Masters of Music Education Program Reflection

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As I near completion of the Masters of Music in Education program at Northern State University, Aberdeen, SD, it is only fitting to reflect on what I have learned along the way. I know many people in other fields who have completed Master’s programs and talk about how much time they felt was wasted being enrolled in classes they believed did not apply to their work or did not help them to grow as individuals. I am very fortunate and grateful to say that such was not the case in this program for me. Each class presented personal challenges, opportunity for growth as a person and as a professional, and real life applicable course work. The content of the program is of highest quality and the professors (Dr. Wendy van Gent, Dr. William Wieland, Dr. Boyd Perkins, Dr. Grant Manhart, Dr. Marla Fogderud, and Dr. Tim Woods) are nothing short of top notch.

**MUS 715 – Music Theory Analysis for the Educator**

This class began as a great music theory review for me. Soon into the course I was given the opportunity to deepen my understanding of music analysis. I was able to study the things I did not understand as we were guided through self-tests and exercises including how to create flow charts, arch maps, identifying parts of a fugue, sonata form, chord analysis and understanding and applying historical elements. I was able to apply the discussions and exercises to writing my formal analysis of *Cantique de Jean Racine* by Fauré. By completing this project and course, I now have strengthened the tools necessary to complete a formal analysis for each piece of music I direct. Analyzing music in this way provides a deeper understanding of the music itself which will lead to more meaningful musical experiences for my students which in turn increases my personal success as an educator.

As an educator and musician, I feel much more confident in my ability to conduct a full and extensive analysis of music than ever before. Prior to this program I had not been analyzing music very much. I always felt as if I was barely getting by with directing and never really understood why I felt that way. Even though I had taken a music analysis class during my undergraduate program, I never fully applied those lessons to my professional career. Perhaps I did not fully understand their importance or trust in my ability to analyze music well. Since completing this course, I have been starting to perform a deeper analysis of the music I direct, moving beyond simple facts and focusing on explanations (knowing how and why), connections (how music grows out of what came before and what comes next), relationships (how parts in one sections are related to parts in another), patterns, hierarchies, and comparisons. It is my professional goal to continue growing in this area and further my understanding of how to analyze better. I have witnessed an increased awareness in my students’ understanding of the music since I have begun music analysis. My older students have started to recognize simple forms and progressions and have led discussions during rehearsal about what the significance is for how the music is composed.

**MUS 716 – Technology for Music Educators**

Technology is an important part of our ever changing world and is a useful tool in education. The incorporation of technology provides endless opportunities for me as an educator as well as for my students. At the beginning of the course we were asked to identify sources we have as ‘resources for learning technology’. My resources were very limited, consisting only of six personal connections, four professional organizations such as ACDA, MTNA, NAfME, and SDMTA and of course search engines such as Google. As the course progressed I was able to add information regarding planning a music technology lab, how to download a YouTube video when YouTube is blocked in my school and I find videos of good value as tools for teaching, Teachers Pay Teachers as a resource for interactive music lessons, and information on how to use a SMART Board or other interactive board. As a class we determined what we already knew about technology in the classroom, things we were using, and built upon that by sharing with one another. We shared useful apps, programs, and methods of incorporating technology in the classroom, such as Remind app., Band in a Box, SeeSaw, Finale, Audacity, Muse Score, Sibelius, and Noteflight. Colleagues also shared how to create apps that would work for in-class student use, assessment, composition, performance and communication with parents. Through assigned projects I created several useful ‘how to’ guides that make using technology easier, such as how to record a single or double input recording using PreSonus Audiobox and Studio One, how to burn a song or track from PreSonus Studio One on to an audio CD, and a simple ‘how to’ guide for using SMART Board technology and interactives. I also learned about music notation and recording programs that are available for free download, such as Muse Score and Audacity. I have used both programs in my middle school classes for composition projects as a result. My school has also purchased PreSonus Studio One and Finale 2014 for an area designed to be used specifically for composition, recording, and a listening library. As a final technology presentation, I created an entire lesson plan for my elementary music classes incorporating SMART Board Technology for *The Nutcracker* by Tchaikovsky.

