

## Preservice Teachers' Opinions of Music Education Methods Course Content

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### **Abstract:**

The purposes of this study were to determine how undergraduate instrumental music education students value methods course components and to compare students' ratings of course component categories to the grade weighting of those categories in course syllabi. Subjects (N = 43), undergraduate music education majors from two large universities, were administered a questionnaire about how they value 14 course components, each belonging to one of three broad categories: teaching experiences, course projects, and exam preparation. Means were calculated for each questionnaire item and ranked from high to low. The three top-ranked items were "Engaging in early field experiences in the schools," "Engaging in peer teaching: ensemble rehearsal," and "Preparing lesson plans for peer teaching." Means for each broad category were also calculated. Furthermore, course syllabi (N = 42), from performance-oriented (instrumental and choral) methods courses (n = 18) and from general music methods courses (n = 24), were examined to determine the grade weighting assigned to each of the three broad categories. According to a two-way repeated measures ANOVA, undergraduate music education majors rated teaching experiences as being significantly ( $p < .01$ ) more valuable than was indicated on both types of methods syllabi, and course projects as being significantly ( $p < .01$ ) less valuable than was indicated on the performance-based methods syllabi.

**Keywords:** music education | syllabi

### **Article:**

Music teaching methods courses comprise one of the most important sequences in undergraduate teacher education curricula (Frego & Abril, 2003; Leonard, 1988). Depending upon the state certification requirements and specific college or university curricula, preservice teachers typically take a general music methods course and one of two performance-oriented methods courses (choral or instrumental). In states where music teachers are certified to teach all music disciplines at all levels (K-12 Music), some music teacher education programs require both performance-oriented methods (choral *and* instrumental) along with general music methods (Boswell, McCloud, & Harbinson, 1991).

According to Nierman, Zeichner, & Hobbel (2002), methods courses are designed to provide pedagogical knowledge such as "assessment strategies, lesson planning, classroom management, learning theories, philosophical frameworks, use of technology, knowledge of multicultural issues" (p. 826) and pedagogical content knowledge, described as "that domain that enables students to construct knowledge of subject matter for use in teaching as a result of experiences..." (p. 827). In these courses, music teacher educators invest a substantial amount of preparation toward enhancing preservice teachers' abilities to transfer theoretical models into classroom situations (Tarnowski, 1997) and toward developing habits of reflective practice (Atterbury, 1994; Gromko, 1995). Furthermore, Ester (1997) charges methods course instructors with the responsibility of breaking the cycle in preservice teachers of "teaching how (they) were taught" (p. 26).

To most effectively carry out these responsibilities, it is important to first determine what music teacher education students value. Butler (2001) echoed this sentiment by asserting that teacher educators need to understand the prior conceptions of preservice teachers in order to develop an effective knowledge base. Teachout (1997) stated:

When planning a teacher training program...consideration should be given to the voice of experience as well as to available research. Consideration should also be given to the opinions and perceptions of preservice teachers. Such preservice teacher information could be used to provide a realistic starting point for individuals designing or revising a teacher-training program (p. 42).

To this end, several researchers have crafted investigations about preservice teachers' opinions of methods course components (Barry, 1996; Conway, 2002; Paul, Teachout, Sullivan, Kelly, Bauer, and Raiber, 2001, 2002; Teachout, 1997).

It is also important to examine the kinds of experiences that are offered in methods courses. The first and second editions of *Syllabi for Music Methods Courses* (Lewis, 2002; MENC, 1991) were projects undertaken by the Society for Music Teacher Education (SMTE) for the purposes of "[assisting] in the development and improvement of college music method courses" (MENC, 1991, p. vii). The projects included syllabi considered to be representative "of what is currently being taught in graduate and undergraduate music education courses..." (Lewes, 2002, p. vii). Across both SMTE projects, syllabi for courses were grouped using the following categories: foundations, history, introduction to music education, general music (elementary/middle/high school), music for the classroom teacher, choral methods, instrumental methods, graduate, and miscellaneous. Syllabi for undergraduate music teacher methods (general music, choral methods and instrumental methods) list a variety of components that reoccur among most of the courses, including peer teaching, field experience observations and teaching, lesson planning, in-class presentations, curriculum projects, method book evaluations, score analysis projects, repertoire projects, maintaining notebooks of professional resources, maintaining professional reflective journals, writing personal philosophies of music education, media skills projects, program budget projects, instrument proficiencies, quizzes and exams. Experiences associated with each of these components can be grouped into one of three broad categories: teaching experiences, course projects, and exam preparation.

