Reflective Teaching Portfolio

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I began teaching at FIT in the spring of 2000. I developed a course, CG 352 Music & Sound Design for the school's BFA candidates in the Animation, Interactive Media, & Game Design program. I had been approached by Terry Blum, head of the department in the late 90's. She was a neighbor of mine and at the time I was the chairperson for the NY Mac Users' Group Music Special Interest Group. I regularly demonstrated music software in various areas: MIDI sequencing, audio recording, as well as some of the intelligent composing software packages such as those from Intelligent Music (M, Jam Factory). Terry asked if I would construct a syllabus for digital audio editing targeted toward 3D animation students.

My background has been in a variety of disciplines. I came to New York in 1977 with a BA in Theatre Arts from Penn State University. I began studying guitar with a renowned studio guitarist, Barry Galbraith. I played on the local club circuit for years, and composed music using computer tools for Off-Off Broadway theatre productions. I also worked as an actor on stage and on television in television commercials, as well as on daytime and episodic television. My work as a performer, combined with a continuing thirst for knowledge has contributed to my work as an educator. I continue to work as a trainer in software, conducting both virtual classes in the Microsoft Office suite, as well as Adobe applications, and HTML coding and VBA programming. In addition, I do onsite training in document management software in the law firm industry.

Teaching Philosophy

I have always thought that the impetus behind teaching should be empowering. It wasn't enough for me to just play music (I was raised listening to rock & roll, folk, soul, jazz, and classical music); I wanted to *understand* music. This followed for acting as well. Though both art forms seemed somewhat extemporaneous in nature, it must be more than that, I said to myself. I studied with Barry to learn to read music, to understand theory, harmony, and voice leading. I studied acting with a number of teachers, notably my friend and mentor, Greg Zittel, who was a student of Sandy Meisner. The Meisner method was a construct, with foundational concepts behind acting.

I want to provide my students with analogous guidelines for using digital audio and sound design in their work. Just as music theory provides a roadmap for composition as well as improvisation, and Sandy Meisner's teachings provides a methodology for acting, I want students to understand the why and wherefore of music and sound, and how it affects us, the technical and the aesthetic. In this day and age of a constant barrage of information, I first isolate the students from the amorphous din of sound that assaults us in daily life: street noise, ambient music in stores, television, radio. There is no respite from this. Where is the quiet? I think sometimes that, as human beings, we don't want to be alone with ourselves, with our thoughts. Music and sound provide that: a constant barrage of aural distraction.

With that in mind, the first exercise I have students do is to listen to ten minutes of a movie without watching it. Just hear the sound. Isolate it. Then they go back and watch the same sequence while listening. What assumptions did they make about the sound before associating it with images? How did watching the same sequence confirm or contradict their thinking? What are our cultural as well as experiential impressions of music and sound?

By beginning to understand how sound affects us emotionally, viscerally, or psychologically, whether it is organized (as in song or soundtrack) or disorganized (as in ambient sounds around us, noise, traffic sounds, etc.) we empower ourselves with the ability to manipulate those very elements in order to affect and enhance the visual creations we produce. My students are visual artists. It is my intent to augment that experience with sound. It is my goal to provide students the ability to isolate, examine, and harness sound into intentional use for their own creations.

Have you ever observed a master teacher? If the answer is yes, what do you recall most from the experience?

One experience stands out in my teaching and it was actually a lesson in humility and the value of teamwork.

I studied guitar with Barry Galbraith, a renowned New York studio guitarist and wonderful teacher in a small studio space on the 9th floor of the old Ed Sullivan Building on 53rd and Broadway (later the home of the David Letterman Show.) The studies were one-on-one, but occasionally Barry would invite four guitarists from among his students to get together for an evening and play through charts Barry had arranged in four parts – sort of a jazz guitar version of string quartets. The compositions ranged from Bach to those of contemporary jazz artists.

One evening, four of us gathered and Barry distributed the charts to each of us. The challenge was to sight read and perform these often-complex parts and make it sound unified, consonant, good! It was a great exercise in teamwork. The format was to sight-read through the parts, and then we would come to a section in the arrangement where each player would solo through the changes (meaning he would improvise through the tune) while the other players backed him, and then another player would take his turn, etc. eventually returning to the music arrangement to finish the song.

There was one, very accomplished player among us who, when it came to the soloing section of the song, played intricate, flashy lines, and took much more time playing than any of the other players. It was one of those occasions where the ego of a player took over. He was showing off, impressed with himself and wanting to show us how incredible he really was. The song finished and everyone was aware of how great he thought he was. His egotism literally sucked the air out of the room. His attitude was corrosive to the team. It was all about him.

