Training Ears with Peers: Establishing an Aural Skills Peer Tutoring Center

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**Background**

Students are often apprehensive about aural skills and ear training classes. The intangible nature of the content covered in these courses presents a challenge for working outside of the classroom, where many students feel they need guided instruction. Online resources, such as [Teoria](https://www.teoria.com/) and [MusicTheory.net](http://www.musictheory.net/), provide great ways for students to rehearse; however, these resources cannot provide verbal feedback or break the exercises down into smaller units if a student is struggling. Peer tutoring for students who have difficulties in aural skills can be an invaluable resource that provides the explanations, support, and encouragement that these electronic resources cannot. In this essay I will describe a method for peer tutoring that I created as the Undergraduate Peer Coordinator at the University of Delaware (UD), and offer tools and suggestions on how to set up and run an Aurals Lab effectively.

Similar lab programs include the [Georgia Tech Math Lab](https://www.math.gatech.edu/academics/undergraduate/tutors-and-labs), [University of Delaware Writing Center](http://www.cas.udel.edu/writing-center/Pages/Peer-Tutors.aspx), and the [Hayes School of Music Learning, Research, and Technology Lab](http://music.appstate.edu/current-students/lab). Many of the labs that exist throughout the country are student run and filled with student tutors. Where they differ, however, is in the levels of the various students leaders. [Nancy Falchikov](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL9155746W/Learning_Together) details the varieties of peer tutoring arrangements including same-level, cross-level, and even cross-institutional. Depending on the context, the Aurals Lab could be staffed by undergraduates, solely graduate students, or even a mixture of levels.

**Getting Started**

Scheduling peer tutoring creates a number of challenges. Music students often speak of their lack of time to accomplish outside work due to the rigorous “music major schedule.” Mandatory one-on-one tutoring may be too challenging to coordinate due to varying schedules between a teaching assistant and the aural skills student. A drop-in tutoring system is one solution, and at UD we are able to offer up to ten hours each night of the week, giving students numerous options to coordinate with their schedules.

In order for a walk-in Aurals Lab to run efficiently, it is often helpful for there to be at least one student manager. [Neal Whitman](http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED305016) mentions two types of peer teachers that could fit the student manager role: undergraduate teaching assistants, who provide formal supplementary teaching, and tutors, who provide extra help outside the classroom. According to [Jim Wood](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL9232845W/Mentoring_and_Tutoring_by_Students), the responsibilities of student managers include organizing student tutors’ involvement, contributing to the training of tutors, and most important, acting as a liaison with the professors.

The student managers are responsible for organizing the various tutors and their schedules to create one finalized schedule. The number of tutors needed depends on the number of hours the Aurals Lab will be open. At UD, I often had two tutors per shift so as to allow each tutor to specialize working with one level of students. To obtain schedules from potential tutors, polling sites such as [Doodle](http://doodle.com/) or [SurveyMonkey](https://www.surveymonkey.com/) can be utilized by everyone.

The student manager and professor(s) involved should compile a list of potential tutors for the Aurals Lab. While tutors will often have a strong background in all the material covered in the aural skills sequence, there could be designated tutors for each of the ear training classes offered each semester, or tutors who specialize in working on singing skills or listening skills. When the tutors focus on a particular course, the students who come for help wouldn’t need to explain what the class is covering in order to get the attention and support they came for.

A training meeting could be held where the tutors review their skills and the manager is able to assess each tutor’s strengths. The tutors are presented with potential scenarios and a [tutoring guide](https://docs.google.com/document/d/17YrNnNTbVs97O6A8WoRmn6wrGb1AeCQVdcQCQmixloY/edit?usp=sharing) in order to prepare them for working with their peers. Scenerios include helping a student struggling to match pitch, performing dictations on the piano for a student, as well as singing counterpoints and cantus firmi. The scenarios are not intended to present every problem a tutor may face, but to allow them to think on their feet and experience what it is like to work with their peers. These training meetings also allow student tutors to share pedagogical methods with each other as well as learn methods from professors. One training meeting per semester allows all students and professors involved to solidify their goals for the semester, and the quick guide provides a continuous reference for the tutors whenever needed.

All of these tasks should be performed under a professor’s guidance, however the communication must continue after the initial stage of creating the Aurals Lab. There are often students who need help in various stages of the theory sequence and the Aurals Lab should be able to serve all of them. To help facilitate this, student manager(s) can maintain regular contact with all of the relevant professors to receive information about course content. If a professor so chooses, extra credit can be given as an additional motivator for students to seek help at the Aurals Lab.

