real need for mentors who have experience in guiding students' efforts and, at least initially, for guiding the efforts of the teachers who attempt to implement composition curricula. As teacher educators who encourage our students to develop skills in guiding compositional curricula, we have a professional need for mentor teachers who welcome the attempts of our interns to lead composition activities and who are able to provide informed feedback as these interns lead composition activities in the mentor's classrooms. We value highly the connection between mentor's practice and intern's teaching but we know that not every cooperating teacher has the experience or skills to guide these highly creative, and often sonically rich, experiences. Veteran teachers who have taken classes with us, tried out some of the experiences that we have done with our own P-12 students and experienced the success of this style of teaching provide our pre-service and intern teachers with the best sites for exploring their own compositional teaching.

Program Participants

Music teachers are obviously one group of participants. They have established skills for working with children and a wealth of knowledge about music. However, as noted above, they often lack personal composition experience as well as experiences coaching and offering feedback to other composers. On the other hand, we find they are often eager to explore what composition will offer their students. It was primarily with their needs in mind that we designed this sequence of instruction.

Composers are another target audience for this class. They also possess a wealth of knowledge about music, but additionally have the knowledge and technical skills to facilitate the composition process. We often find composers who desire to work in school-based settings, but lack experience in working with children. By participating in this sequence of classes, these composers find natural allies among teachers who are interested in composition and composers. Grant opportunities often can lead to partnerships of various types between composers and educators in school and other community settings.

Another group of participants are instructional technology educators. These educators often have established skills for working with children. They are the primary controllers of computer hardware and software packages in many schools and this will include the music software packages and equipment. They are interested in incorporating music software packages into school technology curricula, but often lack advanced formal musical training or ideas for creative uses of music technology.

Program Faculty

When we designed this program of instruction, we were very fortunate to have supportive colleagues who were interested in this area of curriculum. Both of us as music education professionals have implemented composition projects with students of a wide variety of ages and in multiple public school and private lesson settings. Additionally we have observed as our collegiate students created compositions and then designed and taught compositional projects.

There were professional composers both at our institutions and in the community near by who were interested in this sequence of instruction. They agreed to participate by providing several one on one coaching sessions with each of the teachers taking the class. They also agreed to sit as a panel to answer questions about their personal composing processes, their approaches to applied composition study, and how they thought they might serve as a resource to the teacher in the class and their young student composers.

We also had the services of the music technology educators at the college to support the necessary use of the computer lab in those areas where this was desirable. Additionally, a digital recording engineer was available for a session on recording technology for educators, so that the level of skill in creating recordings to preserve the children's (and the teacher's) compositional work could be extended.

Finally we made available a resident chamber music group – a brass quintet – to encourage those educators who wished to, to write something that would be performed at the end of the class sessions. The teachers could write for any combination of those instruments or for all five if they wished and benefit from the perspectives of the performers on their work as well as hearing it performed for a discerning and sympathetic audience.

Curriculum Schedule and Features

This advanced certificate program is organized as three courses to be completed over three summers. This allows each teacher participant to teach each level of the composition sequence before studying the next one and to try out ideas in their own classrooms before progressing to the next level.

Each teacher participates in daily individual lessons with professional composers. They may bring compositions with them to the class that they have been working on previously or they may receive help in beginning their very first efforts. The goal is to invite the teachers to form a possible self-identify as a composer. They work to develop personal skills as a composer and participate in a process of communicative feedback with the composition teacher. This opportunity also allows teachers to develop a working relationship with a professional composer. The composer can then serve as a resource for the teacher and his or her students.

Each teacher also creates a personalized curriculum plan that develops further in subsequent years. Teachers are encouraged to evaluate their programs in terms of where – at various grade levels and various types of music settings – composition could be included. They create immediately applicable teaching materials and resources. They can borrow ideas from their classmates and instructors as well as creating their own materials. These plans can be reviewed and discussed by the other participants in the classes before being piloted within the teacher's own program.

