**Breaking (Musical) Stuff as an Act of (Music) Criticism**

*To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn.*

*–* [*bell hooks*](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL17114886W/Teaching_To_Transgress)

**On Breaking Stuff**

Many college-level music theory courses are structured by a pre-determined set of learning objectives. Assignments, lesson plans, and assessments are arranged around these outcomes, and [students have little or no say in how they are chosen and acquired](http://kris.shaffermusic.com/2014/12/student-centered-curriculum/). This outcome-driven pedagogy can result in what [Paulo Freire](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL1870486W/Education_For_Critical_Consciousness_(Continuum_Impacts)) has called “massification,” the dehumanizing, mechanical reproduction of knowledge in an oppressed class, in which music students accept the learning objectives without critical awareness of the aesthetic values and ways of hearing they impart. What is needed, [Freire](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL1870486W/Education_For_Critical_Consciousness_(Continuum_Impacts)) maintains, is “an education which would lead men to take a new stance toward their problems—that of intimacy with those problems, one oriented toward research instead of repeating irrelevant principles. An education of ‘I wonder,’ instead of merely, ‘I do’” (32).

The conventional tools and typical assignments in music theory often reflect an [outcome- and curriculum-driven pedagogy](http://kris.shaffermusic.com/2014/12/student-centered-curriculum/). Commonly used tools like Roman-numeral or phrase-type analysis, helpful as they may be in certain interpretive contexts, may lead students to approach music in a reductionistic or mechanistic manner. Student responses like “this is just a V chord” or “that is a parallel period” may indicate the achievement of several learning objectives, but not an engagement with music that understands the manifold musical possibilities of the materials they encounter.

Are carefully scaffolded, outcome-driven assignments able to help students develop what [James S. Taylor](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL25726757M/Poetic_Knowledge_The_Recover_of_Education) calls “poetic knowledge”? Taylor defines poetic knowledge as a “spontaneous act of the external and internal senses with the intellect, integrated and whole, rather than an act associated with the powers of analytic reasoning….[a] natural human act, synthetic and penetrating, that gets us *inside* the thing experienced….[a] knowledge from the inside out, radically different in this regard from knowledge *about* things. In other words, it is the opposite of scientific knowledge (emphasis in original)” (6). Similarly, writing about the perception of visual art, [Rudolf Arnheim](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL1531517M/To_the_rescue_of_art) suggests that a “narrow focus on the historical and psychological aspects of a work may draw attention away from what is seen” (62). Arnheim argues for an approach to art that is more direct and unmediated, providing “ways of approaching artistic experience by what can be seen directly and spontaneously. Such seeing requires no scholarship, but it does require a willingness to look carefully at what the artist has put there. Once attention is locked on the target, the shapes and colors and the relations of sizes and distances yield their meaning” (ibid.).

[Jesse Stommel](http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/journal/the-digital-humanities-is-about-breaking-stuff/) integrates the critical pedagogy of Freire with the stances of Taylor and Arnheim, suggesting in a recent article that work in the Digital Humanities should be about breaking stuff. “[T]he humanities have always been intensely interactive, an engaged dance between the text on a page and the ideas in our brains. The humanities have also always been intensely social, a vibrant ecosystem of shared, reworked, and retold stories.” To cast Stommel’s argument in more familiar terms, music pedagogy tends to focus on building and sharing. We build facility with specific analytical tools, many of which are designed to demonstrate various types of musical unity, creating unique (if limited) types of musical experiences and qualities of musical attention while building communities of persons around the resulting shared experiences, values, and concepts. To see this tendency in action, consider any analysis assignment in which the expected student responses are identical (i.e. same Roman numerals, cadence types, chord symbols, etc.).

Stommel offers an example assignment of a pedagogy of breaking: students are asked to take the words of a poem by Emily Dickinson and rearrange them into something else. The instructions are short and straightforward: students may “use any or all of the words that appear in the poem as many or as few times as they want. What they build takes any shape: text, image, video, a poem, a pile, sense-making or otherwise.” Stommel concludes his article by presenting some of the brilliant work his students submitted in response to this prompt.

What might a music pedagogy focused on breaking things look like? How can we invite our students to approach pieces of music as sites for creative experimentation, musical response, and imaginative reworking? What modes of analysis and musical attention might students develop from engaging music without the conventional scaffolding and tool sets? How might such an approach help them gain a critical distance and understanding of any analytical tools they might eventually learn to use?

