

Teaching Music History at Hong Kong Baptist University: Problem-Based Learning and Outcome-Based Teaching and Learning

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There are many challenges in teaching Western music history, and it is even more exacting to do so in Asia, particularly in Hong Kong, where the students' mother-tongue is not English and the educational environment is exam-oriented.¹ As Melanie Lowe has written, it is a daunting task to cover a huge teaching content in a two-semester (or even a three/four semester) music history sequence and to teach that material to students of varying music backgrounds, many of whom see in it little relevance to their daily life; doing so outside of North America brings its own unique issues.² I would say even though Grout-Palisca-Burkholder's *A History of Western Music* is designated as the standard text for the history course I teach in the Department of Music at Hong Kong Baptist University, it is used largely as a reference. In a semester of twelve to thirteen teaching weeks, I can cover only the basic canonic composers and works. In addition, one class meeting is set aside for contemporary Chinese music, covering both Chinese composers living in the West (as represented in Grout), and those residing in the People's Republic of China. I have tried various pedagogical initiatives in the past—from using PowerPoint that includes images and video links to using on-line platforms to try to engage students in discussion. Last year, I decided to replace the teacher-centered teaching mode with “problem-based learning” (hereafter PBL) in response to my university's implementation of outcome-based teaching and learning (OBTL).³

1. Due to Hong Kong's colonial background and universities' international aspiration, English is the medium of instruction for the majority of subjects despite students' varying command of the language.

2. Melanie Lowe, “Teaching Music History Today: Making Tangible Connections to Here and Now,” *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 1, no. 1 (2010): 45, <http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/article/view/17/24>.

3. Over the past few years, a significant amount of funding has been allocated by the Hong Kong government to local universities to implement OBTL. My PBL project, “Incorporating Problem-based Learning to Facilitate OBTL in the Teaching of Music History,” is supported by Hong Kong Baptist University's Teaching Development Grants.

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PBL, a teaching approach that originated in North America in the 1960s in health science and related disciplines, uses problems as an initiative to set out the learning process that result in a vibrant and active learning environment, leading to the development of higher order cognitive skills.⁴ Some of the benefits associated with this practice include: increased levels of curiosity in domains of study; better appreciation of the relevance of the curriculum, as students perceive the problems as pertinent to future professions; and better integration of learning from all curriculum components.⁵ If applied to the Western music history classroom, I thought, PBL might help solve the problems of having too much content to cover in a short period. Learning is placed in students' hands through well worked-out problems that will render the learning relevant to them, and the approach itself can open up different learning methods to help motivate students and prepare them for life-long learning.

There are many different PBL models and I am still exploring what works and what does not. For the past semester (Spring 2013), ten problems of different scope and nature were designed,⁶ including assignments such as:

- Use “19th-century piano music” as a keyword search on Youtube and study the resulting videos. Write at least five sentences regarding the types of pieces represented in the resulting videos and their respective musical characteristics. . Find one aspect of these observations that is of interest to you and then do more research on it through the web or other sources. Write no more than 500 words about what you have learned. Then share your short report on Jan 21.
- As a group, make a lapbook⁷ about romanticism and orchestral music or art song in the nineteenth century. Your lapbook is intended as

4. There is a large body of literature on PBL. The earliest example is the seminal work of Howard Barrows and Robyn Tamblyn, *Problem-Based Learning: An Approach to Medical Education* (New York: Springer, 1980), and more recent ones include, for example, Jessie Ee and Oon Seng Tan ed., *PBL Made Simple: Lessons for the Classroom* (Singapore: Cengage Learning Asia Pte Ltd., 2009), and Terry Barrett and Sarah Moore ed., *New Approaches to Problem-Based Learning: Revitalizing Your Practice in Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

5. Henk Schmidt et al., “Constructivist, Problem-Based Learning Does Work: A Meta-Analysis of Curricular Comparisons Involving a Single Medical School,” *Education Psychologist* 44, no. 4 (2009): 227–49.

6. One of the challenges in implementing PBL is designing high-quality problems that are engaging and motivating, that are based in the “real-world” and open to multiple ideas, that provide stimulus for collaborative enquiry, and that contribute toward learning outcomes. In the case of my project, there is no doubt that the chosen problems need to be revisited and refined if PBL is to be continued.

7. A lapbook is a layer book with flaps and foldables that contain information pertinent to a single subject. The making of lapbook as a creative way of learning has become popular among primary and secondary educators in the past several years.

educational reading for the general public, so it should be fun and easy to understand.

- Your class has been invited to produce six radio programs each twenty minutes in length devoted to Verdi, Wagner, and Britten for their bi-centenaries and centenary celebrations respectively. Please submit your assignment as a pre-recorded radio program ready to be broadcasted on air.

Each three-hour class is run approximately as follows: in segment 1, students present their responses to the problem started in the previous week; in segment 2, students discuss the readings pertinent to the topic of the class in a Q & A format using questions they received a week in advance,⁸ and in segment 3, students are introduced to the problem of the following week and begin brainstorming for solutions while my teaching assistant and I help guide students' discussions.⁹

Regarding the outcome of my PBL, I find that students are more active and more engaged in the learning process. I am quite happy with their solutions to the "problems" despite certain mistakes and oversights in some of their works. Their exam performance did not differ significantly from previous, traditionally-taught classes. Nonetheless, my present PBL class setup took away time previously spent on listening skills.

In terms of learning experience, which is measured through various questionnaires, two-fifths of my students favored PBL and three-fifths preferred traditional learning. Those who liked it did so for reasons identified in previous studies, such as the benefits discussed earlier in the article. Those who disliked it cited the following reasons: too hard, not suitable for Hong Kong students, too much work, too time consuming, too much time spent on activities not related to music history (such as the lapbook project requiring art and craft skills), difficult to coordinate with group mates, unfair workload, non-comprehensive learning.

My PBL attempt naturally raises many important issues pertinent to the teaching and learning of Western music history. First, what should be the scope of our present-day Western music history curriculum; who is responsible for

8. Class readings are taken from Mark E. Bonds, *A History of Music in Western Culture* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003); Barbara R. Hanning, *Concise History of Western Music* (New York: Norton, 2002); and Douglass Seaton, *Ideas and Styles in the Western Musical Tradition* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2007).

9. As discussed in various studies, tutors play an important role in facilitating the PBL learning process by providing students suitable intervention, useful advice, and timely feedback, particularly when students are at a learning bottle-neck. See for instance, Deirdre Connolly and Charlotte Silen, "Empowering Tutors: Strategies for Inspired and Effective Facilitation of PBL Learning," in Barrett and Moore, *New Approaches to Problem-Based Learning*, 215–28.

gate-keeping the curriculum's breadth and depth; who decides what essential skills must be taught and learnt; and how is its cultural relevancy and political correctness determined in this global era? Second, what is good teaching and learning, and is it good or bad to challenge students' comfort zones as I did? Last, is it worthwhile to try out new teaching approaches when academics are very much stretched for their precious time to publish and do service, let alone the risk of getting bad evaluations from students? For me, trying out new teaching approaches, be it PBL or something else, is what makes my teaching life interesting.