On the next tune, Barry quietly pulled out a new set of charts for each guitarist. In front of our friend, he put a chart with incredibly complex chord voicings, on a tune whose tempo was not slow. We began the tune together, and within a very few measures, it became clear that this guitarist, who previously blinded us with his brilliance, was suddenly faltering. He could not read the changes as fast as they went by. He stumbled. We had to stop and restart a few times before getting through the song. You could almost hear the sound of a deflating ego. Humility returned.

The message was apparent. This was a collective effort by a group of musicians with a common task – to serve the purpose of the arrangement, to play together in harmony. Barry detected an ego threatening to breed resentment and envy, and tacitly took an action to deflate the rogue ego. It was not meant as an attempt to humiliate. No words were exchanged. Barry simply put in front of this player a chart that showed him that he, too, had limitations and that putting himself above everyone else was not productive. The experience also articulated that we all have a contribution to make as a team, each to the best of his ability. To lord one's talent over the next person, to boast of how much better one is that the rest of the group, is to alienate the collective effort. It is harmful to teamwork and undermines the idea that by working together with respect of each person's contribution, we can achieve our best.

Give an example of your most successful lesson. Why do you feel it was successful?

I have been teaching at FIT since 2000. When I began teaching my course, CG352 Music & Sound Design, I always thought of the sound designer or the music editor as a solo entity, an individual working on his or her own.

One day I came into class to teach. The format of my two hour and fifty-minute class was to 1) present a lecture for the first third of the class and then 2) to conduct a lab, with the students working individually on assignments based upon the lecture material. I arranged my materials on the computer desktop, opened my Word document with the lecture materials, as well as my music software with the audio files to present with the class. I was ready to go. I then turned on the projector and… nothing. No light, no projection, just the lonely sound of the cooling fan. Nothing I did would get the projector working. IT came up and looked at it: nothing they could do.

There I was, lecture-less. What to do? Suddenly, an idea occurred. I asked my class of 24 students to count off aloud in sixes. "One" called out the first student, "Two" the next, etc. "Okay," I said, "now I want my ones over here, my twos over there, my threes at the back here…" etc. I divided my class into six groups. "Today, class, you're going to work in teams, and each team will create a 30-second radio commercial. Among yourselves, decide the theme of the commercial, the number of actors in the commercial, and what sound effects you'll need. Now decide who in your team will write the copy for the commercial, who will go retrieve the sound effects, who will be your actors in the commercial, and who will edit the commercial. Go! When you are finished, we will share each team's work with the rest of the class.

Thus, for me, the concept of teams was born – a result of a technological flaw that required me to creatively improvise and ultimately provided me with a teaching tool that I rely upon to this day.

This lesson was successful for a number of reasons. My students, as animators, may very well end up working in the movie industry where animators work in teams. Teamwork is going to require the ability to learn responsibility, to work together, to practice humility – to shelve your ego for the sake of the team. Learning to work together, listen to each other, value others' contributions, all these are traits of a team. I know personally from working as an actor with other actors in a television production, or in a play, that I have a responsibility to the team: to have my script memorized on the day of production, to show up on location on time, to be able to take direction from the director, to follow instructions. In the television industry, time is money, and my job is to get through the scenes as efficiently and well as possible. Good habits insure good work and, just as important, more work!

My students will need to have that team-centric mindset as well: showing up on time for work, executing the work asked for under deadline, to follow directions, to work well with others, etc. Building up these habits will ultimately serve them. Given the choice of whom to hire between two equally-talented artists, an employer will most times value good team-based habits in his consideration of the best applicant. I want my students to succeed. I want them to be the best applicant they can be. I want them to get the jobs.

Do you have an example of an unsuccessful lesson? How did you address the challenges?

I have had occasions where I would be delivering computer software training to a class, usually of employees of a company or university. A potentially troublesome scenario would arise: I would be teaching an advanced class, but I would have a beginning student in that class, someone for whom either the material or even basic computer skills

was over his or her head. The beginner would unintentionally hold the class hostage with his or her basic requests: "I can't find the exercise files on my computer," or "How do I navigate to them?", etc.

I would come to the aid of the student, going over to their desk if it was an onsite class, and help them through. Back to the lesson. Four minutes later the same student might have another basic issue: "I can't do this…" Again, I would help them through the issue. Over time, the repetition of requests threatens to undermine the attention span of the class, not to mention the timeframe of deliverable content. I do not shame my students. I have never told a student that they should not be in this class because they are ill-equipped for it. If they choose to stay, I find a way to facilitate their experience while keeping up the tempo of class as well as possible. I have learned that offering to take offsite time – time during breaks or lunch – to catch a student up is the best tack to take. It allows me to gently tell a student to try and follow along while I continue to teach, with a guarantee that I will help them during the breaks. This enables me ultimately to get my materials delivered, my class to stay engaged, and my novice student to feel not left behind.

Why are you introducing and/or expanding the use of technology into your teaching?

With the sheer volume of information students are expected to absorb, I think that, as teachers, we need to find ways to make the information "stick." The variety and number of teaching tools available to us expands all the time.