In addition to looking at the kinds of experiences offered in methods courses, it is important to determine how methods course instructors communicate the relative value of each of these experiences to students. McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin and Smith (1986) concluded that instructors communicate their values by the grade weight that they assign to particular aspects in a course. Furthermore, Fink (2003) suggested that although all graded items are important, some are more important than others and "the relative weight of each item on the course grade should reflect the relative importance of that activity" (p. 142). Crooks (1988) echoed this sentiment by concluding that classroom assessment "guides students' judgment of what is important to learn" (p. 22). Similarly, McCoy and Ellis (1991) asserted that as a result of identifying and clarifying procedures for determining grades, "students will know what the teacher considers important to learn..." (p. 15). In the SMTE syllabi projects, a variety of different grade weights were assigned to the various experiences. When examining the content of elementary music methods courses taught at nine Midwestern universities, Frego and Abril (2003) uncovered incongruence between the course content and grade weighting. Lesson planning and the teaching of singing were the most prevalent course components reported by the surveyed institutions, yet the "largest weight to grading rest[ed] on written tests" (p. 20). Several questions arise when considering preservice teachers' opinions of course content, and the value placed on that content. How do preservice teachers value particular methods course experiences? Do preservice teachers and methods course instructors value methods course experiences similarly? Do performance-oriented methods instructors and general music methods instructors value particular experiences similarly?

The purposes of this study were to determine how undergraduate instrumental music education students value methods course activities and to compare students' ratings of course components to course syllabi. Two research questions were formulated for this study: (1) How do undergraduate instrumental music education majors value specific methods course components? and (2) Are there differences in how the three categories of course components (teaching experiences, course projects, and exam preparation) appear to be valued among undergraduate instrumental music education majors, performance methods syllabi, and general music methods syllabi?

## **Method**

Subjects ( $N = 43$ ) were junior and senior instrumental music education majors (band and strings) attending two large universities: one in the Midwest ( $n = 19$ ) from which data were gathered in the spring of 2002, and one in the Southwest ( $n = 24$ ) from which data were gathered in the spring of 2003. Both universities were in states that certified instrumental music teachers with a K-12 Instrumental/General Music license. Each university was included in the present study because of the similarity of experiences between the two programs. All subjects had recently completed a several-semester instrumental methods course sequence that included a variety of course components. Teaching experiences included one-on-one and ensemble peer-teaching episodes in the university classroom as well as field teaching experiences in a middle school and a high school instrumental music classroom. For all teaching experiences, students were required to write preparatory lesson plans and concluding self-evaluations. Several course projects were required throughout the methods course sequence. Students maintained a collection of professional materials in a notebook and an on-going reflective journal. Additionally, they

completed a score analysis project, a transcription project, an electronic portfolio project, a methods book evaluation, and wrote a personal philosophy of music education. Throughout the sequence, students were administered periodic quizzes, midterm exams and final exams. At the conclusion of the course, subjects were asked to complete an anonymous survey in which they indicated how valuable they believed each course component to be in preparing them to become a successful teacher using a 1-10 scale; one meant "not particularly valuable" while ten meant "extremely valuable."

The structure of the questionnaire was modeled after an instrument used by Teachout (1993), in which each of 16 statements was representative of one of four preference factors. In the present study, each of the 14 items was representative of one of three broad categories: teaching experiences, course projects, and exam preparation. Teaching experiences are graded components of the course that involve actual teaching and/or preparation for teaching (e.g., engaging in early field experiences out in the schools, engaging in large group peer teaching, preparing lesson plans for peer teaching). Course projects are graded tasks that involve working with information and materials provided in and outside of class and that result in a tangible product (e.g., maintaining a collection of professional materials in a notebook, writing your personal philosophy of music education, completing a score analysis project). Exam preparation represents the work expended to prepare for grade-producing course examinations (e.g., preparing to take periodic quizzes in class and preparing for mid-term and final exams). All items were placed in a random order on the questionnaire (see Appendix). Subjects' scores were compared for each item using a two-way ANOVA to determine if differences existed between the two universities. Because no significant differences were found between the groups for any of the fourteen items, subjects' scores from both universities were combined into one group for comparison with the methods course syllabi.

