Time to Change Your Mind

Two nice things about living a long time: you have a lot of past experiences (if you can remember them), and you still have time to change your mind. Recently, as I neared retirement age, I changed my mind about music theory teaching and began revising my methods. This short essay is about a culture gap between what I call “geezerland” (i.e., profs over 50 like me) and the cohort of younger teachers who feel the need to freshen up college-level music teaching, who are promoting the “flipped classroom” and the “engaging students” publications. When I discovered them, I was delighted to see that I had stumbled into a 60s-style movement!

And I was surprised that these younger folks had come to their epiphany at a much younger age than I had; why had it taken me so long to question my teaching? I suspected for years that there was something wrong, but until it was held up to me by a smart undergraduate (I’ll spare you [the details of this story](http://jmtp.ou.edu/journal-article/global-perspective-music-theory-pedagogy-thinking-music)), I just looked the other way and went on teaching as I had been taught. Probably the hardest thing for profs in geezerland, especially in a conservative discipline like music theory, is to depart from their own upbringing. In the short essays in *Engaging Students* you will run across five themes that are stumbling blocks for the older crowd:

1. To me, the most striking of these is the increasing interest in teaching technique for its own sake. Back in the day it was an open secret (at least at the loftier schools) that teaching was most emphatically *not* the most important activity in the hat trick of skills that would get you tenure. We were trained in a *research* *discipline* by experts who openly disdained their colleagues in music education (around 1970, one of my profs called our teacher’s college “the asshole of the universe,” no kidding). Now media, the flipped classroom, group problem-solving, and creative reinterpretation techniques are being used in Math, Chemistry, and English, and many of the authors of the essays here have looked into a lot of literature on education. In this domain, the problem for the geezer may be relinquishing his/her elevated social class.

2. Student-centered learning and group work replaces the old lecture. This revolution has been on the horizon for a while: I attended a workshop in 1995 in which Larry Michaelsen told us that lecturing was finished, to be replaced by [readiness assessment tests](https://books.google.ca/books?id=8S8efQkqeqIC&printsec=frontcover&dq=larry+michaelsen+2004&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CB0Q6AEwAGoVChMItpeZ777vxgIVyhKSCh3WEA3f#v=onepage&q&f=false) and group learning (close ancestors of [“Just-in-Time Teaching”](http://flipcamp.org/engagingstudents/hughes.html)). Learning from one’s peers is one of the central tenets of social constructivism, a theory of education that is increasingly appealing in music teaching (see [Peter R. Webster](https://books.google.ca/books?id=XEnlQsSuuB4C&printsec=frontcover&dq=%E2%80%9CConstruction+of+Music+Learning.%E2%80%9D+In+MENC+Handbook+of+Research+on+Music+Learning,+Vol.+1,+edited+by+Richard+Colwell&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CBwQ6AEwAGoVChMIx53j1sTvxgIVSQmSCh3K7wDU#v=onepage&q=%E2%80%9CConstruction%20of%20Music%20Learning.%E2%80%9D%20In%20MENC%20Handbook%20of%20Research%20on%20Music%20Learning%2C%20Vol.%201%2C%20edited%20by%20Richard%20Colwell&f=false),  [Paolo Freire](https://books.google.ca/books?id=hnCRirl96R0C&pg=PA22&dq=paulo+freire+constructivism&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CB0Q6AEwAGoVChMI8oW7ncjvxgIVhROSCh3RIQJ-#v=onepage&q=paulo%20freire%20constructivism&f=false) and a forthcoming Routledge book on [improvisation in music teaching](https://www.routledge.com/products/9781138830165)). Student-centered learning now means that students may choose which pieces to study, crowdsourcing the curriculum and getting rid of the museum of canonic works in favor of increased relevance (both to their interests and to their prospects on the job market). For geezerland, this would appear to entail an almost complete loss of authority: The flipped classroom, problem-solving, recomposing and improvising, debating, voting, writing in pairs, and peer tutoring all replace the prof’s lecture on pieces she chose because they’re the ones she studied. The most revealing term for some of these new activities is “real-world tasks,” since it openly acknowledges that those we did before weren’t.

3. More than one of the writers in this series have noted that assessment is actually an obstacle to learning because the student focuses on the grade more than the material. It is scary for geezerland to imagine relinquishing those carrots and sticks in favor of such risky and anarchic schemes as: self-assessment, peer assessment, proficiency- or standards-based assessment, comments alone, and (gasp!) *no* assessment. Feedback in a student-centered context requires paying attention to individuals, not applying a one-size-fits-all grading scheme. Of course our institutions require assessment; we struggle with it, we try to come to terms with it, and we can be forgiven a little stridency when we write about it.

4. New technology makes old-school profs vulnerable learners even as it offers some alternatives to the traditional ways of analyzing musical works and of giving feedback. As a geezer myself, I have managed to use Skype for student feedback and videos for short “lessons,” but I frankly mistrust media other than scribbling on the score, writing a paper, or making a schema or a table. To include Spotify, Twine, storyboards, etc., would mean I would have to master these media so as to be a convincing leader and to understand the value of what my students “hand in.”

5. The inclusion of social and cultural aspects of music in the theory class takes us out of the realm of pure music, once our beloved object. It partially solves the problem of relevance because it begins to answer the most basic classroom question “why are we doing this?” But, because it’s easier and more appealing to talk about daily life than to peer closely at the notes on the page, the danger is snorkeling (vs. scuba-diving, in [Brian Alegant](http://flipcamp.org/engagingstudents2/essays/alegant.html)’s memorable metaphor).

In sum, the new efforts hinge on empathy with the students, and it can feel very destabilizing to teachers who start off imagining themselves to be teaching younger versions of themselves. Should the teacher butt out and let students discover great truths by themselves? This points to the loss of control of the traditional professor, even to the loss of the professor altogether (don’t laugh, the success of [unsupervised students](http://www.hole-in-the-wall.com/docs/Paper06.pdf) has been documented). But with students fooling around excitedly, we might be throwing the baby of the prof’s contribution out with the bathwater of boring lectures. Do we no longer get to make mind-blowing observations about pieces we have lived with for years, observations that will trigger the transformation of a callow undergraduate into a sophisticated music theorist?

But there’s another problem that has been bothering me for years that I’ve done nothing about, something that may underlie all the symptoms of boredom and alienation that the new wave is a response to. It is the lack of musical preparation of students entering university. The lack of engagement that our students seem to be experiencing may result from their lack of preparation: they haven’t the skills to grasp the piece (hear it, play it, remember it), much less appreciate their teacher’s insightful interpretations. In how many high schools is it cool to play an instrument, sing in the chorus, or listen to Bach? Maybe a problem more fundamental than what’s wrong with music teaching in the university is what’s wrong with high school music. Maybe our next task should be to address music training in the earlier stages of education.

The best thing about the “Engaging Students” series is that it is group learning writ large. It offers a forum for exchange of experiences in a domain that is in flux, and from it we get to hear the experiences of our colleagues at other institutions. It confirms the need for change and the willingness of music teachers to embrace new ideas. It shakes us up and gives us a chance to reflect on things we might have done, while it’s still not too late to do them.

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