With the tutors and teachers all in agreement, the schedule for walk-in hours can be published where all students can access it. The Lab can help the most students possible if it includes a variety of hours that can accommodate the diverse student body. One option is to create a [Google Calendar](http://learn.googleapps.com/calendar) that will display the hours available as well as the tutors available for that shift. It is helpful to publish the tutors assigned to each shift so that students can work with a tutor they are comfortable or familiar with. The Google Calendar will automatically be updated if a professor or student tutor were to change or cancel a session. This calendar can be shared with the entire music department and has the capability of being embedded into a professor’s course site.

Finding a location in the music building to host the Aurals Lab can be one of the greatest challenges in starting this peer tutoring center. The location must be large enough so that it can be shared among tutors attempting to reach multiple students at differing skill levels. Lots of table space as well as chalkboard space allows tutors to utilize any technique needed to teach their peers. However, the location used must have access to at least one piano/keyboard. A piano lab is an ideal location because it allows the tutors to have pianos for dictation exercises, but allows the students to also have access to a piano to check their pitches or even work on counterpoint.

**Record Keeping**

The Aurals Lab was created for students to work through and review their ear training exercises. That said, many students still did not make the time to come in and work on these skills. To keep track of which students attended the various sessions, we used a [Google Form](https://docs.google.com/a/udel.edu/forms/d/1_kIgNznKZaXSe4AM_-eg2z1un_QbrIz-3Lawa4B8u_c/viewform) that the tutors would fill out after working with a student. This form recorded the student’s name, when they attended, for how long they attended, as well as what they worked on. The responses were collated into a single spreadsheet that could be accessed by student managers and faculty to show work accomplished in tutoring sessions. Professors can also utilize these responses to gain a better understanding of what students are struggling with and how these students are improving their skills.

A Google Form can be updated semesterly with any changes to self-reflection questions or course selection options. As with any electronic record keeping of student information, it is very important to maintain the utmost security. If a Google Form were to be used, it should only be shared with the tutors and any professors involved with the Lab. Since the Google Form collects information on each submission, if a student were to submit the form, their username would appear in the spreadsheet rather than an approved tutor’s username; this limits the potential for cheating.

**Outcomes of Peer Tutoring**

While an improvement in grades might be a student's primary motivator for lab attendance, many students discover that refining their skills is the pathway to success. Students who spent time in the lab weekly reported not only an improvement in their grades, but also a rise in their confidence level. As students return to the Aurals Lab on a weekly or daily basis, they begin to form strong, academic relationships with their tutors. This positive bond is invaluable and allows a student to feel free of judgement when they return to the Aurals Lab.

Anecdotal reports confirm positive outcomes on an individual student basis. One student began attending the lab as soon as it opened because he struggled in matching pitch. It became apparent that this student was capable of singing correct intervals and sequentials, yet struggled with matching a starting pitch. As this student came at least twice a week, several tutors were able to try different methods that included scooping up into the pitch and plugging one ear so as to hear the pitch with minimal background noise. Eventually the student found that plugging one ear resulted in a more accurate match of starting pitch. Had the student not finally mastered this essential skill, he may not have passed his ear training course.

Another student’s task was to perform a polyrhythm with canonic lines. This assignment was given months in advance to the students, and I, along with another peer tutor, worked closely with this student to accomplish this assignment. Performing polyrhythms can be difficult especially for musicians who are not used to their hands working independently of one another. After trying many techniques including listening and memorizing the sound of the polyrhythm, as well as writing and analyzing where the beats were, the student finally understood the concept when a tutor suggested treating it as a drumset. This visual aid quickly transformed a complex polyrhythm into a mere multifaceted drum pattern.

In addition to the benefits of the tutees, many of the tutors in the Aurals Lab may eventually become educators of various levels. A [National Education Association review](http://www.nea.org/tools/35542.htm) states that “Peer tutoring is a beneficial way for students to learn from each other in the classroom.” Peer tutoring allows students to experience working either one-on-one or in small groups to develop their teaching skills. Aural skills specifically calls for a teacher to have a “bag of tricks” filled with different ways to look at a problem and to come up with new methods made specifically for each student. [Jennifer Snodgrass](http://jmtp.ou.edu/ejournal/undergraduate-learning-and-teaching-%E2%80%9C-trenches%E2%80%9D-development-peer-run-music-tutoring-cente-0) summarizes a peer tutoring center as “providing undergraduates with the opportunity to formulate their own teaching philosophies, while gaining valuable experience in peer teaching and theoretical problem solving.” The experience that future student teachers can gain in a tutoring setting can be invaluable for their future success in education. The creation of an Aurals Lab has the potential to benefit the students and faculty involved as well as create a solid foundation in ear training for the entire music department.

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