Syllabi ( $N = 42$ ) from the first and second editions of *Syllabi for Music Methods Courses* (Lewis, 2002; MENC, 1991) were separated into two groups: those from performance-oriented (instrumental and choral) music methods courses ( $n = 18$ ) and those from general music methods courses ( $n = 24$ ). Each syllabus was examined to determine the percentage of grade weighting that existed for each of the three broad categories; grade weighting percentages served as values for each category. For example, a syllabus found to include 40% of the total grade for teaching, 30% for projects, and 30% for exams would be assigned the following categorical scores: teaching = 40, projects = 30, and exams = 30. Two researchers independently evaluated the syllabi. After using the researchers' scores to calculate a series of Pearson Product-Moment Correlations for the categories, a Fishers Z-Transformation was used to establish an overall reliability co-efficient of  $r = .90$ .

To facilitate comparisons among syllabi groups and subjects' rating of the three broad categories, each subject's mean category score was divided by the total of that subject's mean scores, allowing each category rating to be converted to a percentage of that subject's total mean score. Similar to the syllabi, each subject's category percentages served as values for each category. For example, a subject with category mean scores of 8.8 for teaching experience, 7.0 for course projects, and 2.0 for exam preparation, would be assigned percentage scores of 49.44%, 39.33%, and 11.23% respectively, resulting in the following converted mean scores: teaching = 49.44, projects = 39.33, and exams = 11.23.

## Results

The first research question asked, "How do undergraduate instrumental music education majors value specific methods course components?" Means were calculated for each item on the questionnaire and ranked from high to low (see Table 1). The four highest rated course components were engaging in early field experiences in the schools, engaging in peer teaching in an ensemble rehearsal, preparing lesson plans for peer teaching, and completing the score analysis project. The four lowest rated course components were preparing for midterm and final exams, completing the instrumental method book evaluation, maintaining an on-going reflective journal, and preparing for periodic quizzes in class.

**Table 1**  
*Course Activities Considered by Preservice Teachers to be Valuable*

Activity	Mean <sup>a</sup>	SD
Engaging in early field experiences in the schools	9.25	1.21
Engaging in peer teaching: ensemble rehearsal	9.00	1.44
Preparing lesson plans for peer teaching (both types)	8.69	1.14
Completing the score analysis project	8.60	1.49
Maintaining professional materials in a notebook	8.25	1.67
Engaging in peer teaching: one-on-one instruction	8.18	2.19
Completing the transcription project	7.97	1.83
Self-evaluations of peer teaching	7.79	1.79
Completing the electronic portfolio project	7.51	2.27
Writing a personal philosophy of music education	7.41	1.99
Preparing for midterm and final exams	6.81	2.77
Completing the instrumental method book evaluation	6.25	2.96
Maintaining an on-going reflective journal	5.83	2.77
Preparing for periodic quizzes in class	4.46	2.47

Note. <sup>a</sup>1 = Not particularly valuable; 10 = Extremely Valuable

The second research question asked, "Are there differences in how the three categories of course components (teaching experiences, course projects, and exam preparation) appear to be valued among undergraduate instrumental music education majors, performance methods syllabi, and general music methods syllabi?" A two-way repeated measures ANOVA was calculated to determine if significant differences existed among the three categories of course components by group. Because of a statistical anomaly that occurs when working with score sets that consistently total to be 100%, between-group main effect differences could not be calculated. However, a significant within-group main effect difference was found for the categories of course components [ $F(2, 164) = 23.07, p \leq .01$ ]. A post hoc LSD comparison procedure yielded a significant difference ( $p \leq .01$ ) between course projects ( $M = 40.48, SD = 16.06$ ) and teaching experiences ( $M = 34.16, SD = 14.57$ ), a significant difference ( $p \leq .01$ ) between course projects and exam preparation ( $M = 25.36, SD = 12.67$ ), and a significant difference ( $p \leq .05$ ) between teaching experiences and exam preparation.

In addition, a significant interaction effect was found among the three groups across the categories of course components [ $F(4, 164) = 8.49, p \leq .01$ ]. It appears that undergraduate music education majors seem to value teaching experiences more than what was indicated on

both types of methods syllabi, and that they value course projects less than what was indicated on both syllabi types (see Figure 1 ). According to a post hoc Scheffe comparison procedure, undergraduates ( $M = 40.36$ ,  $SD = 5.96$ ) rated teaching experience as being significantly ( $p \leq .01$ ) more valuable than was indicated on performance methods syllabi ( $M = 24.22$ ,  $SD = 21.68$ ) and general music methods syllabi ( $M = 29.63$ ,  $SD = 14.08$ ). No difference was found for teaching experience between the two types of syllabi. Another post hoc Scheffe comparison procedure revealed that undergraduates ( $M = 34.41$ ,  $SD = 4.39$ ) rated course projects as being significantly ( $p \leq .01$ ) less valuable than was indicated on the performance-based methods syllabi ( $M = 49.40$ ,  $SD = 17.73$ ). No statistically significant differences were found for course projects between the two types of course syllabi or between undergraduate music education majors and general music methods syllabi. No significant differences were found among the groups in the exam category.

