

Student Perspectives on Reflective Writing, Improvisation, and Cooperative and Peer Learning in a Collegiate Aural Skills Course

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PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH

This study examined the efficacy of these new approaches by comparing students' experiences, progress and assessments to those of previous years. Though a comparison of final exam scores did not reveal a statistically significant difference in achievement, results suggest reflective writing was particularly effective for students in increasing self-awareness, organizing and reinforcing learning, increasing retention of course material, and providing opportunities for self-assessment.

METHODS

Participants: 12 students from year 2012 – 2013 and 34 students from years 2009 – 2012

Interview. A series of open-ended interview questions designed to provide in-depth information pertaining to participants' experiences, attitudes and viewpoints relating to ETSS and specifically, of reflective writing, improvisation, and cooperative and peer learning activities within the curriculum, were developed and used to guide semi-structured interviews. All 12 students from the 2012-2013 year were invited to participate in the interviews. In contrast, simple random sampling was used to select 13 students from the 34 students who had completed the course from year 2009 to 2012.

Survey. An online survey was designed through the digital platform Survey Monkey. Close-ended Likert-type questions asked participants to report the year they took the course sequence; the extent to which they valued what they learned in ETSS; the extent to which the material would serve them as a musician in the future; the amount of time spent on course-related assignments and activities outside of class; and the extent to which working with partners was helpful and effective in achieving proficiency in various areas and skills. The link to the survey was sent via email to both groups totaling 46 students, which included all 12 students from the 2012-2013 year and 34 students who had completed the course within the last three years prior to the fall of 2012.

RESULTS

Interview.

Course description: A generally recurring description of the course in both groups was that it was "hard," "difficult," and "challenging" due to a lack of experience and confidence. Often the material was completely new to students. Yet, many of the same respondents describe the course as being "useful" and "rewarding" particularly when progress was evident.

Attitudes towards course: Various sentiments expressed both positive and negative attitudes towards the course and were evident in both groups. Students with less background in music tended to have more negative attitudes, did not perceive their progress to be adequate or fast enough, or felt unable to meet the expectations of the course, instructor, or themselves.

Instructional strategies. Dictation and online resources such as computer assisted instruction (CAI) were most frequently mentioned as being the most effective instructional strategies. At least half of the interviewees in each group favored dictation. The following section summarizes comments concerning reflective writing, improvisation, and cooperative and peer activities.

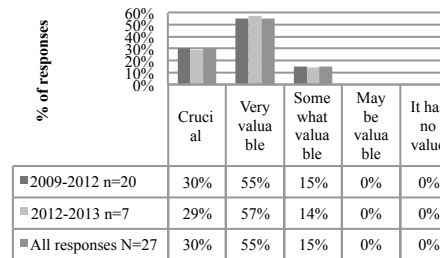
Reflective writing. All 8 participants from 2012-2013 had positive comments regarding the reflective writing component. It was noted that posting journal reflections online following assignments and collaborative activities increased awareness of progress, provided opportunities for self-assessment, helped organize and reinforce the material learned, aided planning future practice, and highlighted the significance of learning.

Improvisation. Questions addressing improvisation activities and experiences solicited strong reactions, from both groups. However, a discernable difference between the two groups was apparent. Nearly all of the students that comprised the 2012-2013 group made positive comments about improvisation. Conversely, students from the 2009-2012 group had a more difficult time recalling improvisation activities.

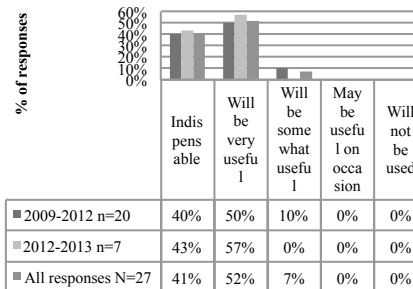
Cooperative and peer learning. The interview data from both groups reflected similar views regarding cooperative and peer learning and revealed mixed sentiments for collaborative learning activities. (See table below)

	Favorable	"It depends"	Unfavorable
2009-2012 n=11	5 (45.5%)	5 (45.5%)	1 (9%)
2012-2013 n=8	4 (50%)	3 (37.5%)	1 (12.5%)

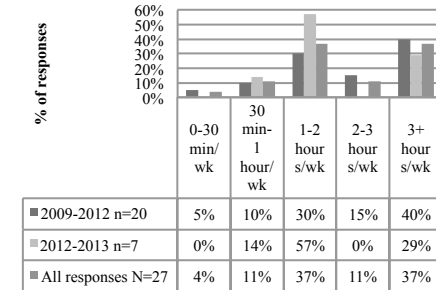
Course value and relevance: To what extent do you value what you learned in ETSS I and II?



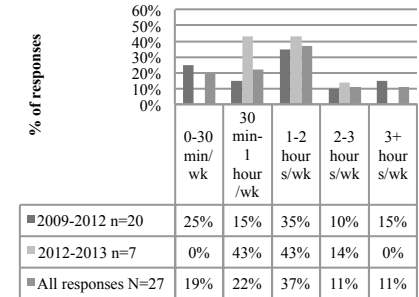
To what extent will the knowledge, skills, and materials learned in the courses be useful and serve you as a musician in the future?



On average, how many hours/week did you spend on assignments associated with the course?



On average, how many hours/week did you spend practicing the skills associated with the course apart from what was assigned?



DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

2012-2013 students responded quite positively to reflective writing and improvisation activities. The 2009-2012 group had positive attitudes towards the idea of improvisation but responses indicate that it had not been used enough to be particularly positive or impactful. Responses to cooperative and peer learning were similar in both groups and reflected mixed attitudes and reported effectiveness.

Students in the 2012-2013 group expressed enthusiasm and support for reflective writing, improvisation, and peer and collaborative learning activities, and generally ranked course activities, tools, and approaches as being more helpful and motivating than the 2009-2012 group. Based on these findings, it is reasonable to infer that the attitudes towards the course and its instructional methods were slightly more positive for the 2012-2013 group.

Though a statistical analysis of final exam scores suggest that reflective writing and cooperative and peer learning activities did not significantly impact student achievement in aural skill development, a much higher percentage of students from 2012-2013 scored above average on their final exams than the 2009-2012 group.