Teaching Philosophy
Leon W. Couch III

Teaching is a calling in which we share values, patterns of thought, and skills we cherish. Thus, good teaching demands traits much beyond demonstrable professional expertise. Effective educators not only believe in the value of the subject they teach and ideally enjoy it themselves; they also inspire students to engage in intellectual pursuits and meaningful extracurricular activities that enrich their communities as well as themselves.

Teachers inspire not only through belief in students' potentials as thinkers or as good people, but ideally by serving as the models for how to be, think, and participate in our professions and communities. In subtle and direct ways in- and outside the classroom, thereby, instructors have especially strong influence over each student's development much beyond the immediate subject matter. The delivery and choice of material subtly helps (or hinders) students solidify many basic beliefs about and approaches to the world. Thus, pedagogy as well as curriculum should be constantly evaluated and intentionally chosen rather than inherited thoughtlessly. We also take the responsibility of imparting the value of critical thinking and considered participation in the workplace, family, communities, and political life; as well as teaching much of our profession's canons.

To these ends, we promote a positive learning atmosphere, free of alienating discourse as much as possible. We are alive as scholars, active in our field, and avoid the outdated: teachers are advanced learners. Demonstrating an examined life and striving for the best, instructors seek evaluation of their courses through numerous informal and formal means. Abstract points must be experienced as practical issues, i.e., related to circumstances beyond the classroom and achieving high marks. Their other classes should inform and be informed by our classes. Mediocrity is easily avoided through expecting students to achieve their potential rather than minimum course requirements, and by explicitly stating high (but achievable) standards. These same instructors develop effective methods of evaluating and promoting student progress according to cultural context and institutional goals: We never stop learning.

As teachers, we can often help students discover and pursue their desires. Sometimes we inspire the unmotivated but often help just as much by assisting them when considering alternate life paths. This requires tactful honesty. Even with limited interaction, teachers increase students' awareness of themselves and the world through class atmosphere and assignments, so that they can move from their current level to a higher one as a professional and a person. Those facts, skills, and concepts aim towards the goal of living rich lives that contribute positively to the world through ethical behavior and professionalism we expect from those holding our degrees. Students are not merely competent when they leave our courses.

As a result, some assignments should develop an ability to express and explain their thoughts and beliefs precisely and articulately, while other necessarily teach specific disciplinary skills and knowledge—there is a delicate balance between rote and creativity. Some assignments develop students' abilities at evaluating themselves, others, and information sources. Some exercises may not only encourage inquisitiveness about the world, but also reduce dependence on their teachers as we prepare students for adulthood full of good judgement, ethical behavior, compassion for others, and responsibility.

In other words, course preparation, design, teaching, and grading takes significant effort, time, forethought, intentionality, and reflection—values we wish to instill in our students. By evaluating the way we achieve our teaching goals, we achieve them. With such concern and dedication, the student-teacher bond can be said to stem from a fundamental platonic love for others. Through this bond, teachers can have a profound impact on those in their classes.

Theory/Composition Pedagogy Papers

My interest in developing new ways of teaching has led to several pedagogy papers and posters. As far back as 1999, I co-authored a paper entitled "'Blip, Buzz, Blurp': The Challenge of Teaching New Ways to Listen" for the *International Computer Music Conference* (ICMC) in Bejing, China. In this paper, we encouraged theory instructors to teach aural analysis to sophomore-theory classes. We provided a notational method to "dictate" music that lacks musical scores, and we advocated non-formalistic ways students could remember musical events.

Later in 2003, I summarized the results of our pedagogy in a paper entitled "Introducing Electronic Music in the Undergraduate Classroom: Efficient Teaching and Intriguing Results" at the *College Music Society International Conference* in Muelle, Costa Rica. Based on a pedagogy paper I published in 2000, this presentation displayed several student analyses and categorized students' diverse perceptions of the form and expression in two electronic-music works. Their analyses were compared to the composers' expressed intents, when known. The pedagogy encouraged students to not only invent new notations but to think creatively about interpreting the works with narratives as well as the traditional formal observations.