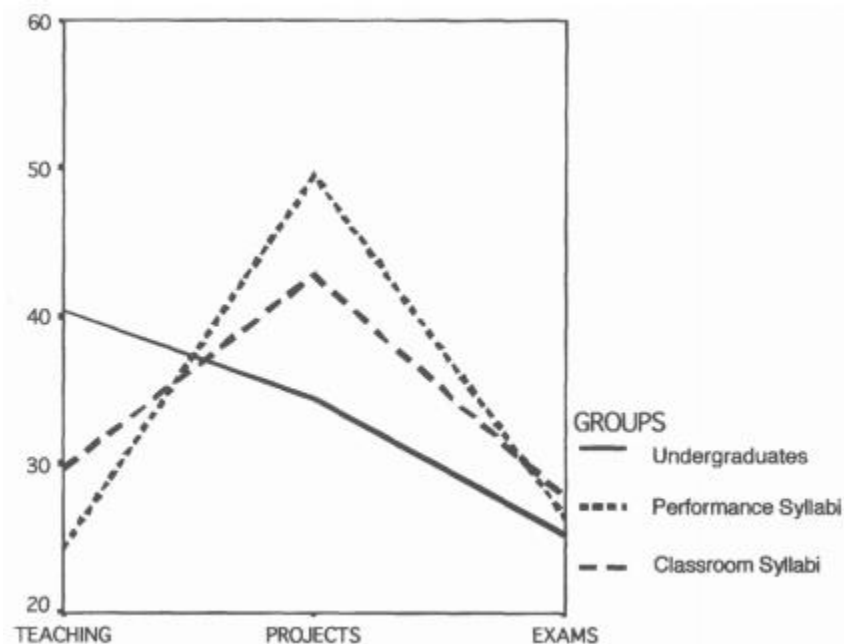


Figure 1. Interaction effect of category by group

## Discussion

Ten out of the fourteen items were rated with a mean score of seven or higher and all but two items were rated with a mean score of six or higher. Such relatively high ratings across the survey suggest that the course activities were generally considered to be valuable by the students. Interestingly, the standard deviations tended to increase as the rank decreased. This trend suggests less of a consensus among the students for the lower-ranked (less valued) items than for the higher-ranked (more valued) items.

It was no surprise that engaging in field experiences in the schools and engaging in peer teaching in an ensemble rehearsal were ranked first and second respectively. These results are congruent with those from several studies in which preservice teachers were asked about the importance of methods course activities (Barry, 1996; Teachout, 1997). The third-place ranking for preparing

lesson plans was somewhat unexpected, but encouraging. It has been the author's experience that preservice teachers tend to approach lesson planning in a manner similar to that which their most recent role models have approached planning. For members of a performance-oriented instrumental methods course, the role models would be ensemble conductors at the secondary and post secondary levels; conductors at both of these levels are typically not overt about their lesson planning practices. Consequently, it might be expected that these preservice teachers would place less value on planning. Perhaps the high ranking provides some evidence of success with Ester's (1997) charge to break the cycle in preservice teachers of "teaching how (they) were taught" (p. 26).

Again, it was somewhat predictable that preparing for quizzes, midterm exams, and final exams were among the lowest-rated activities. These results support the findings of several other researchers who assert that teacher knowledge can be most fully valued in relation to an authentic context (Conway, 1999; Katz & Raths, 1982; Kinsley & McPherson, 1995). When students attempt to recall information for the purpose of making correct choices on a test, they are operating in an artificial setting. According to Berg (1998) "objects, people, situations, and events do not in themselves possess meaning. Meaning is conferred on these elements by and through human interaction" (pp. 9-10).