**Breaking Musical Stuff: An Assignment**

While “breaking” and analysis (from the Greek “analusis,” meaning “unloose” or “undo”) are etymologically similar, there is an important distinction. Music analysis as it is commonly taught involves identifying elements in a way that allows the music to be reconstructed, whether symbolically, conceptually, graphically, or through layered reductions. Breaking stuff is analysis without the restrictions of a pre-determined analytical system or aesthetic ideal (*e.g.* unity). The idea of breaking allows the listener to exercise agency, to identify interesting musical features of any quality, type, or size, and to freely respond to these features by making something new. Breaking stuff need not depend on using digital tools; engaging a text by writing in the margins [creates new works and possibilities of experience](https://books.google.com/books?id=r8trG_FywFAC&printsec=frontcover&dq=platitudes+undone&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CCcQ6AEwAGoVChMIsdab97SGxgIVRZqACh1lBQB_#v=onepage&q&f=false). The process of recombining and reworking materials creates “[added value](http://flipcamp.org/engagingstudents/roust.html),” an aesthetic surplus brought about by creatively engaging an original work.

A breaking stuff assignment might consist of at least five parts: instructions, process, product, learning outcomes, and student reflection/assessment. The instructions are the only part of the assignment that is predetermined and shared with the students at the beginning of the project; the other parts take shape as students’ projects develop.

**Instructions**

The instructions should be simple and direct, as [Stommel’s assignment demonstrates](http://www.slideshare.net/jessestommel/digital-pedagogy-is-about-breaking-stuff-toward-a-critical-digital-humanities-pedagogy/14). (In a recent lecture, Stommel humorously quipped that there is something wrong with assignment instructions that take longer to read than to complete.) A sample breaking stuff assignment is given below, with variable components in brackets:

|  |
| --- |
| Take one or two pieces from Debussy’s Preludes (Book [I](http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/c/c0/IMSLP00509-Debussy_-_Preludes__Book_1.pdf) or [II](http://conquest.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/d/dd/IMSLP00510-Debussy_-_Preludes__Book_2.pdf)) [or a collection provided by the instructor]. Use some or all of your chosen pieces and rework, rearrange, re-situate, and/or recompose this material as a new musical and/or aesthetic object: a soundtrack, an improvisation, a graphic score, a recomposition in a new style, an electronic composition, a series of ring tones, a soundscape, and so on. You may engage just one piece or combine elements of multiple pieces together in a single mash-up. Students are expected to work [individually, or in groups of X]. |

I recommend that students be given the [full instructions](https://docs.google.com/document/d/17t10C5VFGR56nOErN8R_i1wfYFSwOCRgzM-NUcXUbQI/edit?usp=sharing) in class and allowed time to digest the assignment. Those who are not comfortable with assignments in which the final product is not well defined will ask (possible instructor responses are in parentheses):

* What do you want us to do, exactly? (Create something new.)
* How am I supposed to choose what parts of the music to use? (What parts interest you?)
* Should the original piece be recognizable in my project? (It is for you to decide what relationship the new music will have with the original, and to what extent the new will resemble the old.)
* How do I choose a form? (What do you hope to do with your materials?)
* Why aren’t we doing real music theory? (What is real music theory? Who determines its limits?)

As students generate and grapple with difficult questions, instructors should reassure students that the questions they develop are at the heart of the creative process.

Any limits to the scope or content of the final product should be given in the instructions. The instructions should also include a timeline laying out each stage of the process. ([Mary Stewart](http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/journal/designing-emergence-role-instructor-student-centered-learning/) has provided more ideas about the role of the instructor in a student-centered classroom.)

**Process and Product / Product as Process**

In this assignment, process and product are equally important. The two should fit together seamlessly, so that students perceive musical “products” *as process,* i.e., as works that project the dynamics of creative engagement and response. Students should be encouraged to consider how the inner connections they establish between process and product might be expressed (especially if the instructor requires an account of the creative process as part of the assignment). Students are encouraged to explore creative ways of capturing their process, whether blogging, tweeting, painting, podcasting (video or audio), sketching, or journaling. For example, consider [Lans Nelson’s description of her creative process](https://lanssolo.wordpress.com/2013/04/06/a-certain-slant-of-light-typographically-speaking/) as she worked on Stommel’s Dickinson assignment; her description is as thoughtful and engaging as the visual representation of Dickinson’s lyric she created. As Nelson’s account highlights, the reflection process not only records what has been done but enables the artist to generate new ideas and directions.

