

Reforms in curriculum, pedagogy and assessments Presentation in college music appreciation course

KUNG, Sandra F.

Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages, Taiwan
General Education Department

Abstract: Action Research was selected as appropriate for classroom research, because it provides interplay between theory and practise, and the testing of actions, and adjustments to actions, based on results. The researcher therefore undertook an action research project from one of the learning activities of the music appreciation course ‘group presentation’ as a way to review the teaching for further improvement.

Six practices were emphasized in this study to provide ways in attracting college students to learn music in a limited, sixteen weeks, one-semester period.

The results of this action research project reveal that a lively group performance with real-life applications has considerably enhanced college students’ learning outcomes. Students deserved a course with a practical approach that meets their needs.

Keywords: Music appreciation course, Group presentation, colleges

Introduction

Since the 1994 reform by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan, art and music education have been receiving greater attention and emphasis has been put as a subject in general studies to prepare students for future. Music educators expected some general music courses to will be treated as an integral core discipline study, not as an extra-curricular activity. Given this has been the case, universities and colleges have been allowed to set their own general curriculum with a humanistic emphasis in accordance with the Implementation Rules for University Law. More recently, there has been some agreement among music educators in tertiary institutes regarding curriculum design and this has influenced the course design for music appreciation (CAGE Report, 2000).

The Need for a New Approach to the Music Appreciation Course

Today’s students come to the classroom with musical experiences and preferences that are very different from those of most of teachers. Their musical tastes are acculturated by their exposure to the commercially popular music and which reflects the rapidly change of a pluralist society. Technology has taken music appreciation out of the concert hall, and placed it at home, car, streets and even elevators. People no longer have to go somewhere specially

for music listening (Botstein, 1996). They can do it almost anywhere and are not required to really 'listen' to it. Therefore, many college students believe that they 'know' music. However, popular music is what they are most familiar with. Their musical exposure and knowledge are narrow and limited. Most students believe music to be a 'good thing' but they are not always sure that the study of music is something worthwhile for the tight curriculum. Many college students would like to be able to appreciate more about popular music or even art music, but without proper guidance, they feel alienated from such music.

The Music Appreciation Course

Since instrument playing and choral singing are not required in primary and secondary schools in Taiwan, the music-training background of college students is varied. Eventually, the music appreciation course is designed for ordinary non-music majors, but the professional musicians who teach them appear to expect too much of them. Moreover, regardless of the achievement of students, the design of the curriculum content has remained unchanged in most of the colleges. For more than 20 years, the same complaint has been heard: too much theoretical knowledge building and too little practise-oriented training. 'What is in it for me?' is a common question raised by college students in Taiwan before they take music subjects. Research shows that many music appreciation curricula are not attractive enough to motivate students' participation (Yang, 1999; Hsu, 1999).

The music appreciation course has been one of the most widely studied in general education electives in formal academic education in Taiwan, ROC. A typical music appreciation course runs for two hours per week over an 18-week semester. In general, the music curriculum has emphasised the study of Western and Eastern music history and literature, together with a basic knowledge of musical structures while neglected most of musical performance, music composition and the aesthetic value of music (Hsu, 1999; Kung, 1999; Yang, 1999). With the trend of reforms in curriculum, more music educators begin to realise that the general music course is not a 'professional' course intended to deepen students' technical knowledge. They are more aware of students' desire to have a change in the music appreciation course with more on emphasis music repertoire and developing a long-term relationship with music. Broader concepts of music education with a humanistic approach, greater practical application and lifelong learning have been established.

It is a challenge to design a course that embraces music education objectives, context and content through a practical approach in such a short period of 18 weeks. Good understanding of the relationship between student development and music learning can broaden the scope and depth of lifelong education in music. Teaching orientation and approaches in curriculum design are now expected to be flexible, and should vary according to students' age, grade

level and their special needs. A new approach to music appreciation course design will cater for the needs of the college students, helping them to integrate music into their daily life. This is the main theme we are going to discuss in this article.