**MUS 721 – Performance Practice and Literature I**

This intensive class required me to research state music lists and create an extensive repertoire list for my program. This list is organized by voicing, genre, and level of difficulty. In order to complete this list, I had to search for state repertoire lists. In doing so, I realized that there are considerable differences from state to state as to what is included on recommended lists as well as the difficulty level assigned to the pieces. I realized, too, there are many states that do not have a repertoire list. I found this to be surprising and a bit disturbing. There is much work to be done in this area. I believe it is my job as a professional educator to contribute to the improvement of this in South Dakota. Prior to this program I did not have the confidence to believe I could contribute professionally to this endeavor.

In addition to creating a repertoire list we studied the National and State Music Standards. As we studied the standards, I created a unit study lesson plan for *Sicut Cervus* by Palestrina. Included in this lesson plan is a pretest, standards met upon completion of the unit, historical analysis, performance and interpretive aspects of the piece, analytical notes, concepts, sub concepts and objectives, glossary, activities for teaching comprehensive musicianship, and a final assessment. The pretest asks students to identify as many periods in history as they can; describe what they know about music from each of those periods; match terms such as monophony, homophony, counterpoint, polyphony, motet, tone, dynamics, and tempo to their definitions. The format I used for this unit study will be useful for every piece my students will learn. I will be able to perform a thorough analysis of each piece, prepare a timeline for the unit, plan a variety of assessments including written, in-class discussion and performance, and scaffold students’ understanding of the music in its fullness as they apply analytical information, historical information, interpretative information, and personal understanding.

**MUS 723 – Performance Practice and Literature II**

As a result of this class I was able to compile another repertoire list of pieces for my choir. I compiled this list to the prior repertoire list I completed in MUS-721. The genres of music included in this list are pop, ‘classical’, spirituals, and multicultural. I created an annotated bibliography of articles we were required to read and those I selected. This bibliography will serve as an excellent reference for me in the future and is something I can easily expand upon as I continue researching these topics and more. Topics included in the annotated bibliography are choral warmups, classical versus pop music, spirituals, and multiculturalism.

I researched the importance of choral warm-ups. The importance is to enhance and improve singing technique, to increase listening and reading skills, and to provide more opportunity for applied learning. Warm-ups prepare singers to sing, listen and learn. As a class we discussed various warm-up methods and the philosophies supporting them. I put together a warm-up method based on Dr. Russell Robinson’s *The Complete Choral Warmup* book and presented it to my peers, explaining the purpose, strategies and philosophy behind the warm-up method. I have used this resource nearly every day in my choir rehearsals this year. In addition to this warm-up book, I have incorporated *Successful Sight* Singing by Nancy Telfer as part of my choir’s daily warm-up. My high school choir has had very little sight reading exposure so I chose this as my SLO for professional growth and development. By doing so, it was not only my incentive to grow professionally but more importantly, to allow my students opportunity to grow more independently and increase their understanding of singing and their voice.

As a final project I chose Dr. Russell Robinson as my composer/arranger to research, write about, and present to the class. He has made profound contributions to music education and his career is very inspiring. As aspiring musicians and future educators, we have big dreams as we work hard and study during our undergraduate years. We are surrounded by others who share in the same passion of music that we do and everything we partake in seems so natural. Upon completion of our Bachelor degrees, we set off into the big world with lofty goals and aspirations. Some say the ‘real world’ tames us and will all too often suffocate the fire of optimism, spirit, and high achievement, leaving us with a career that once looked promising but is suddenly a way to put bread on the table with seemingly no hope of former dreams ever becoming reality. The truth is, hope is never lost unless we quit looking. While not every person is meant for renowned greatness, every person can be great at what they do wherever they are. Sometimes it takes the lives of those who are renowned to show us that all is not lost and hope is everlasting for those who still dream, work hard and commit themselves to a cause. Having met Dr. Robinson in person twice, I realized he was the kind of renowned person who can inspire.

