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RESEARCH TOPIC (“Is it working?” question)

Do music theory students become more fluent when improvisation is approached using foreign language teaching and learning models ?

OVERVIEW

Music Theory courses comprise the largest body of credit hours within the music major. Music Theory courses meet 5 days a week for 4 credits throughout the Freshman and Sophomore years. The focus of these courses is provide foundational skills for upper level study and the profession world. Improvisation is currently taught in these courses but the profession has only recently (and somewhat reluctantly) embraced this idea. Consequently, there are currently very few standard approaches or methods for how to teach or learn improvisation. As a result, most music students improve little at improvising. Since Improvisation in music is akin to extemporaneous speaking in a foreign language, foreign language teaching and learning models can be adapted to fill this void.

METHOD

During the 2005-2006 Academic Year, various methods and research articles in foreign language acquisition and instruction were investigated. Effective language learning strategies were then translated into improvisation learning strategies. The strategies were implemented into the Music 379 course, a required course for all music majors. Subsequent classes were then reviewed by two faculty colleagues (one in the music department and another from the foreign language department). These reviews were highly favorable as were the student surveys. My findings were that foreign language teaching and learning strategies are very helpful in teaching improvisation and fluency. I presented these results to the Music Theory Department Fall 2006 Meeting and the response was overwhelmingly positive. The presentation has served as a catalyst for meaningful discussion of curricular reform in our department. It is hoped that further study can be done in this area by others.

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