Music Appreciation and General Education

Zenker (1994) claims that music appreciation would provide people with a way to make all genres of music accessible to them on their own. It is through listening to music with musical knowledge that we can hear it in a sophisticated way. We are able to attribute positive or negative value to what we listen based on the conventional musical concepts. On many college campuses, the standard of music appreciation course is the primary opportunity for music educators to reach non-music majors. By introducing students to the history and repertoire of music, music appreciation courses remain the best hope for building audiences for music (Huang, 1997). Monsour (2000) advocates that the essential mission of the music class is to be “music for everyone getting a total citizenry who is taught by music in a way that the “quality of life” can be improved regardless of a person’s career, age, culture, or social place (p. 45). In the designing of a music appreciation course, the issue is neither on training music professionals nor producing more performers and more music professors (Botstein, 1996); it has to do with getting a public invested in making, hearing, and dealing with music as part of their lives, because music is important and more than just a frill in our society. A College Music Society (CMS) Report (1989) set the goals for music in general education, which includes building future audiences, increasing music literacy and expanding known or familiar repertoire. It maintains that it is highly desirable that a music appreciation curriculum be designed for the non-music major. The curriculum should include the study of music history and literature, the structure of music, and experiences in performing and appreciating music. Most of all, students should have the opportunity to learn how to reap the benefits from the music, and they have learn and to select the appropriate music and musical activities to match their needs.

Action Research in Music Education

Action Research was selected as appropriate for classroom research as: (1) it is about individuals working in context to bring about improvement in their own practise in the areas that they determine; (2) it follows a systematic process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting in cycles that tend to be ongoing; and (3) it places a high priority on collaboration and sharing of knowledge. The problem-solving, evaluating features and stages are similar to the teaching process (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, pp. 22-23). It provides interplay between theory and practise, and the testing of actions, and adjustments to actions, based on results. I therefore undertook an action research project from one of the learning activities of the course design as a way to review my teaching for further improvement. The more I

understand college students, the more I am convinced that students deserved a course with a practical approach that meets their needs.

The college's music appreciation course is usually offered for one semester, so the regular cycles of action research were inapplicable in this context. Therefore, a modified three stages of the action research project (Sagor, 1992; Zuber-Skerritt, 1996) was devised to be implemented in the college. For the purpose of this study, the process of three stages of modifying the curriculum design has become its focal point. However, within the scope of the study, the data collection and the details of the re-designed curriculum (Stage 3) will mainly be presented.

Data were collected through observation and focused reading of survey results. Written surveys allowed students to write in an unstructured way in response to guiding questions and were administered after every stage on the end of the semester. Students were invited to evaluate their group presentation through two open questions:

1. What suggestions would you give to improve the group presentation?
2. Please write down your feeling which relate to the group presentation?

Constant comparison of data throughout the study ensures that issues in cases raised by students were further probed and explored with other participants to determine their significance, and obtain a variety of views on the issues raised (Quinn-Patton, 2002). Data was coded and categorized according to the issue they described and categories were continually reassessed to ensure their suitability for the nature of the data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000).

Learning Activities

Myers (1996) indicates that creativity can enhance self-worth and empower individuals' ability for decision-making. As music activities are more or less creative, they provide an important channel for individual self-expression and for self-realization (Hood, 1978). On the practical side, music offers many possibilities for filling leisure time including serving as an "interlude" in their daily routines (Jeffs & Smith, 1990, p. 6). We should consider not just what good music is, but what music is good for, and for whom.

Group Presentation

The learning activity was focused on group presentation, which was one of the student-centered learning activities that had increased significantly as a popular and common activity in higher education classrooms. The small group discussions and group presentations not only inspired intellectual stimulation but also encouraged students to assist each other in

finding answers to areas of common inquiry, rather than seeking answers from teachers. It is based on problem-solving approach through information gathering, analysis and discussion by student groups. It is suitable for large size class (Scharinger & Sisak, 1992, p. 3).

The learning activities were coordinated with the introduction of pieces of the course repertoire. This activity was conducted simultaneously with music listening activity. It was initially designed as a group written report at Stage 1, modified to a group oral report at Stage 2, and re-modified as a group performance presentation at Stage 3.

