

## A COMPARISON OF THE TRADITIONALIST AND CONSTRUCTIVIST APPLIED STUDIO

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The profession regularly analyzes the curricular constructs of the undergraduate and graduate music program in a variety of disciplines; musicology, theory/analysis, music education, composition and performance. At times, administrators, faculty and students struggle with what constitutes the necessary aspects of a music education program within the framework of a university setting. Quite commonly, the questions that arise are based on the growth of new technologies, pedagogical procedures, artistic trends, and most frequently, the pragmatic relevance of course that will better enable a student to obtain gainful employment within the profession. The profession's introspective tendencies can only better its curricular goals. In particular, the role of the applied instructor is one that should be under scrutiny, for it is the applied instructor who probably has the greatest impact on a student. It is this individual who is greatly admired by their students for their artistry, pedagogical approach, mentorship and friendship. No other instructor in the profession has a student-to-teacher ratio of 1-1. This special relationship has a great impact on the student's artistic thought process; how they specifically intellectualize music; how they view specific literature; what areas of music they wish to specialize in, and most importantly, how they intend to share their ideas of the artistic process with others.

The relationship that is developed between a student and the applied instructor is, at times, intense and quite personal. Students will frequently try to emulate their instructor. The relationship is one that, I believe, elevates our profession to another level. There is no other discipline that puts two individuals together for intense study while requiring the instructor to be an educator, an artist, a friend and a guide all in one. Thus, the role of the applied instructor is probably one of the most important aspects of a music student's study.

If one is to agree with the premise that the applied instructor has an immense impact on the student, then it is fair to say that scrutiny of this pedagogical process is worthy of debate and analysis. The following is an in-depth look at two distinct philosophies that many of us who teach applied music may incorporate and/or combine in our curricular approach. These philosophies are that of the Traditionalist and the Constructivist. This paper addresses the role of the applied instructor and the role of the student in each philosophy. Therefore, the objective is to provide a comparison of how these philosophies work in the development of student and teacher interaction, how they may incorporate the use of materials, and, most importantly, how they determine student assessment.

### *Role of The Applied Teacher-Traditional*

The applied instructor of a traditional studio seeks to mold the student in their likeness. Their curriculum is based on their own experiences as a student and performer. Thus, the main concern is not attaining what the student hopes to learn, but that which the instructor defines as being imperative to learn. The student is not necessarily viewed as an individual, but as an empty vessel that will be filled and molded with the knowledge of the instructor.

The instructor will indicate which literature must be studied, what method books will

be used, all performing ensembles that a student should participate in, what technical exercises must be practiced, and what competitions/auditions a student should experience. In addition, all instruction is focused on the teacher modeling for the student. The student is not asked for their interpretation of a musical composition, but to reiterate, through their performance, that of the instructor. In turn, all musical interpretation is recommended by the instructor; for example, phrasing the composer's intent, how to perform technical passages, and tone production.

With regard to practicing, the student is taught how to practice based on what the instructor believes to be the proper execution of technique and refining the student's execution of musical phrasing. The student's thoughts about their performance are not primary factors in the traditional applied studio. The instructor will define how often their students should practice, the length of each practice session, what to practice, and most importantly, how to practice a specific area that has been deemed necessary for review by the instructor.

Creative exploration is limited and most often not explored at all in a traditional applied studio. Traditional instructors focus their attention toward the student learning the instrument and not on the creative exploration of music. There is little or no composing or improvising. Emphasis is on learning new repertoire for auditions and competitions and each lesson is strictly focused on the standard orchestral/recital literature.

### *Role of The Applied Teacher-Constructivist*

A constructivist teacher in an applied studio focuses their attention solely on the student. Their experiences are not important, but what is are those the students develop on their own. These experiences are filled with creative exploration and the student developing their knowledge of the material. The student is encouraged to question, create and solve problems on their own.

Thus, constructivism is a theory about how people learn. It is a theory that says that learning means constructing and developing one's own knowledge; that we do this by actively questioning, interpreting, problem solving, and creating; and that in-depth understanding is one result of this learning (Marlowe & Page, 1998, pg. 27).

The constructivist applied studio is structured differently than that of the traditionalist. For instance, the traditional applied studio focuses each lesson on the individual student, whereas in a constructivist studio, the instructor may incorporate individual lessons with group lessons. The group lessons may require students to focus on a given work, composer, or time period. Thus, the group lessons became classes for cooperative learning where students teach each other based on the knowledge they acquire on their own. In turn, the constructivist teacher guides their students toward those topics that primarily interest them, coupled with those areas that are deemed necessary to study.

