Assessment and Student Learning

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MUS 0103 – Elements of Music Theory
Elements of Music Theory is the first course most music majors or minors take. It is the beginning of the pre-performance curriculum. Elements is the course designed to ensure that a student has an understanding of the rudiments of music: reading, writing, and identifying notes, key signatures, scales, and triads.

Before a student takes Elements, he/she takes a proficiency exam. If a high level of knowledge in the basic skills is indicated, then Elements is waived. Most incoming students take Elements. From the first class to the last class, a student is preparing for the final exam that is very similar to the waiver exam. The final exam is the assessment that demonstrates a student has a knowledge base appropriate for Theory I.

The text for Elements has exercises for practicing the material presented in each chapter. Most of these exercises have the answers provided in the back of the book. A student is to prepare for each class by reading the assigned material and working the exercises. Quite often short quizzes are given at the beginning of class to assess if the student is prepared for class. Class time is spent reviewing the assigned material, answering questions, working new examples. Assessment of the material is provided through the completion of handouts that are designed to have students apply what they’ve learned in a new situation. Handouts are graded.

The course is divided into units. A major test is given at the end of each unit. All of the learning is cumulative.

In addition, students learn the basics of the notational software program Finale 08. Assessment of student learning comes through the completion of three projects. Since 1996, when I completed a two-week workshop learning Finale, I have used a guide from the workshop (JBU has paid for the material each time the software has been updated). There is a guide on each computer station in the Music Library Computer Lab. Students use the guides not only to complete their projects in Elements but also in further course work.

Ultimately, from the very beginning, the student is gaining the skills necessary to move to the next course in the pre-performance curriculum. The courses are sequenced – Elements of Music Theory, Theory I, Theory II, Theory III (depending on the music degree), and in each of the courses the skills a student has learned in Finale is utilized and in many cases augmented.

Elements of Music Theory is the first building block in the theory/musicianship sequence.
MUS 1111 – Musicianship I
While Elements of Music Theory is more geared to developing written skills, Musicianship I is designed around acquiring skills in notating music from an aural stimulus (dictation) and singing music from a visual stimulus (sight singing). The ultimate goal of theory/musicianship courses is to be able to hear music you see and see music you hear; a better way of saying this might be, “See with your ears and hear with your eyes.”

A student develops skills in ear training – abilities to take rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic dictation. In addition, skills are acquired in singing music at sight using syllables (solfege). These skills, together with what a student is learning in written theory, are to be integrated to help develop well-rounded musicians.

Both texts (a sightsing book and a dictation book) used in Musicianship I are also used in Musicianship II and III. The dictation text has a CD that the student uses outside of the classroom. The CD may be used in the Music Library Computer Lab, but it is also possible to use it in any computer on campus or on the student’s own personal computer. There are weekly assignments from the text that are turned in on Monday and returned to the student on either Tuesday or Wednesday (this involves taking up all the individual texts!). On most Mondays, a quiz is given to assess if the student is working outside of class on identifying intervals, triads, scales… During class, additional work is done on the material.

The sight singing text is correlated with the ear training text. There are assignments each week for the student to prepare. The assignments involve singing as well as reading rhythms. Scattered throughout the semester are sight singing assignments labeled “to be graded.” A student draws a small slip that indicates the selection the student is to sing. The student sings during the class period.

During each class period, skills in ear training and sight singing are drilled and new material for the following week is presented to make sure the student understands what he/she will be preparing.

The two major assessments for the semester occur during the midterm and final exams. There are two parts: the dictation exam and the skills jury. The written dictation exam is taken by everyone at the same time during a designated class period. The skills part is an individual exam testing the student’s skill in singing and rhythm reading. The material for both parts assesses if the student understands and can apply the knowledge and skills he/she has been working on throughout the semester.

All of the means of assessment for both Elements of Music Theory and Musicianship I help me decide if a student is or is not learning the material presented. Based on this knowledge, either more or less time will be spent on a topic or in reinforcing a skill. This year, the Music Department has been successful in supplying a tutor for both Elements of Music Theory and Musicianship I. This is one more way of encouraging a student to work through whatever struggles he/she may have with either of the courses.