Group Written Report (Stage 1)

The group written report was chosen as a learning activity at Stage 1. It was expected to enhance students' writing skills, as encouraged by college-level requirements, and to contribute to knowledge of the subject matter. Each group was required to submit a written report on its investigation into a given related subject. The written instruction for the report content was outlined and the standard format explained. The groups needed to do some research on the given topic, organise their material and draw important conclusions. Students were required to consider the guiding questions before giving in-depth answers. It was suggested they write down their own interpretation of the questions after their discussion. The students were required to submit a list of their allocated roles within the group.

It was difficult to evaluate the reports and give the assignment a fair grade, taking into consideration of the presence or absence of particular details, the appropriateness of the writing, and the degree of creativity. Finally, I chose to rate a group's work with a short paragraph of comment. The evaluation procedure is time consuming, and I soon realised that some reports were not handled properly. The quality of the reports varied between groups; some were well written after issues were thoroughly discussed, whilst others were just copied and pasted. Consequently, neither giving an objective grade nor achieving the purpose of this assignment. Moreover, the written report did not meet the expectations of students for personal growth and self-actualization. From conversations with students, I found out that individual as well as group reports were required in most of the college subjects. Students spent most weekends collecting and searching for materials. My students questioned whether the music appreciation course should follow the same requirements. Consideration was given to reduce students' workload while still maintaining the standard and achieving the objective of the learning activity. Group oral reports were preferred to help students to learn more effectively in a lively setting.

Group Oral Presentation (Stage 2)

In group oral presentation, research, writing and delivery of informative information on an assigned topic were involved. Group presentation was a good practise for co-operative learning; hence, the contents of presentation should constitute a coherent approach. Initially, every member in the group was encouraged to present orally in the class. Group members have to coordinate their research strategies, design, and individual components to make the presentation as a whole piece of work. Acquiring a holistic understanding of the topic, rather than merely concentrating on their own fragmentative information was encouraged, so that students could see how the individual parts can be fitted into the research and presentation. Rehearsals were suggested to allow the group to present the topic as a whole in a thoughtful way.

Students were taught to learn about the differences between oral and written reports, such as providing clear transitions, and overheads that condense the key points. The presenter was requested to introduce the subject for 15 minutes, and then answer questions from the class. However, limited interactions between the presentation group and the audience are possible. Our objective of presentation was that students learn to express themselves orally. However, neither of these outcomes was being effectively achieved without some technique e. g. if the presentation is not attractive, it will loose the attention of the audience. Group oral presentation of music appreciation should create an additional attraction and ‘flavor’ to bring about the interest and involvement of the audience. A change in the format of the group oral presentation will be recommended.

Group Performance (Stage 3)

As a result of limited hands-on experience and practical music-making in school’s general music courses, instrumental performance was not common in the general music courses in Taiwan. Yet, young students tend to appreciate the opportunity to carry out group presentations in a performing style. Students usually enjoy the involvement and the ‘buzz’ of performing success. If the ‘group oral presentation’ failed to be a productive learning experience at the second Stage, the ‘group performance’ was designed to improve learning activity at Stage 3.

Performance Guidelines (Stage 3)

PowerPoint slides, overhead transparencies, videos, posters and handouts would be mobilized for better presentation effects. The use of music was especially mentioned as an important aid: students could play CDs, tapes, DVDs or even sing/hum the music themselves during the performance. Students were inspired to think creatively – a professional but interesting and vivid performance was the challenge. In addition, performing in costume or

with classroom decoration was allowed. Students were excited throughout the discussion session, and enjoyed the group's 'show time'.

As an educator, I am believe in a common saying – “practise what you preach, and preach what you practise”. Since the researcher preferred to teach without depending on the notes, the students are encouraged to do the same.

Modelling the students' potential performance is crucial. To help students prepare quality performances, selected videos of group oral presentations (from Stage 2) were played to let them gain some ideas of effective presentations; likewise, photographs were displayed. These prepared the way for the Stage 3 group performance.

