

Teaching Reflection

Fall 2021

As a couple of general notes on my approach to teaching and reflection:

- Writ large, I have tried to continually reflect on removing punitive language, policies, and ideas from my syllabi, in hopes of creating courses that are sensitive to student needs and provide the structures and flexibility for all students to succeed.
- In all courses, I start out the semester with a confidential check-in document, where I ask students to fill me in on pronouns, any mental health concerns or issues they may want to alert me about, etc. Then, midway through the semester, I do another confidential mental health check and ask them to let me know how things are going around week 7 or so—I always learn a lot from these check-ins, and it allows my students to keep me in the loop of things that are just helpful to know or sometimes allow an entry point for further conversations or office hours.
- In upper division courses, I utilize online discussion forums in part because it offers a different means of engagement than in-class participation—which may be stressful for certain students due to factors such as language fluency, anxiety, etc. In certain courses, I may have the students do an online assignment that is not a forum post if I have concerns about potentially harmful discourse (as in, only I see the initial posts and then we work from there).
- Back in 2020, I developed the following language to add to my syllabi, which I continue to use: “I am committed to using trauma-sensitive teaching and learning principles to support your resilience and success in this course. Trauma-sensitive principles help create a safe, transparent, connected, and collaborative classroom environment where you feel empowered and respected. Be sure to do periodic self-checks on how course material—and the ways in which material is delivered and discussed—are affecting you, and please talk with me if you are having difficulties with any aspect of the course. Getting support from friends, colleagues, family, and mental health professionals is also important, especially if you have risk factors or you find yourself becoming distressed. For additional links to campus and community services, see <https://www.potsdam.edu/studentlife/wellness/counseling-center>
- I aim to address diversity and inclusion in my teaching through course content, course policies and pedagogical strategies, service, and scholarship. I bring new content and new approaches to current content to all of my classes, whether it is teaching a course such as “Opera and Race in the United States” or “Music, Gender, and Sexuality, post-1800” or in the music history core, where I incorporate both new repertoires and new frameworks to teaching well-trodden works. My focus on diversity- rich course content is evident in that two of my syllabi—Music & Disability Studies and Music/Gender/Sexuality —are featured as examples of diversity-rich syllabi for DIAC’s Diversity Attribute.

Music History III: Music Since 1900

In my seventh semester of teaching this course, I have tried to reflect on what I am actually interested in students taking away from a course, and it is certainly not the ability to think under time duress, or to always get it right the first time. With that in mind, I no longer have any sort of time constraints on exams (all exams are online, open-book, and untimed), and most assignments have some kind of potential re-do possibility if you did not achieve the learning outcome. I tried to vary types of instruction and build in more time for groupwork and further exploration of topics.

This semester, I tried to divide the class into different kinds of work on each day: typically reading/listening on Monday, discussion and quiz based on a video on Wednesday, and group activities and discussion on Friday. I found this helped structure the week's work, and the students generally appreciated that there was no homework for Friday classes! The Friday group activities were a resounding success, from work on ragtime to transnational migration to soundwalks.

I have streamlined certain aspects of this course, both to emphasize pedagogical priorities and to avoid overloading the students. I forced myself to only assign 3-5 pieces every week. Within that limitation, I brainstormed overarching organizing themes for each week and strictly abided by the principle that each week's 3-5 pieces should at minimum include one piece by a woman composer and one piece by a BIPOC composer. This specific framework yielded the most diverse repertoire I've taught in this course to date (see "course schedule" in appointment dossier for specifics), not just works by artists I already tended to incorporate—such as Nadia Boulanger or Florence Price—but composers such as José White Lafitte, Manuel Ponce, May Frances Aufderheide, Ethel Smyth, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and quite a few others. I thought this kind of framework worked really well, and made questions about representation a quintessential focus throughout the semester.

In terms of other work in this course, I tried to still build in listening skills, but in a low-stakes way via small-scale listening quizzes in class. I also used two of our Friday sessions to scaffold some medium-size projects. I thought all of the different kinds of work in this class worked really well, and I'll continue to tweak this general approach next spring. The major challenge is the continued uncertainty in pandemic times, as the students deal with ever-evolving concerns and intense overwhelm.

Music, Sound, and Video Games:

Although I've taught portions of this course at other institutions, this was the first time I've taught this at SUNY Potsdam (after hoping to do so for some time!). There was a large amount of student demand and interest in this course, hence why I plan to offer it again immediately in the spring (ie two semesters in a row)

I made sure to incorporate a great deal of cultural discussion into the course, parsing not just the technical issues around game sound but questions such as race, gender and sexuality, and sonic stereotypes in multimedia. I was lucky to bring in a guest lecturer, Dr. Jerod Sommerfeldt, who led an excellent lecture and discussion on the technical elements of video game sound.

I offered several "play" assignments throughout the semester, where students were instructed to pick a game aligning with certain parameters (a rhythm game, for example), play for at least 30 minutes, then write a response paper to share with the class. These were very successful and a wonderful opportunity to integrate play and critical discussions into curriculum. The semester culminated in a researched

podcast; students examined a wide variety of issues in these final projects. I was really happy with how responsive and excited the students were to take this course.

To quote from a few student evaluations:

Student #1: I loved having Dr. Brooks as a professor and it's clear that she is very competent in the subject area as she is always adding useful information and conversation points to our discussions. She is usually quite fair about due dates and making sure the information we are reading about is interesting and relevant. She always kept a good and comfortable class environment in which we could say things in our discussions without fear of being wrong. Overall, I loved having Dr. Brooks this semester.

Student #2: Dr. Brooks is a wonderful instructor! She is really knowledgeable on all of the topics we covered, and she facilitates conversation and discussion between students. She helped us to explore many different topics this semester.

Student #3: Dr. Brooks is amazing, considerate, and a wonderful educator.

Intro to Grad Studies:

In "Intro to Graduate Studies," I covered a number of basic citation, writing, 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. If desired, you can see all of this in the course overview (see appointment dossier).

I really centered my course on asking questions to prepare the graduate students for their eventual cumulative project in their degree [either the master's oral exam in music ed or the program notes/paper for music performance students]. I was gratified that students seemed to take away a lot of very practical skills from the course.

To quote three brief snippets from student reviews of the course:

Student #1: I found this course to be extremely informative and helpful. I learned more about writing and research than I ever could have expected. We covered a wide variety of resources and issues we

come across in research and thoroughly discussed how to address them.

Student #2: Dr. Brooks is a wonderful teacher. She presents information in an informative and easy-to-understand way. She understands how stressful college can be and because of that, avoids busy work. Instead, she has well-thought assignments that will help our skills in the long run.

Student #3: Dr. Brooks is a great professor! She is incredibly knowledgeable about the course content and is honest about how significant all of it will be to us. Her teaching method is easy to understand and she communicates well with her students. I would absolutely take another class with her!