More recently, I developed CAI (Computer Aided Instruction) for the teaching of species counterpoint using WebCT, and I presented my findings in a poster "Efficient Teaching: Species Counterpoint and Developing CAI Applications" at *College Music Society 2007 International Conference* in Ayuthaya, Thailand, and at the *Association for Technology in Music Instruction* in Salt Lake City in 2007. Rather than relying solely on time-consuming traditional methods for teaching species composition, I was interested in speeding up the learning of my freshmen through CAI. Carefully crafted error-detection exercises and automated feedback helped students learn the sixteenth-century vocal style and to memorize the rules as a basis for the study of tonal harmony. Some exemplary student species compositions, from cantus firmi to 2v imitative counterpoint, were displayed to show the effectiveness of the pedagogy.

In my presentation "Teaching Chromatic-Chord Identification and Part-writing Efficiently and Effectively" at the *College Music Society 2009 National Conference* in Portland, Oregon, I shared a new method for students to identify tonal chords quickly. Current textbooks don't provide a step-by-step methodology to distinguish many categories of chromatic chords. So, I invented a flowchart that isn't fancy but works well—and students love it. The method relies upon the leading characteristics of raised and lowered scale degrees. The remainder of the presentation improved the way diatonic and chromatic common-chord modulation is taught.

In sum, I want my students to build a solid technique that allows them to use their theory skills creatively in their own music making. I am interested in doing this in the most efficient manner possible with concise handouts, clear presentations, and regular homework. I often help students see the "forest through the trees" and, as a performer and composer, I'm able to excite students about the pragmatic uses of theory. I'm also interested in opening their ears to many styles by providing them with grounded approaches to appreciate different musics. As a result,

my goals require a good balance between necessary drill and open-ended assignments that accommodate multiple points of view. These assignments develop students' musical intuitions in addition to establishing technical prowess and knowledge of theoretical concepts.

Details about Teaching

I believe that my colleagues would say that I think creatively about my teaching. Below, I've listed a few approaches in addition to those detailed in my pedagogy papers.

In many of my classes I have a homework redo policy that encourages students to incorporate feedback on graded assignments. I average the grades of their first and their last submissions. After a few weeks, students want to do their best on their first submissions, because they didn't want to have to redo assignments. As a result, the grading load is not much heavier. The quality of work is generally higher, and the depth of learning is greater.

Most of my theory courses incorporate guided composition, whenever practical. In the first-semester theory projects, students produce a 4v setting of a rhymed text of their choice. In the second semester, students not only learn more 2v counterpoint, they learn embellishment and reduction through eighteenth-century chorale-variation technique. These skills are used to compose an artsong that incorporates compound melody and a piano accompaniment based on their own chorales. My third-semester course ends with group projects and presentations, where students discover twentieth-century techniques through analysis and produce a significant composition with those techniques. All composition projects are performed in class.

I've also used third- and fourth-semester courses to teach effective communication skills. The third-semester course (Chromatic harmony) often involves extensive writing about musical analysis. (In fact, my course at Texas A&M University was designated as a writing-intensive course for the major.) In the fourth semester (Form & Analysis), students work on their verbal skills through a series of group projects that each end with oral presentations. I select pieces that are apt for multiple interpretations, and, because groups come up with different solutions, the presenters learn how to manage discussions with contradictory points of view.

In musicianship classes, I have found that physical movement (Dalcroze) helps students learn material very well. In particular, it improves rhythm and helps students control their pacing. My teaching of harmonic dictation distantly derives from the old French *Règle d'octave* approach but addresses chromatic pitches as well. In addition to supplementing their studies with MacGamut, I also use figured bass to teach the ear-training of harmony: Students touch, see, and hear the harmonies they produce, while reinforcing their theory knowledge. I've also developed a series of worksheets (the so-called "evil exercises") that develop basic ear-training skills that undergird most sight-singing and ear-training.

I've also been keen to teach interdisciplinary courses. In 2004 and 2009, I co-taught a hymnody course with an English professor. In both years, we paired non-musicians (English majors) with music majors, and each group composed their own hymn texts, tunes, and accompaniments for a formal public concert. This required students to not only to negotiate their style preferences; they imagined the conception of the whole artwork and had to work out their differences of faith. These projects sparked lively and important class discussions about the expansive nature and intersections between the arts, society, religion, and so forth. Having never created such interdisciplinary art before, students found the evening empowering, and the packed audiences left inspired. Many students and listeners said their experiences changed their lives.