Flipping the Final: Possibilities for Assessment in the Flipped Music Classroom

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Abstract

Students often ask the question: “What is going to be on the final?” For the music instructor, as well as any other discipline, this is a vexing question. In this essay, I propose an alternative question: “How can the student effectively apply what they learned in relation to their own interests?”

In this paper, I describe how I “flipped” my final exam for my students at the end of the semester for my “Twentieth-Century Techniques” course at the University of Utah, School of Music. I describe how the final exam, a project, needs to meet the needs of modern music major students, describe how to channel student awareness in the course to help them design a final project, and describe some of the projects created for the final exam in the class. I also discuss how the flipped final is aligned to the learning objectives/outcomes for the course.
The flipped classroom, trending in recent years, offers students the opportunity to engage in more one-on-one interaction within the classroom; receive access to lecture and learning material online, before class; and allows for more active learning and application-based activities. What if assessment happened differently? In my “Twentieth Century Techniques” (Musc. 3550) course at the University of Utah, I flipped the examination paradigm. Rather than come to finals week and take an exam, students had the opportunity to select a piece of music that interested them and engage it with the tools that they had learned over the course of the semester.

In any discipline, throughout the semester, one vexing question that instructors frequently encounter is, “What is going to be on the final?” No matter how well a course is taught, students are poised to ask this question at some point during the semester. The question implies that only the material for the final exam is worth learning. In this essay, I seek to circumvent this question by posing another question: “How can the student effectively apply what they learned in relation to their own interests?”

The Needs of the Student

One of the challenges for modern musicians is relevancy. Music students’ professional development needs are based upon their instrument or academic music discipline. Singers need a command of the art song and opera repertoire, while instrumentalists need fluency understanding the symphonic forms that they will encounter during their performing career. Students studying composition, music history, or music theory need to encounter multiple compositions, in different genres and forms, so that they can develop their own appreciation and portfolio of different genres.

Too often, music analysis focuses on compositions for the piano. Every music classroom has a piano, and compositions for the piano are easily explored in a music course. Meanwhile, instrumentalists need experience analyzing pieces that they will perform in an orchestra someday. Singers, on the other hand, need a better understanding of how text is set in relation to music for piano and other instruments. Jazz students will often only receive a few classes on jazz arranging, composition, and theory. They take a plethora of courses in the Common Practice Period: the Classic and Romantic genres that will give them the basics of understanding harmony and theory but will not align with their jazz repertoire. Also, jazz theory books often do not contain a nuanced discussion of rhythm. How can these problems be addressed by allowing students to become creators, ultimately assessing students’ performance throughout the semester?

Fink’s Dream Exercise: Gearing Up For the Final Assessment

When designing a course or revising a current one, Fink’s Dream Exercise is a useful tool. Fink’s Dream Exercise poses the following three questions to the instructor:

- What do you want students to learn?
- Awareness: What useful tools can be included in the course to further student learning?
- What makes students who have taken your course “stand out?”

The awareness component of Fink’s Dream Exercise is an important tool for developing a viable assessment of students in a “Twentieth-Century Techniques” music theory course. Students are learning about the nifty tools for studying music that is composed on the cutting edge. They should get an opportunity to revisit a piece in the course that interested them, as well as complete a project that addresses their needs as a performing musician.
Alignment: Learning Outcomes and Assessment

Above, awareness in Fink’s Dream Exercise is identified as an important component for developing a viable final assessment in a course. How does awareness inform a viable alignment between learning objectives/outcomes and assessment in the “Twentieth-Century Techniques” classroom? The following table provides more nuanced levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy, learning objectives/outcomes, and possible activities for student presentations at the end of the semester.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bloom’s Taxonomy</th>
<th>Active Learning Verbs</th>
<th>Course Learning Objective/Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Appraise, Assess, Critique, Recommend, Etc.</td>
<td>Students will recommend, at least, three analytical approaches used throughout the semester to analyze a piece by a composer studied during the semester or compose a piece in the style of a composer studied.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesis</td>
<td>Compose, Construct, Program, Generate, Etc.</td>
<td>Students will produce an original analysis of a composition from the post-tonal period or compose a piece in the style of a 20th-century composer.</td>
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Table 1. Bloom’s Taxonomy for the Flipped Final

Long before finals week, I asked students to select a piece of music from the various composers and styles studied throughout the semester. Students had already analyzed pieces in the syllabus and had an awareness of which analytical conventions might best serve the piece that they selected. Students now had an opportunity to create an analysis, a composition, or a performance, ultimately an experience for their classmates that would be presented during the final exam period during finals week.

A Diversity of Experiences

The projects that my students presented were diverse in nature. Students analyzed pieces that they might perform in a recital someday, composed pieces in the styles of other composers, and even used music technology to create a computerized realization of a musical work. Here are the exemplars of the projects that were completed and presented at the end of the semester:

- **Composing a Twelve-Tone Piece With a Derived Twelve-Tone Row**: A junior music education major looked at composer Anton Webern’s pieces that used a derived row. After designing the twelve-tone row, the student met with me for an appointment. We discovered
that the technique used to create the row was similar to the row form used in Webern’s *Concerto*, Op. 24. The student also learned how to produce a polished product in a music notation program, a skill that would help her as a music educator in the future.

- **Analyzing Alban Berg’s Vocal Music:** Two students, junior voice majors, analyzed Alban Berg’s “Schlafend trägt man mich,” the second song from his *Vier Lieder*, Op. 2. The two students analyzed the pitches used in the piece and gained an understanding of how the voice part and prosody related to the piano part. Ultimately, the two students might perform the song in a recital someday.

- **Creating a Realization of a Twelve-Tone Piece and Possibilities for a Composer:** Two students, jazz studies majors, analyzed Luigi Dallapiccola’s “Contrapunctus secundus” from *Quaderno musicale di Annalibera*. The *Quaderno* uses twelve-tone procedures. The students used a coding program called Opusmodus, a programming environment with coding and musical scoring realization. After programming a realization of the original “Contrapunctus,” the students created a “what if?” scenario, and made a realization of how the piece might sound if the composer used different row forms in the piece. The music technology experience helped the two jazz studies majors further refine their music technology background, a skill needed in music technology.

Ultimately, the flipped final exam experience helped address the individual needs of the students, in relation to their own interests, as well as their needs to succeed on the job market as professional musicians. Students created compositions for different instruments, analyzed pieces that they might perform someday, and learned valuable music technology skills that they will use in their future careers.

The flipped final also empowered the students by eliminating the question of what was going to be on the final. Students had the opportunity to apply their newfound skills to a specific interesting, allowing them a chance to develop as musicians and inviting an opportunity to create.
References