**MUS 735 – American Music Survey**

This class opened my eyes to what poverty really is as we read and discussed Ruby Payne’s book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. This book put to words and explanation so many things I have encountered through the years in my own life and in the lives of past and present students and their families, specifically the mindset of survival in poverty and generational poverty became clear to me, and will help me understand reactions to directions in the classroom and authority in general, and help me to help the students to self-discovery and forgiveness, using music and mentorship to guide young people in the mindset of a better life.

This book and the discussions shared in this class will serve me well as an invaluable resource in the future. In addition to discussing poverty and its influence in our classroom, we studied music in the United States. I learned how it evolved into what it is today. I had the opportunity to research American composers and to reflect on their music and its significance, in particular how the music evolved, its connection to the events surrounding the music and composers, and the backgrounds of the composers themselves. I shared a few listening examples with my students, including John Cage’s piece *4’33”*, Cowell’s *Banshee*, and Ive’s *Unanswered Question*. Following those pieces, I invited my students to reflect on a series of questions I was asked to reflect on for my final paper. The questions were: “What is your view of America’s position in the world musically?  Are we creating music of international value?  Are we creating musicians of international value? How so?  If not, what specifically are we creating that is not of international value? Aesthetic value, moral value, messaging, musical value all need to be addressed.” Since we were working on music chosen by the students to be performed at the annual pops concert, I felt this conversation would be appropriate as a form of student self-assessment and to help them think about intention of music. This discussion also helped me to gain insight into my students’ perceptions of their vernacular music.

**MUS 743 – Jazz Pedagogy for the Educator**

Jazz is purely American and, unfortunately, is not a common language in schools across America. Programs are dwindling or non-existent in certain parts of the country. Many of us do not understand the language of Jazz. In this course I was able to practice the special language in vocal jazz and various jazz ensembles through guided worksheets, tutorial videos, and discussion. Since jazz is its own language, listening is crucial. I was able to listen to a wide variety of jazz styles including bebop, swing, Dixieland, big band, easy listening, and blues just to name a few. The assigned text for the class, *Jazz Pedagogy: The Jazz Educator’s Handbook and Resource Guide*, is a great resource for the basics of jazz study, including how to set up a jazz ensemble, understanding the importance of each individual player within each section, focusing on the function of each section – in particular, the rhythm section, and development of jazz bands, ensembles, and combos. Recorded examples of esteemed jazz directors leading rehearsals with young jazz bands were included in the book. I developed two lesson plans for my 5th grade class. The first lesson was “Introduction to Jazz Beginning and the Swing Era”. The second lesson was a takeoff of the first lesson and I was able to teach my 5th grade class a basic 8 count swing step so they could experience swing in movement while they danced to *Jump, Jive ‘n* Wail. In addition, I now have an extensive list of listening repertoire from assigned listening and colleague recommendations to add to my personal listening lists in addition to a classroom listening library.

**MUS 751 – Advanced Conducting**

In this class we practiced, recorded, and evaluated ourselves and our peers conducting basic patterns and passages. In doing so, I became more aware of good and bad habits and was able to recognize the qualities in the directing my colleagues did. Using Elizabeth Green’s book, *The Modern* Conductor, I focused on how to effectively communicate with my ensembles through my conducting gestures, patterns, breath, eye contact and body language, gestures of syncopation, and expression. On campus I was able to direct Handel’s *Messiah* with the class and apply the things I had practiced.

I was provided with valuable resources to aid me in choosing quality repertoire. Scholarly works such as *An Evaluation of Compositions for Wind Band According to Specific Criteria of Serious Artistic Merit* by Jay Gilbert and *Teaching Music from a Historical Perspective* by Richard Miles provided well communicated ideas of what to consider and why. *Rehearsal Techniques* by Larry Rachleff suggested a simple approach to rehearsals, beginning with knowing a general plan for the rehearsal, instilling a desire for students to learn their parts, having students involved in solving rhythmic problems, and establishing an effective tuning procedure. This coincides with a strong constructivist approach which I relate to well and enables independent learning which is key to students’ lifelong enjoyment of music making.