Two small meetings were held with each group three weeks before the performance. Encouragement and suggestions will be offered throughout the whole process. Each group had between 5 and 7 students, which will work well in courses with 30 to 50 students. All group members should participate equally in both research and performance, and the group should discuss their topic before the first meeting with the instructor. Necessary alterations in the light of new information could be made after the first meeting with the instructor, but not after the second meeting, which was held two weeks before the presentation. The performing time for each group was between 15 and 20 minutes. A bell was rung to remind the group of the time: the first 'ring' meant that there were only 5 minutes left; the second that the performance would be stopped even the group had not finished the presentation. The students organised themselves into eight groups, and the performance schedule was determined through lots drawn for the different weeks. The performance started in the 13th week of the semester and lasted for three weeks.

Peer Evaluation (Stage 3)

Peer evaluation was required after each group performance as a part of the presentation process. With clear guidelines, peer evaluation can increase the sense of community in the classroom and promote active learning (Schell, 2000). It can help students to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of their own performance. Comments from peers are more effective than those of the teacher; consequently, even criticism becomes acceptable. Short discussion after each group performance, and, except for the presenting group, written feedback using peer evaluation guidelines was expected. Etiquette was an important issue when evaluating the group; students were reminded that they would only learn from honest feedback. Opinions expressed in a positive manner were encouraged.

Student Comments on Group Performance (Stage 3)

Generally, students were satisfied with group performance. It is a profitable activity to motivate their self-learning, and stimulate their critical thinking. During the preparation process, the design of the group performance became the focus of their chatting, and encouraged “good interaction” between them (s34). After watching the live performances of other groups, student impression of various types of music was changed: “I have changed my mind about traditional Chinese music” (s23, 25); “it helped me to understand the background of the aboriginal music” (s01, 35).

Usually students will be deeply involved in the group performances because they gained a sense of belonging to a group, and the experience of working with other members of the group was precious. They learnt more, observed more, experienced good interaction and were ‘surprised’ by the talent of classmates.

Positive experience

College students enjoyed working in groups or as a “team” (s15), because it was “fun” (s03, 07), “interesting” (s11, s21) and good to “work with different people” (s37, s41). They not only enjoyed working with classmates, but also indicated that they preferred to learn in a “lively way” (s15, 24, 42). ‘group performance’ was mentioned by students to be particularly “enjoyable” (s20). More important, the learning activities made them realise that “music is alive, not dead” (s01).

Self- direction

Students prepared the whole process of the group performance, realizing that it was a self-directed activity and indicated that “learning by doing” (s10) was an “enjoyable” (s35) experience.

Input from others

The topic covered by each group’s performance was different; it became a “surprise” (s29) for the students. Several students indicated that they were amazed by the performance and the performing content (s27), and they also learned “unexpectedly” (s35, 47). Students also realised that it was a “self-learning process and it took cooperation and discipline” (s35).

Negotiation skills

A certain degree of conflict occurred during the group performance project as students experienced the necessary processes of negotiation and compromise with others. They wrote about “arguments” (s8), “differing opinions” (s16) and “individual persistence” (s12).

More time for group presentation

Students indicated that they appreciated the group presentation experience. Not only they benefited from the co-operative learning in the preparation process, but also gained from the highlights in other groups' presentations. They suggested that more time should be allowed: "group presentation is very interesting. There should be more time for it" (s02, 03, 06); "15-20 minutes passed too quickly during group presentation" (s06). As college students are more career-oriented, they automatically pay attention to the professional field of their classmates. However, their peers' talents came as a surprise in the group presentations. Two interviewees felt that the non-competitive atmosphere of the programme was valuable: "They were all fantastic, my classmates have undiscovered talents" (s03, 06).

Benefit from peer evaluation

Although educators hold different views about peer evaluation, each group was given several evaluations under clear guidelines and instruction, and the students appeared to have benefited from them. They were required to write their group's assigned number on their peer evaluation sheet, and learned to be responsible for their opinions. Three students said that the comments are valuable.