Journal writing is considered by music teacher educators (Atterbury, 1994; Gromko, 1995) and teacher educators in general (Freiberg & Waxman, 1990; Laboskey, 1994) to be an important tool in developing reflective practice. In the present study, however, maintaining an on-going reflective journal was ranked next to last. For the subjects in the present study, the journal experience was comprised of daily on-going entries and formal reports periodically submitted for a grade. Formal journal reports included samples of the daily entries, a summary of all daily entries, and a summary-critique of the most recent field experience. Perhaps revising the journal assignment to enhance student engagement might increase its perceived value among undergraduates. When faced with a similar situation, Barry (1996) suggested allocating periods of time throughout the course so that peers could share and discuss journal excerpts.

The appearance of "completing the score analysis project" among the highest rated items and "completing the instrumental method book evaluation" among the lowest rated items could be reflective of an attitude among undergraduates of valuing practices that have apparent applications. Score analysis is an activity in which practitioners typically engage, and would consequently be considered by undergraduates to have an apparent application. Evaluating methods books, on the other hand, is an activity that members of a performance-oriented instrumental methods course seldom witness as common practice among their most recent professional models: ensemble conductors at the secondary and post-secondary levels. Furthermore, any direct experience with method books most likely occurred when the undergraduate students were, themselves, beginning instrumentalists. The relative value that undergraduates placed on "completing the score analysis project" and "completing the instrumental method book evaluation" support the notion that undergraduates assign value according to the degree to which an activity is considered to have an apparent application in the "real world" of teaching. Perhaps field experiences with teachers who regularly evaluate and work with method books might be helpful to undergraduates.

Among the three broad categories, subjects value teaching experience more than course projects or exam preparation and they value course projects more than exam preparation. These results are congruent with other researchers' findings that preservice teachers consider teaching experience in the field (Conway, 2002) and in university-based microteaching episodes (Butler, 2001) to be a highly valued (Teachout, 1997) and effective (Paul, Teachout, Sullivan, Kelly, Bauer, and Raiber, 2001) component of the undergraduate curriculum. Course projects and exam preparation can be useful as strategies to get students to engage professional and academic materials. It has been the experience of this researcher, however, that without being connected to a teaching context, the learning associated with such activities is often short lived. Considering the importance of operating in a teaching context, it is not surprising that undergraduates would order the value of these three areas as decisively as was found.

Undergraduates in this sample value teaching experiences more than was indicated on both types of syllabi and they value course projects less than was indicated on the performance-oriented syllabi. In recent years, music teacher educators have presented a multitude of research and journal articles supportive of activities that occur in a teaching context (Barry, 1996; Butler, 2001; Conway, 2002, 2001; Henry, 2001; Heidel, 2002; Krueger, 2001; Paul, 1997; Paul, et al, 2001, 2002; Teachout, 1997; Whitlock, 1997). It is clear that consensus exists throughout the music teacher education profession placing a high value on providing preservice teachers with actual teaching experience. Yet, course syllabi do not seem to reflect these values, as indicated by grade weighting of the three components. Perhaps projects and exams might better serve the mission of music-teaching methods course if they were more closely tied to actual teaching experiences. For example, a transcription project that offers valuable practice with instrument ranges and transpositions could also provide the literature to be rehearsed for a performance at the end of the term. Similarly, a test of one's ability to teach clarinet embouchure could be in the form of a videotaped teaching session involving a one-on-one lesson with the examinee as the teacher and a novice to the clarinet as the student. Interestingly, no differences were found between performance-oriented methods syllabi and general music methods syllabi for teaching activities, projects, or exams.

All of these results tend to raise a number of important questions about the teaching experience component of a methods course, providing directions for future research. In what ways is the teaching experience component assessed? How comfortable are instructors with such assessment tools? Are (should) students with less teaching experience (and/or prior opportunity to gain such experience) evaluated with a different grade weighting system than those with more experience? Similarly, should instructors weigh the first teaching experiences in a course differently than the last ones? Finally, what role does (should) self-assessment on the students' parts play in the grade weight?

## **Summary**

Music teacher educators consider teaching experience to be one of the most valuable parts of the teacher education curriculum (Verrasto & Leglar, 1992). In recent years, many traditional music teacher education programs have incorporated earlier and more frequent field experiences into their programs (Nierman, Zeichner, & Hobbel, 2002). The results of the present study, however, indicate that students value teaching experience to a greater extent than they are being given



credit for those experiences in their methods courses. There seems to be a need to re-examine how the teaching experience is approached as a component of methods courses so that music teacher educators feel comfortable assigning a higher grade weight and, consequently, operate more congruently with values that appear to be a consensus of the profession, and of undergraduate music education students.

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