The teacher's responsibility is to create educational environments that permit students to assume the responsibility that is rightfully and naturally theirs. Teach-

ers do this by encouraging self-initiated inquiry, providing the materials and supplies appropriate for the learning tasks, and sensitively mediating teacher/student and student/teacher interactions (J. Brooks & M. Brooks, 1999, pg. 49).

Individual lessons focus on the student's primary musical interests and their understanding of the creative process and musical expression. Therefore, the instructor will design the curriculum toward the student's interests and abilities. The student will define what they wish to learn, what and how often they will practice, for they know best as to how they learn. In addition, the student will decide what performing ensembles they will participate in and what competitions/auditions they will apply for.

Determining a student's deficiency is not entirely the responsibility of the instructor in a constructivist studio. This is not to say that one who practices this philosophy sits idly by while the student determines what is and is not correct without any guidance or demonstration. The constructivist looks for the student to recognize those areas that are or are not deficient. Thus, the student is experiencing and focusing their attention toward learning why something is correct and why it is not. The constructivist is not seeking to fill an empty vessel with knowledge, but to have the students discover for themselves the answers to these questions. In the mind of the constructivist, this is the only way for them to truly learn.

Since creative exploration is a primary focus of constructivism, the applied pedagogue who practices this philosophy will also invite their students to explore musical interpretations. The instructor may wish to guide student compositions that can be representative of a particular technical skill, time period or composer. Thus, students explore the creative process without the instructor lecturing or demonstrating on how a composer wrote a particular work. The students learn this through their own research and their own compositions.

#### *Role of The Student - Traditional*

Regardless of which philosophy the applied teacher may follow, it is in agreement that the student is the center of each lesson. However, what the student brings to each lesson and how the student participates in the lesson differs between the traditional approach and that of the constructivist. In a traditional applied setting, the student's role is somewhat limited. The students expect the instructor to provide all the information necessary for their growth. The student is guided and structured in the likeness of the instructor. In turn, the student rarely questions the instructor. This does not mean that the student in a traditional applied setting sits aimlessly waiting to be told what to do. The student is free to ask questions. What the student is not expected to do is to define what is to be taught. Nor is the instructor expected to change their way of teaching to accommodate the way the students learn. The student expects to be informed as to what is right and what is wrong and will spend hours practicing, trying to correctly model, and at times emulate the instructor. The student does not spend their time focused on musical comprehension of various topics, not are they working toward developing their own musical individuality. The student's primary concern is to perform the given assignment with technical proficiency and proper musical phrasing while applying the appropriate tone as modeled by the

instructor. Therefore, student reasoning is limited to that which is described by the instructor. The student does not spend time on developing cognitive skills in music, and rarely do they explore the creative process. The student is only expected to develop their performance abilities in order to become a skilled artisan, primarily in the likeness of their applied instructor.

#### *Role of The Student - Constructivist*

In comparison, the students of the constructivist applied studio function in a much more active role. They are an integral part of the educative process, not merely as ones who are to receive information from the instructor. They attain, provide and educate themselves as well as others through research and independent learning activities.

They also participate in developing courses of study that reinforce their interests as well as their learning processes. This may consist of a portfolio that contains each composition studied and researched by the student, as well as a practice grid that delineates the amount of time the student has spent on a given assignment that correlates with their daily journal indicating their progress. This is not to say that the student in a constructivist studio does not receive guidance, and is responsible for the course of study. Rather, they are responsible for actively participating in the learning process and for seeking answers with the guidance of the applied instructor. For example, the student may be asked to research compositional styles of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven and compare how they differ. This may take part in a group lesson that has other students researching different time periods and composers. At the end of such a course of study, the students may then partake in a group discussion, sharing their knowledge as well as demonstrating on their instruments. This process develops students who are not being told the information, but are cognitively reasoning this information, for they have obtained it on their own. The instructor can then guide the student further, for the student is not merely performing on their own instrument, but now understands why they are performing the composition in the manner as demonstrated by the instructor.

In addition to researching and investigating other composers and compositional styles, the student may also take part in the creative process. For example, the students may be asked to compose a piece for their instrument based on the compositional style of the time period researched, or they may be asked to compose a work that would focus on a particular technical deficiency specific to them. This process engages students while enlightening them to the creative process that is so essential in the arts.

Thus, students learn more when they are actively engaged in their own learning. By investigating and discovering for themselves, by creating and recreating, and by interacting with the environment, students build their own knowledge structures. Learning actively leads to an ability to think critically and to solve problems. Through an active learning approach, students learn content and process at the same time (Marlowe & Page, pg. 16, 1998).