Focusing on process is perhaps the most critical part of this assignment. Pursuing process-oriented questions will lead students to develop a more critical understanding of the musical materials they employ. For some students, this may mean developing a deeply personal sense of the sound of consonant and dissonant intervals. For others, the process may be one of exploring the potential of a line to be repeated in augmentation or diminution at different registers. Still others may explore the range of emotional impacts made by a particular harmonic progression when repeated alongside a particularly moving poem or lyric. As [Arnheim](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL1531517M/To_the_rescue_of_art) suggests, it is when attention is “locked on target” and focused on salient musical details that the musical meaning and significance of the material is more fully revealed (62).

**Emergent and Process-oriented Outcomes: Breaking as Criticism**

There is little in the assignment described above that directly addresses the conventional learning outcomes of a music theory course, apart from the reference some students might make to particular intervals, chords, or contrapuntal relationships. Nevertheless, students achieve significant emergent and process-oriented outcomes through working on this assignment:

1. To see musical works as process;
2. To use analysis creatively and adaptively to reveal compositional process;
3. To ask meaningful aesthetic questions, such as: What makes a particular piece memorable or identifiable? and To what extent can a musical idea can be modified and broken while remaining identifiable?
4. To understand the roles timbre, register, and instrumentation play in the articulation of musical ideas;
5. To understand the relationship between musical form and content;
6. To perceive the ways in which musical materials can be repeated and varied to generate other materials;
7. To work with others to generate, refine, and realize new musical ideas;
8. To discover creative and compelling ways of communicating about music and learning, using new media to reach a wide audience.

Focusing on these learning outcomes allows students to develop a more critical stance toward the music they will experience, the tools they will use to analyze it, and the contexts (curricular, institutional, personal, and professional) in which they might use their analytical tools.

Importantly, these outcomes may only emerge as students pursue and develop their musical and creative ideas. One way instructors can help students become more consciously aware of their learning is to devote class time throughout the project to peer feedback and reflection. Setting aside time at the beginning, middle, and end of the project gives students a chance to articulate their ideas, explain their process, and describe the final product to their peers, an activity that helps students and teachers alike recognize the intellectual and creative growth achieved through a project whose goals were not clearly defined from the outset. In addition, peer sharing allows students a chance to learn from one another, inspire new ideas, build confidence in their own creative work, and clarify questions about the process. As mentioned above, students can also be assigned self-reflective tools like blogging, journals, learning portfolios, or group discussion forums to encourage and assess the creative process during the assignment.

Unlike outcome-focused assignments (*e.g.* Roman-numeral, figured-bass analysis), individual students may achieve different outcomes in a breaking stuff assignment, though all should be prepared to share the unique musical problems and solutions they discovered. Such varied learning signals not an educational breakdown, but a pedagogy that is vital, spontaneous, and open to wonder. When unique outcomes emerge for each student, identifying and assessing these individualized outcomes can be shared between student and instructor. Students may design or contribute to a rubric that can be used to assess their learning and growth. (For more ideas about assessing within open-ended learning environments, see Shaffer, “[Assessing Problem-based Learning.](http://flipcamp.org/engagingstudents2/essays/shaffer.html)”)

Incorporating assignments like the one above into a course does not require jettisoning conventional learning outcomes. Rather, such assignments help awaken students to the aesthetic values and conditions embedded in any particular analytical tool they may learn, enabling what [Freire](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL369525M/Pedagogy_of_freedom) identifies as a “pedagogy of freedom.” The more engaged students can be in the pieces they learn, and the more critically they can evaluate their analytical tools, the better they will be able to study and analyze other musical works without sacrificing their creative independence or reducing their ways of hearing. [Alfred North Whitehead](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL19843683M/The_aims_of_education_and_other_essays) decried an education focused only on the transmission of “inert ideas—that is to say, ideas that are merely received into the mind without being utilized, or tested, or thrown into fresh combinations” (1–2). When our students not only master particular analytical tools but ask what value, limitations, and relevance these tools have in explaining particular musical passages, we may hope that our pedagogical techniques have liberated learners to “[take a new stance toward their problems…instead of repeating irrelevant principles](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL1870486W/Education_For_Critical_Consciousness_(Continuum_Impacts))” (32).

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