Discussion

Group presentation included group performances, brainstorming, small-group projects/presentations and group discussions. Six practises were emphasised:

- Discussing with students how to develop a shared conception of the problem and of possible ways towards a common goal,
- Providing students with individual responsibility for their learning,
- Inspiring the oral conclusion of group discussion in a well organised but lively presentation style,
- Increasing interactions with embedded practice and feedback sequences,
- Using cooperative evaluation techniques, for example, negotiated learning and
- Arranging lectures with short discussions interspersed.

Compared with the group written report (Stage 1) and group oral presentation (Stage 2), the level of preparation and the quality of group performances in Stage 3 were impressive. This may be due to the desire to project a good stage image, which encouraged group members to strive for a quality performance. Several students asked about the taped video: "I can't wait to watch our performance video; can we keep a copy?" (s02, 13, 17, 20, 40). It was possible that the students were motivated by being on screen or the sense of pride in being part of a team; it all contributed to a performance of high standard and quality.

The group performances took longer than I expected, and it was difficult to cut them off when they were too long, yet interesting. The audience became actively involved in watching

their ‘costumed’ or ‘actor’ classmates, and was happy to discover a different side to them. Watching the work produced by the students, and reading their comments, I realised that the new approach was the reason for such accomplishment. Group performance had consolidated students’ involvement and their interest in self-learning. With a well-prepared presentation, both the performers and the audience shared an enjoyable learning experience, which appeared to affect the students’ desire for further music contact.

The comments on group presentation were positive overall. Students claimed that the love of music was more lasting when the learning experience was enjoyable. Because the course moved in a sequential fashion, from the easy to the more difficult, it “facilitated learning” (s08). They “appreciated” learning in a positive, welcoming, and non-threatening atmosphere (s4, 44), especially because the fear of “failure and losing face” was of strong concern amongst college students (s6, 15, 28). They also favoured the interactive style of teaching and learning, because it produced a “friendly and understanding” atmosphere (s20, 30).

Students were frequently encouraged to attend the course regularly at the beginning of the semester. But absenteeism was not an issue when the students became attracted by the course; they felt their presence was important and they did not want to “miss the fun” (s26, 06). Although music knowledge and history still played an essential part in the course, with this different approach it was not the only focus. Students felt stimulated by the realisation that they were starting to appreciate music without being fully equipped with the ‘theoretical’ knowledge. Typical feedback included: “since I always believed music theory was boring, I thought I could never really appreciate music” (s27); “I am glad there is a way to learn music appreciation without stuffing me with all kinds of theory and history” (s39); “after I started to be interested in classical music, the history stuff makes more sense” (s36).

Conclusion

The results of this action research project reveal that a lively group performance with real-life applications has considerably enhanced college students’ learning outcomes. Group performances not only enhanced their self-learning and self-growth, but also stimulated their self-actualization. In addition, the cooperation in learning and peer evaluation assisted the students to become objective and open-minded learners. Researchers indicated that learning time effect student achievement and outcomes (Kuceris & Zakariya, 1982). Normally, sixteen weeks were the course length, however, with a selective music appreciation class, the first two to three weeks were the ‘auditing period’, plus the mid term, final exam weeks and public holidays, nine or ten weeks would be the actual course period. Many teachers would predict that it was too short a time to change attitudes towards music. The results of this study show it is possible. Providing a profound learning experience with the life-connected activities was found effective in attracting college students to learn music in a limited, sixteen

weeks, one-semester period. The students experienced enjoyment from music learning and realised the benefit by practicing music in their lives, so that a further relationship with music was built up to enhance self-motivated learning (Photo 1 & 2). Thus, lifelong learning in music and improving the quality of life did become possible, even in such a limited time. Consequently, achieving the growth of cognition (zhi), emotion (qing) and volition (yi) into ‘oneness’ for the well-being of individuals as the highest aim of general education can become a reality.



Photo 1: *Introducing aboriginal song*



Photo 2: *Introducing Chinese opera***References**

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