

Class Meetings and On-line Resources: A Complementary Approach

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The Practice

My preferred use of class meetings is interactive work with students on exercises illustrating the general principles of harmony. However, I have been frustrated by the uneven background of my students (first-year undergraduates) with respect to basic concepts that are prerequisite to the exercises and to application of the principles they illustrate. I have found it necessary, therefore, to lecture on these concepts; and, as a result, the time available for the exercises has been too brief. Although textbook presentations of the concepts can be of some help, texts provide a single static description of a concept while the number of different backgrounds among the students is closer to the number of students enrolled (3 groups of 40-50 each). Lecturing, at least, allows multiple, variable approaches to a concept.

Nevertheless, the more time spent in lecturing on prerequisite concepts, the less time that is available for the type of interaction that I value most with my students. Thus, my goal has been to enhance the value of the class meetings by reducing the need for lecturing. To that end I designed a [set of on-line resources](#) for my students; and, as it turns out, the web-based resources are proving more effective than lecturing was at helping students learn both prerequisite concepts and the principles of harmony introduced week by week in the course. The result has been more time for practical exercises in the class meetings.

Web pages have many advantages as a format for course materials. As with textbooks, web-based materials can be consulted repeatedly and for as long as desired. However, they also permit multiple ways of finding information: by [subject](#), by [course plan](#), and by hypertext links. Web pages can be organized at various levels of sophistication -- beginner, experienced, or advanced -- and marked accordingly. The ability to easily peruse the material in more than one order, in non-linear and interactive ways is extremely valuable as it favours personalized learning according to the strengths and weaknesses of each student. I designed the online resources to take full advantage of this characteristic -- simply posting my former lecture notes would have been a poor substitute for the lectures, rather than an improvement on them. A further non-trivial benefit of online resources for music courses is the ease with which [musical examples](#) can be embedded via MIDI or MP3 files.

The MTE 1008 and 1009 website contains course notes, musical examples, test materials, a bulletin board and a discussion forum, some of which are password protected. Also available on the web site are supplementary exercises, including corrected versions. Before each class, the students read the appropriate material online, and each class begins with a review of the rules of harmony under consideration, emphasizing general principles. Then, most of the time in class is devoted to doing exercises which illustrate these principles and clarify various special cases.

Guiding Principles Behind the Practice

1. The best use of class time is not duplication of material available in print, but rather class interaction around meaningful exercises.
2. The web environment can be a valuable location for learning materials and activities, but these must be designed to take advantage of the web environment's strengths, particularly non-linear interaction.

Sources of Inspiration or Influence for the Practice

My thinking has been inspired by other professors in the “[SUITE](#)” group (Group for the Support of the Internet and Technology in Teaching) at the Université de Montréal. This group aims at exchange between colleagues and not at applying particular pedagogical theories. Another important influence has been a [book by Claire Meunier](#) (cited below). I especially appreciate her insistence on thinking about web tools in non-linear ways. Finally, my colleague [Alan Belkin](#) has stimulated me greatly with his thoughts about the use of guided questions in teaching.

Frequently Asked Questions About the Practice and Responses

1. How can you be sure that the students actually read these web notes before class?

Because the students have very different backgrounds, some will not need to read the material as thoroughly as others. However, the [WebCT](#) environment I am using does allow the instructor to know which pages have been read by which students, and when. Also, the class is given in such a way that the student who arrives without having read the web material is at a substantial disadvantage. Of course, there are always a few poorly motivated students, but they generally don't do very well whatever the pedagogical regime!

2. Do you really think the web resources help students learn better?

Absolutely. Having already examined the material online, the students are better prepared for the class, and need only to take note of points requiring clarification. They see the overall picture better, which allows them to place specific rules in their larger context. I have also noticed that the questions asked in class are less numerous and better focussed than previously; those that are asked also provoke a higher level of discussion.

3. Is online testing a valuable part of the course design?

Yes. In general, the WebCT environment provides good tools for revision of one's understanding. When the students leave the classroom they often don't appreciate subtle facets of the theoretical concepts they have heard (verbally and musically). They are able to return to the online material to revise their understanding, for example by reviewing the musical examples considered in class. The online evaluations are another aspect of that revision process. The online tests may be taken twice, and count for 10% of the final mark. These tests allow students to verify their knowledge and its improvement, following correction, with a second try. This is an example of using evaluation as a learning tool: the students must search the material to find the answers to what they failed to understand the first time.

For More Information (References and Links)

Meunier, Claire, *Points de vue sur le Multimédia interactif en éducation / Entretiens avec 13 spécialistes européens et nord-américains*, Montréal, [Chenelière/McGraw-Hill](#), 1997.

[Harmony Course](#)

N.B.: Please note that this is an incomplete version of the site, without interactive tools. The latter are available in the WebCT environment, with password controlled access, reserved for students.