

A Commentary on Music Student Achievement & Teacher Evaluation

The idea of tying student achievement to teacher evaluations is not new. The concept has been and probably always will be a slippery slope for teachers when evaluations are tied to student progress and achievement on specific standards.

In my own experience, student achievement relative to a set of standards or criteria varies widely from year to year. Student growth, however, can remain constant. Assessment in music has been an area of interest and study for me. I have for the last 4 years administered the Watkins-Farnum sight-reading exam to my students. I give the test at the beginning of the year and again at the end. I have re-standardized the test to my own population and use the scores as the student's second semester final. My students score so far below the original scale that was established in 1954, that many of them do not even achieve the minimal score; thus the need for re-norming the exam. My own data shows that, although student achievement can vary dramatically, student progress measured by the coefficient of change from the pre-test to the post test can remain relatively constant. As a result I score the students on the amount of improvement they demonstrate, as well as the level they achieve.

If I were evaluated on the level my students achieved, there would be years when I would look like a very poor teacher. However if evaluated on how much improvement my students showed, my teaching would look much the same from year to year. Attempting to standardize student achievement for purpose of measuring the effectiveness of a teacher or an institution will never be possible until you can standardize the quality of student coming in to the classroom--something that no one is suggesting is possible. However, without that measure of quality control over our material (student) we cannot expect scores on achievement test to reflect to an accurate degree the effectiveness of an individual or an institution. Some years the students coming into my class have very poor skills and almost no understanding of music as an art form. Regardless I have to meet them where they are and take them as far as I can. The end product looks different from year to year; the distance traveled however is frequently the same.

At the moment the only assessment that I administer in the pre-post format is the sight-reading assessment, and I only measure the students based on yearly progress. It would be interesting to chart progress over a longer period, and to develop a pre-post exam that had to do with an appreciation for concepts involved in music, for example the structural and expressive elements of music.

Administrators are very impressed by the scores generated from the sight-reading assessment and what they demonstrate, however they do not appreciate the fact that it is only one of many standards that should be measured. Having said that, the necessity and practicality of administering pre and post test for every assessment is questionable. Perhaps that is an assumption that needs to be challenged. Developing a short pre-test that could measure general knowledge of musical concepts might not be that impractical, and would provide the important baseline from which growth could be measured.

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