

Teaching Reflection IV

Fall 2020

MUCH 611: Intro to Graduate Studies

This kind of course—an introductory graduate course required for all music master's students—is extraordinarily common in music graduate programs of all kinds across the country. When I was a Ph.D. student, for example, I took a yearlong course called "Bibliography" which emphasized research and citation skills and disciplinary methodology. I'm sure most faculty at Crane completed some course of this type as part of their graduate studies. When I agreed to teach this course at Crane for the first time, I wanted to really think carefully about what I would teach in such a course—I knew that certain things would transfer from my own experiences in a musicology Ph.D. intro course, while others would be deeply unsuited to this class at Crane. To discuss pedagogy and aims, I first had a meeting with the retiring faculty who had taught this course for many years. Next, two close friends and colleagues at large R1 Schools of Music were likewise teaching this class for the first time this fall; the three of us spent part of the summer chatting about course design, objectives, and challenges of a course like this as we each designed our particular classes. Finally, I did a survey of approximately 15 syllabi from universities across the country to determine the norms and outliers of an intro to graduate music studies course. All this to say, I designed this course quite carefully, mixing skills and methodological discussions and analytical assignments. As discussed below, the students gleaned a number of important abilities from this course and I'm quite satisfied with many components of the class. However, I do think it is a course with unique challenges—given both the critical learning outcomes for a foundational graduate course and the multiple different populations it is expected to serve. If I continue to teach this course, I'd have interest in a Crane-wide discussion [or a discussion amongst different departments and areas on the Graduate committee, for starters] about what they hope to see in an "Intro to Grad Studies" course. As noted, there's a number of different ways to approach a course like this; there is certainly no "one size fits all."

In terms of what I ultimately chose to include in this course, there were a number of basic citation and research skills that are standard in most courses like this. Without belaboring the subjects too intensely, I did spend time teaching students the details of citations. Beyond "how" to cite, I was particularly proud of the time we spent as a group talking about citation ethics; not just how to do it, but why to do it, and whose labor is often overlooked in citations. In addition to their work on citing books and journal articles and questions of plagiarism, I had the students read an article about "Cite Black Women," discussing how the intellectual labor of underrepresented groups is often erased or devalued in academia. Much of the first few weeks of the course was a deep dive into research skills, ranging from how to use online scholarly search engines such as RILM or ERIC to using Worldcat, finding a dissertation, and explaining the differences between juried and non-juried sources. I sometimes had the students do a "scavenger hunt" for these kinds of assignments, making sure they developed some fluidity with their research skills. I folded a number of other skills into the course as well; we spent time learning how to analyze the structure of a dissertation and how analyze the structure of a scholarly article. We discussed how to vet sources, spent time unpacking the modes of inquiry and qualitative and quantitative methods, and discussed the writing norms and methodologies for different music disciplines. Although we did not visit an archive, I was really happy with the digital archives assignment I created for this class. This project asked the students to assess a particular digital archive and reflect on the concept of the "activist archive," or how archives can both consolidate or challenge power. You can see all of this in the course overview (see appointment dossier).

The research project was to some extent the centerpiece of the course (not unusual in a class like this). Scaffolded week-by-week throughout the semester, the research project began with individual meetings, progressing through research questions, bibliographies, a summary report on sources, abstracts, partial drafts, peer feedback, presentations, and a final version. At every step of the project, the students reported that they had often struggled to do parts of these steps in earlier college classes, so I felt we were uncovering and fixing/changing a lot of anxiety and bad habits from earlier parts of college. I had some similar concerns about peer feedback as in my upper division—I really value helping the students learn to give good peer feedback to each other; we spend some time talking on how to do it, and I think it's an invaluable skill for all to learn in college. Yet this part of the project is always a little tricky, since inevitably one or two people in any given class will have a partner who—for a variety of reasons—doesn't submit their project on time. It's hard to figure out the best way to do partner work that doesn't disadvantage folks when their partner goes missing. I'm still thinking about this, but hesitant to completely cut out peer feedback. I had the students create Zoom videos for their final presentations rather than delivering them live; this was intentional, as so many conferences require pre-produced videos at the moment. They all noted that this was "hard" (it is! I'm not a fan either) but we all found some useful things in that process. Overall, the final projects were a mixed bag—a ton of very varied subject matter!—but every single student gained some significant skills along the way.

Having trialed the organizational approach in the spring for an upper division seminar, I settled on structuring this fall's virtual class into one asynchronous day (Tuesday) and one synchronous meeting (Thursday). In this virtual setup, typically I had the students do asynchronous work—readings and then homework and/or Moodle posts—on Tuesdays. We then met synchronously on Thursdays to do additional work on the week's topic. Our Thursday time was typically a mix of lecture, small breakout room groups to work on specific parts of an in-class project or practice skills, and then back to the full group to work through things as a team. On several occasions during the semester, I met with each student individually to work through a specific portion of the final research project. Overall, with some explanations and caveats as explained below, I think this course worked well in the virtual format in Fall 2020.

Turning to the feedback from the student evaluations, students were generally very positive. I had multiple students exclaim that they had learned really specific skills in this class—from how to frame a research question to how to really use online journal search engines to how to use citations. Quite a few noted that while the course content could be a little dry in some cases, they felt I presented it in a way that felt engaging and interesting. Several commented positively on the mix of synchronous and asynchronous work. Again, one of the students commented specifically on the small ice-breaker activities at the beginning of class, praising these as an outlier in "effectively developing positive student-teacher relationships" in these difficult virtual environments. Finally, in terms of mental health, again several students wrote positively regarding the support provided through individual meetings and office hours. Seeing these comments reassured me to know that they felt cared-for during these impossible times.

This course does present a number of challenges in teaching it. One of these was specific to this semester—it's challenging to teach a research methods class with not only zero access to the physical library, but also no interlibrary loan and no archivist. It often meant long hours on the screen with thousands of tabs open for both myself and the students, which is hard. Second—as noted above—this class has a lot of different types of students enrolled in it. There are often both graduate students and students completing their undergraduate degrees. There are typically both Master's students in education and Master's students in performance. I felt I did a good job straddling the different interests of each of these groups, but that's obviously a juggling act which may not satisfy all students at all points in time. On that last point, it's obvious from the evaluations that I had one student in this course who was very dissatisfied. I'm sorry about this,

because this individual never conveyed any of this to me during the semester. I try to be very welcoming about dialogue during my classes, so it's unfortunate that we didn't have the opportunity to discuss concerns. With that said, some comments from the student in the evaluation strike me as problematic, namely that I "wove my political agenda" into the course and that things such as human rights and racism having "nothing to do" with research and writing about music. I assume this was probably in reference to discussions about citing the intellectual labor of Black scholars and how archives have tended to consolidate histories of the powerful. To me, this student is relying on a deeply problematic understanding of "political." The classroom is not a neutral space. Anyone who argues that attempting to alleviate power inequities or participate in curricular and institutional change to increase visibility and participation for historically marginalized groups is inappropriate—I disagree. I don't typically have issues with this in my courses, but I'm sorry one of my students (who is either graduating or a graduate student) holds these viewpoints. I wish we'd had more of a chance to have an open dialogue about it.