

Teaching Music During the New Normal of COVID-19

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This paper draws upon almost the whole range of my experiences as a music teacher and composer. Although I became more deeply aware of modeling's pervasiveness and importance, I realized that all along my composition learning and teaching experiences have involved modeling, from replicating my favorite composers' passages to conveying Debussy's imagistic and impressionistic approach to eliciting the hearers' emotions.

In the average one-on-one composition course, the teacher does a good deal of demonstrating on the piano, making the student aware of the many possible options. In other words, modeling is the chief modality the a teacher uses to convey ideas during composition lessons.

As Patrick (2006) noted, this instructional strategy helps students to acquire certain concepts and techniques by observing the teacher's performance of a variety of approaches. There can be no doubt either that modeling is inherently a constraint on the students' freedom or that our broader pedagogic goal is to empower the fledgling composer to bring her or his own originality into the process of problem solving. The question is whether this process ultimately helps or hinders creativity when it comes to those composition-learning tasks that require students to depart from the models and go their own way.

Finding balance

Thus, the challenge for the educator is to arrive at the proper, creativity-promoting balance of freedom and constraint. A particular model may inspire creativity, but it may just as easily cause the student to "freeze," so impressed by another composer's work that she is too timid to proceed.

The goal of my study was to gain the broadest and deepest possible understanding of the relationship between the teachers' modeling strategies and their students' creative thinking processes and products. The data were collected via interviews I conducted with teachers (N = 15) who have been teaching composition in one-on-one settings at the university level for five or more years. The interview data range across their overall teaching experiences at various ages/levels and in a myriad of class settings.

Two types of modeling

Diverse perceptions of modeling in its relation to creativity emerged from the interviews. Many of these educators agreed, however, that there is "modeling for exercise" and then there is "modeling for actual composing."

The purpose of the former is to help students build a particular skill, and this is done by limiting the number of musical elements involved. In this case, modeling serves to make the composition process feel, as one of the educators put it, "more manageable." They all had only good things to say about it, but their feelings were far more mixed when it comes to the effectiveness of the broader sort of modeling within the creative process. Nevertheless, 12 out of the 15 composers do believe that the use of modeling has a beneficial impact on the students' creativity and does so "by playing the role of a positive constraint."

They also agree that "total freedom is never good" and that "most people don't have the natural creativity" needed to work entirely without models. Therefore, "you should listen to the music [model] that you like and imitate it until you become yourself." Models help students to come up with creative ideas by making them aware of the many options available to them. "To invent something creative, you need to have a point of reference." One of the educators made this fascinating observation: "Modeling is a stable form of refreshment."

Nevertheless, those three remaining composers shared a concern as to the possible negative impacts of modeling upon creativity. They, too, respect the pedagogic usefulness of modeling, but they are more wary of it. Because their students tend to be strongly swayed by models, they believe that "to make something really new ... the aim should be to do that without the use of models." One of them succinctly summarized this concern by asserting that, "Whenever you're following a set list of instructions on how to write something, it gives you a lot less room to be creative with what you're doing."

Understanding student needs

One of the most revealing of my study's findings has to do with the educators' suggestions as to optimal ways of using modeling strategies so as to avoid such possible negative effects as outright imitation. As they see it, choosing the proper moment within the process, the right amount,

and the right type of modeling all can be determinative.

With respect to the right moment, they seem to agree that it comes when the student has finished constructing her or his ideas and/or when she or he is “blocked,” out of ideas. As for the appropriate amount, the composers underscored the importance of using multiple models as opposed to a single one, so as to keep the student from being overawed by any one approach that another composer has adopted.

Perhaps the best and broadest conclusion, one that my own findings confirm, is that which was arrived at by Kaschub and Smith (2009). They tell us that when it comes to the appropriate types of modeling, although the composers they interviewed have their own particular preferences, all of them agree on the importance of choosing appropriate notated/aural models that accord well with each student’s age, level of musical knowledge, and compositional experience.

References

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