On the other side of the coin, we have had to operate in a fundamentally isolating manner due to the Covid-19 situation. We are not all together in one classroom. I cannot physically gauge the interest, engagement, or apathy of my students through the usual means: visual identification of body language, eye contact, or people simply looking at their cell phones. So how do I know what to adjust to maintain that engagement? If I can gauge student involvement through periodic use of interactive tools during class, through breakout room discussions requiring students to formulate responses to questions I post, and even encourage interaction among them through chatrooms, collaborative work, such as padlets, etc., then the technology can serve as an effective proponent of involvement.

How do you feel these technology innovations will affect the student experience? How do you think it will affect your experience?

I think these innovations will improve participation and improve learning. I think the tools will help me be more in touch with the students as I teach. I think the sense of isolation we all feel, students relating to the teacher, students relating to fellow students, will diminish. I think a virtual camaraderie can develop among the students as their peers interact with them.

Participation enables the student to demonstrate to me as well as to their peers what they are learning and that they are absorbing the materials being presented. Too often it is easy to attend the classroom experience, onsite or online, and get lost: either through disengagement, distraction, or an attitude of "my contribution wouldn't make any difference." Every student potentially has something to contribute and, by using the tools available to us, the student can now get instant feedback and encouragement from their contribution, either from me, their peers, or both. By engaging them: soliciting student opinions, allowing them interactive conversation (e.g. through breakout rooms or chats), giving pop quizzes to gauge progressive comprehension, or teamwork, technology can help students absorb and learn materials. The technology can help me gauge whether they are "getting it." Are they learning, do they find the material thought-provoking? Are they inspired by possibility through the tools they

learn? One consistent response I hear from students from year to year is how much audio and music helped them express their visual ideas. Through using technology-based teaching tools, we can fine-tune the students' ability to maximize the use of audio in their work.

Please describe new teaching ideas you plan to implement as a result of this technology certificate program.

I am looking at the tools that facilitate more participation from students – breakout rooms, so that students interact in smaller groups. I think this will make it easier for shy students to voice their opinions in a smaller group, as opposed to speaking in a larger group of 23-25 students.

Creating links in Blackboard to Adobe Audition tutorials from the Adobe Creative Suite tutorial section will also be implemented.

I have traditionally put my lesson plans for each class into Word with information points as well as class exercises. I have put that Word document up on the screen as I speak, and transition back and forth between that document and the actual software (Adobe Audition) for illustrating how the software works.

Much as the Word document is valuable for study outside of class, I think it would be more effective to put salient points of the lesson into slides, keeping the focus on visual images to supplement my dialogue rather than inundating the students with a lot of text on the screen and just reading it to them. For this, I will convert my lesson plans to PowerPoint and, while distributing the original Word class document to them for later review, I will concentrate on teaching in class from the PowerPoint slides. I think this will help focus the students on the concepts more clearly.

How will these new technology tools/approaches contribute to your classroom practice?

I feel as if I can create more "space" in my classes – space for student interaction, participation, and gauging of progress/learning by the students. Converting Word-formatted lectures into PowerPoint slides to emphasize important points will distill information down into consumable parts. I will also be able to pause slides periodically to question students on presented material.

Making more use of chat response, increasing class participation by breaking them down into smaller groups via breakout rooms, use of padlets, etc. and making materials and tutorials available asynchronously through the Blackboard environment will allow me to optimize my real-time teaching with students. I can avoid overwhelming them by setting aside asynchronous materials for students to review later so that I don't have to "cram" everything into my actual classroom hours. Instead, with less need to cover all the material in that small timeframe, I will be able to solicit more participation and interaction with my students.

How will you evaluate the success of your activities?

One metric will, of course, be the quality of their assignments. Are they understanding and implementing the tools taught in class into their projects? For example, are they using all the audio tools available to fine tune a radio commercial? Are the tracks balanced, is the narrator's voice clear – did they successfully equalize the frequencies of the narrator's voice using the EQ tools in Adobe Audition? Do they have a grasp of the tools available?

Through periodic questioning during class, breaks for discussion of topics covered, feedback from students in class and during office hours re: where they are, what they're having issues with, etc. will all give me a better gauge of where they are and how I can adjust my teaching to optimize the learning experience for them.

What do you consider to be the bigger picture items with regard to technology and learning?

I think it is about balance. On the tech side, here are all the tools we can use to disseminate information, gauge participation etc. On the other side, away from the technological, do they have a grasp of the aesthetics of good sound (USE your ears!) and do they trust their own aesthetic sense? Do they see that oftentimes less is more? Music is not always about the notes, sometimes it's about the space between the notes. Do we use music and audio judiciously with the end in mind? Just as a painter need not put more paint on the canvas than necessary, we don't have to fill every moment in time with sound and/or music. Using technology, not for its own sake, but where it serves to enhance the learning experience for both student and teacher is paramount.