**MUS 752 – Advanced Rehearsal Techniques**

Score study and long range rehearsal planning were the main areas of focus for this class. As a result of this I was able to analyze Schubert’s *Mass in G* and work on conducting it. I also put together a performance program of 30-40 minutes in length for my high school choir. This program includes curriculum objectives, goals, reasoning for the selections I programmed, a four-week calendar and detailed lesson plans that will aid me in managing rehearsal time efficiently and thoroughly. I used this method of planning during the school year and found it to be very effective. I was given an interview with Margaret Hillis to read and discuss. The interview regarded her views on score study. I found this to reinforce what I realized in the MUS 715 class: score study and analysis will greatly increase my effectiveness as a teacher and director which have a positive impact on my students and their musical success. The long range plan, practice in score study and analysis have helped me to become more intentional in my teaching.

While practice conducting *The Messiah*, I realized once again my love of conducting. It seems that I never get much opportunity to conduct. I am spending all my time teaching the students their parts. This year I have worked hard to begin establishing a foundation of concrete musical skills for my students. We have been practicing sight reading, working on vowel formation, blend, and interpretation. They seem to forget it each day but I realize it is a process and will take some time. I believe in time these skills will help to close the zone of proximal development and climb higher on the pyramid of Bloom’s taxonomy. I need to improve my ideas of repertoire selection, perhaps by simplifying the selections to better reflect the changing voices and wide age range and experiences of my choir. I am excited about what the future will hold for them and for our school choir program.

**MUS 766 – School Music Administration**

A smorgasbord of topics was read about and discussed in this class. Among those topics was how to write a personal mission statement. Since having a personal mission statement serves a function of stating why I teach and gives a glimpse into my personal philosophy of music education, I developed my own personal and professional mission statement. This was a great self-reflection that proved to be very challenging. I have always known the importance music plays in my life and I have always known why I want to teach, but I have never thought about putting that to words or thinking about it in terms of what my students would be wanting. This was a great project for me. I found that I referred to my mission statements countless times throughout the school year. They served as a guide in developing my lesson plans and also as encouragement on days when it was difficult to stay positive and focused.

In class, we talked about time management and what that may look like in our present teaching situations and in our personal lives as we look for ways to create and maintain a healthy balance. In doing so, I was able to create a detailed calendar for the school year that lists, month by month, the things that need to be done and the events that take place. This has been beneficial in managing my time efficiently at work and in helping to maintain a balance between work and my personal life. As a martial artist we talk about balance all the time. I found the connection between martial arts discussions and the time management discussions and project to be very profound. Balancing spirituality, family, work, play, and rest is very difficult; however, when one or more of these elements is out of balance, life can be stressful. This stress affects me negatively and, in turn, my students and all relationships.

We explored various types of school budgets and talked about which types are better and why. In addition to that we discussed how government funding works and were encouraged to research our state and local funding formulas. I was able to write a thorough and professional budget proposal for my school and submit it for the upcoming school year. As we discussed budgets the topics of fundraising and booster clubs were also pursued. I now have a set of by laws in place for our music booster organization. Unfortunately, I have not been able to utilize this yet, but I plan to put this information to use in the upcoming school year as my colleague and I examine the current state of the music booster club and I research state education funding and local funding in an effort to understand how it all works. I want to be proactive in this process each year.

**MUS 772 – Research in Music Education**

This course was intense. There were times of frustration after hitting what seemed to be countless road blocks. Through this experience I have gained much more respect for those who conduct research on a regular basis to aid in my ability to teach to my fullest potential. I have never seen myself as a researcher but in some ways I am by the nature of my profession. Since I have learned the process of conducting a research study, I believe that I could successfully conduct research in the future. As part of the requirement for the course, we needed to conduct a research study within our schools. I chose to study the significance of parental involvement in music education within my high school choir. The results were very interesting and helpful. I found out that students consider parental involvement to be the act of coming to a performance. I also learned that most of my students are in choir because of their independent choice rather than direct influence by their parents. The results will help me to meet my students and their families where they are and encourage them to see involvement as something deeper than simply ‘a presence’ at an event, which could potentially encourage a lifelong enjoyment of music rather than simply a high school activity. The study created more questions that could lead to future study. This course has brought a deep understanding and appreciation for good research and an awareness of my own day to day natural research.

