

MUSIC BOTTLENECK LESSON
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| <p>CONTEXT</p> | <p>Music Z315, Music for Film, is a 36-student class for non-majors in the IU Jacobs School of Music with which STEM students can meet an arts and humanities requirement. One-third of the students are from the Media school, and the rest come from a wide variety of other departments.</p> |
| <p>STEP 1: THE BOTTLENECK. WHAT ARE STUDENTS UNABLE TO DO?</p> | <p>Students have difficulty identifying what to listen for in a particular genre and communicating what they hear verbally. Underlying this is the emotional bottleneck that they struggle to articulate their felt knowledge of music. Despite the fact that students spend a lot of time with music, they commonly say, "I don't know anything about music." It is a message they give themselves, not unlike "I'm no good at math" or "I'm no good at writing." There is also an aspect of "Music is to be enjoyed, not studied" too.</p> |
| <p>STEP 2: THE MENTAL ACTION. WHAT MENTAL ACTIONS DOES THE EXPERT PERFORM TO GET PAST THE BOTTLENECK?</p> | <p>Trying to translate the sounds we hear into meanings we can communicate begins with listening very closely, something we don't always do. Sometimes we listen to music as merely background, or just feel it communicate an idea or image. To listen for the various aspects of music and how they come together to create a musical piece, we can listen for instrumentation, melody, rhythm, or form. To listen and describe music in this way requires focus on how music exists in time, and the quality of the sound, no matter the genre.</p> <p>I will focus in on three parameters that make up time in Western music: rhythm (durations), meter (patterns/regularity), and temp (speed). Students readily understand tempo (speed), so rhythm and meter are the bottlenecks. Meter is the pulse of the music, a regular, organized pattern of strong or weak beats. In Western music, meter is usually structured in some variation of twos--- such as in a march or a gallop (weak-strong) ---or threes---such as in waltzes (strong-weak-weak).</p> <p>On the other hand, rhythm refers to the specific length or duration of notes. When a note is played, it can hit on the metric pulse, last longer than the pulse, or hit in between the pulse. In some pieces the pulse is articulated by instruments and in others, it is implicit.</p> <p>I can experience the meter and rhythm with my senses---hear with my ears, watch the sway of the instruments being played, and feel as the notes strike my body---maybe even as I tap my toes to the music, the meter, or the rhythm. As a music expert, I can tap my toes to the meter and maybe even clap the rhythm with my hands. Once I know how to observe meter and rhythm, then I am better able to describe them.</p> |

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| <p>STEP 3: MODEL THE THINKING. WHAT ANALOGY WILL YOU USE TO MODEL THESE MENTAL ACTIONS?</p> | <p>Listening to meter and rhythms is like feeling the regular clickety-clack pattern of a train moving along a track(meter) and rocking along with it or doing something against the pattern, such as texting on a phone or talking loudly to someone (either of which could match the regularity or deviate from it).</p> <p>For the within-the-discipline example, I clap the rhythm of the <i>Star Wars</i> main title, exaggerating the clapping motion to help them find it. I highlight my actions with these questions: Can I feel it in my body? Regular, irregular? Striking or unobtrusive?</p> |
| <p>STEP 4: PRACTICE AND FEEDBACK. HOW WILL THE STUDENTS PRACTICE THESE MENTAL ACTIONS? HOW WILL THEY RECEIVE FEEDBACK TO MAKE IMPROVEMENTS?</p> | <p>Then it's the students turn: Half of the student's clap meter, half clap rhythm. For more practice, students reverse roles, with the half that clapped meter clapping rhythm, and vice versa as we work with different pieces of music as well as duple and triple. (And we note another bottleneck: Students may feel awkward about playing the beat in "public.")</p> |
| <p>STEP 5: MOTIVATION. WHAT WILL I DO TO HOLD STUDENTS ACCOUNTABLE AND DISRUPT RITUAL WAYS OF LEARNING?</p> | <p>As usual with emotional bottlenecks, we have to help students become aware of their preconception---I don't know anything about music---and then they can more readily learn the cognitive mental action---how to listen for the meter and rhythm, and differentiate between that part of the musical piece as it plays across time. Also, metaphors are a powerful way to help their understanding.</p> |
| <p>STEP 6: ASSESSMENT. HOW WILL YOU ASSESS STUDENT MASTERY OF THE MENTAL ACTION?</p> | <p>Students were asked before and after the rhythm lesson: Explain to a friend who missed class today how to find rhythm and meter in music. Of the 28 students who took both pre-and posttests, 7% gave a competent explanation on the pretest and 57% on the posttest. (To meet the criteria for competence, students had to do more than parrot the definition; they had to differentiate between meter and rhythm in their own words and some even explained how it feels or invented an analogy.)</p> |
| <p>STEP 7: SHARING. HOW WILL YOU SHARE WHAT YOU LEARNED?</p> | <p>I have taught this model lesson to pedagogy classes and for campus workshops several times.</p> |