



Music: Writing about music theory

An undergraduate music theory course by Deron L. McGee (1993)

Course Design:

In order to promote a better understanding of course materials, Dr. McGee typically assigns between three and six free-writing assignments, three short assignments, and a final project to his music theory students. The five-minute free-writing assignments are neither collected nor graded; they serve to highlight previous knowledge and to initiate discussion of new concepts. They take place at the beginning of class in order to spur lively class discussions on the elements of music theory and its relationship to other sub-disciplines such as conducting and musicology.

Short papers, between one and two pages, are designed to prompt students to think critically about music theory as well as to promote the logical organization of ideas, the support of personal opinions, and the consideration of alternate theories. In the short papers, students must be concise and must consider a particular audience as specified by each assignment. Audiences may include musicians, composers, non-musicians, and classmates. These assignments make extensive use of student presentations and peer-review, in small groups or for the class, so that students become more critical of their own work.

The final project, assigned instead of a final exam, is an analytical paper which is divided into different sections and worked on over the second half of the semester. The first part of the final project is a complete formal and harmonic analysis of a movement from a piece that the student is preparing to perform in concert or for another class. The second part of the final project is an analytical paper based on the harmonic analysis; this second analysis prompts students to observe patterns, consider abstract relationships, and examine the organization of the piece of music. The assignment also requires a brief prospectus and two personal conferences with the instructor.

Higher Level Learning:

Students gain a deeper understanding of how to apply music theory by analyzing and explaining the different concepts in a wide variety of written assignments (**Thinking, Acting**). The nature of the assignments enables students to move beyond textbook examples of music theory, to delve into their own analyses, and learn how to

improve their own ability to apply music theory by comparing and contrasting their own assertions with existing theories (**Learning**).

Active Learning:

Students learn how to approach questions of music theory by working on the exercises themselves (**Doing**) and by helping to critique their peers' analyses (**Doing, Observing**). The free-writing assignments prompt student reflection upon their individual perceptions of music theory (**Dialogue with Self**), and these as well as the student presentations promote group discussion of the elements of music theory (**Dialogue with Others**).

McGee, D. L. (1993). The power of prose: Writing in the undergraduate music theory curriculum. Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy, 7, pp. 85-104.