**MUS 775 – Foundations of Music Education**

This was a nice course to draw the graduate program to a close for me. We discussed Music Learning Theory more as well as other learning theories, including Bloom’s Taxonomy, Zone of Proximal Development, Constructivism, Gestalt Theory, and others. This course brought together my thoughts concerning curriculum, development of curriculum, student centered teaching, and independent learning. Throughout the graduate program I have come to realize that I have been practicing several of these theories already but never did so on purpose. Now I am much more confident and aware of the benefits of being intentional in my planning and teaching. This course has helped me to make a full circle of all the other courses in the program, bringing together the curriculum, philosophy, and mission statements I have developed.

**MUS 777 – Curriculum Writing**

In my present teaching position there is not a curriculum for music education. This class provided an opportunity for great discussions and sharing of ideas with my peers through the texts we were assigned to read. Through the reading and discussions, I learned what is meant by curriculum, its importance in music education, how it has evolved through time, the various forms of curriculum, and finally how to create one for my present situation. I have come to the realization that when it comes to music curriculum in school, there needs to be a great deal of education as to the reality of the value music holds in education and the fact that music is academic. Many administrations believe that the music itself is the curriculum rather than a reinforcement and practice of the curriculum.

**MUS 782 – Foundations of Music Education, Trends, Philosophy**

Throughout this class I read about many trends in music education and how those trends relate to philosophy. As a class we had great discussions about what philosophy is, the importance of having a personal philosophy in music education, what needs to be included in a philosophy, and ethics. I studied different philosophical ideas and beliefs. I studied Music Learning Theory (MLT) and discussed how it is not a method but rather a theory on how people learn. As a result of the research and discussions I wrote my own philosophy of music education. By doing so I was able to really assess why I teach and how I teach and put it in writing. This philosophy summarized, ‘teaching students – not music’, reflects the values I have regarding music education. Being able to really reflect and discern my philosophy has benefited me in many ways, helping me to become more confident and purpose driven. This confidence and drive will help in creating a positive learning environment for my students.

**MUS 785 – General Music Pedagogy**

This class required me to research various methods used in music education, including Kodály, Orff, Dalcroze, Teaching for Musical Understanding (TMU), and Comprehensive Musicianship (CM). Discussion questions always challenged me to think more deeply about the methods and their implementation than I have in my career thus far. Even though I studied these methods during my undergraduate program, I found through the years that I never really applied any method intentionally to my teaching. This was mostly due to lack of resources and creativity. This course provided me another chance to not only revisit these methods, but to study them in more depth and put them to practice in my elementary music classroom. As a project I chose four methods (Kodály, Orff, TMU, and CM) rand created a lesson plan for each. Each lesson plan was written for practical application and through the lens of MLT. I have since used these lesson plans in my classroom and found there implementation to be successful. I have been using the format for these lesson plans ever since. I have tried various formats for my lesson plans, but this has been the best by far. It helps me to be more intentional, which has been a goal throughout this program – to become more intentional in my teaching. As a class we presented an overview of our lesson plans and completed peer evaluations. The final project was to write an elementary music methods overview in which I explained my understanding of all the methods studied. I am now discerning certification in GIML or Orff.

This Master’s program has been everything I hoped for, everything I expected and more. I expected to relearn old skills I may have forgotten or gain new understanding of, which I did. I expected to learn new skills and information, which I learned so many new approaches and gained valuable resources for future growth. I expected to fulfill a goal of earning and receiving a Master’s Degree in Music Education. Never did I expect the level of personal growth aside from reaching an outward goal. I have gained confidence in myself as a musician and educator. I have found strength in what I know, what I have learned, and what I have experienced. I discovered freedom in coming to terms with things that have hindered my personal and professional growth in the past. While I realize these ‘weaknesses’ in human existence could still haunt me from time to time, I have found a new strength in self-understanding, self-acceptance, and a deeper connection to my students and an understanding of what motivates them. All of the discussions, readings, research, and projects have helped me bring to focus the outward learning process as well as the inner meaning and purpose of the learning. I am excited for my future and for that of my students; after all, as Muhammad Ali said, “the only limitations one has are the ones they place on themselves”.