Teachers gain practice in the skills of providing meaningful feedback to composers by providing feedback to their peers within the course. The provision of feedback is one of the most challenging aspects of composition teaching. Composers hold a strong sense of personal agency in the creation of their works and are rightfully sensitive about views of outsiders. Teachers need to develop a repertoire of guiding, but not self-imposing, questions to guide young composers in the development of their own objective evaluative process. Teachers in the course explore and attempt various assessment strategies and discuss the appropriate use of each. The philosophical issues of whether or not to formally assess student compositions and under what circumstances one might use formal assessment of compositions are explored.

Perhaps the most valuable part of the program for everyone involved is the formation of communities of composers. These new professional relationships provide critical support as teachers and students engage in creative, and sometimes messy and chaotic, endeavors. Peer relationships are formed with other like-minded teachers. Potential partnerships with professional composers can be explored and possible collaborations

considered. A professional relationship is established with a recording engineer, who can later serve as a resource for the educator. Finally the teachers also will know several music education faculty members who then serve as resources during the curriculum development and implementation phases of this certification.

[Sidebar]

Preparing Pre-Service Teachers to Teach Composition: An Imbedded Curriculum Model

As music education grows, so does the challenge to fit all of the important topics into the curriculum. While adding classes to an already bulging undergraduate program is difficult, modifying existing curriculum to address important topics within existing classes is a much more manageable task. Here is a sample of undergraduate core courses with composition woven into them.

1. Introduction to Music Education - Students create brief (16 measure) pieces. They are asked to speak aloud as they work and to record their entire working process. Students create transcripts of their composition sessions and analyze the work to reveal personal processes. These are compared in class to models of creativity.

2. Historical Foundations & Learning Theories – Guided by the course instructor, the students collaboratively design a composition based lesson which they team teach to middle school students. Each middle school group is videotaped as they compose. The college students analyze the creative processes used by the middle school students and compare what they have identified to Webster's (2002) model of creative thinking in music. Unique characteristics of middle school learners are discussed as they pertain to the teaching of music composition.

3. General Music Methods – In the general methods course, students partner with an elementary school general music teacher to guide K–3 students in the creation of a book school (similar to film scoring). The book is used as a starting point for a lesson on unity and variety, sounds and silence, motion and stasis, and tension and release. Exact methods vary by grade level, but each class creates and performs a book score. This project takes 2–3 class meetings of 10–15 minutes (varies by grade level).

For the upper grade levels, student often engage in songwriting or instrumental chamber music projects. College students partner with teachers of guitar or keyboard classes, and music appreciation or music theory courses. Students design group, partnered or individual composition projects for middle school or high schools students. Each project is created through a series of steps in collaboration with the classroom music teacher and usually unfolds over a several week time span. Most pieces are premiered in classroom settings.

4. Choral Methods – Working in partnership with a classroom teacher, college students guide a class in the creation of a unison choral piece. With the college student facilitating,

classes generate a two stanza poem with a refrain, and create a singable melody. The college student drafts a simple accompaniment and each class publishes their unique song. This process usually takes 2 – 3 class meetings of 20 minutes each in grades 3 – 6.

Choral methods (implement in student teaching practicum) – Students create a composition unit during this course that is implemented in the student teaching semester. Each student designs a series of activities that enable high school singers to create original, a cappella, multipart arrangements of folk songs. Listening and analysis is used to deconstruct folk song arrangements prior to the students beginning to create their own interpretations. This process introduces students to compositional techniques that they may choose to use in their own work. Some of the resulting folk song arrangements have been featured on school recitals and concerts and all have been performed for peer audiences in rehearsals.

5. Multi-course collaboration: instrumental methods, world music, instrumental conducting (implementation in student teaching practicum).

Drawing on the musicological research skills developed in the World Music course, students in both instrumental methods and instrumental conducting select a band score derived from a folk music source. Each student creates a unit to engage band students in the creation of a series of variations built from the original folk music source (*Variations on a Korean Folk Song* by John Barnes Chance is an accessible model of a high school level wind band score appropriate for this project). In most cases, the college students implement this unit during their student teaching practicum. This project has led to the performance of fully student composed original works for wind band. In other cases, college students have implemented this unit with lesson groups that offer more easily manageable numbers of middle school and high school students so that the project “fits” into a practicum time frame.