Teaching Basic Conducting Skills through Video
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As pressure increases on academia to do a better job of preparing future music educators, we who are involved in the effort must explore productive and current modes and techniques to accomplish this task. The addition of new high school graduation requirements seriously affects enrollment in music and other fine arts courses throughout the country. Increasing numbers of mandated classes also impact college and university music education programs, where coursework needed for teacher certification must be fit into an already overcrowded curriculum. Among the mandated courses are those dealing with special education, multicultural education, reading pedagogy, and health-related issues. Unarguably, these classes, which are probably here to stay, offer essential knowledge for any beginning teacher.

College music educators can either complain (probably ineffectually) about the new certification requirements, or they can evaluate current programs to determine if redundant, outdated, or inefficient teaching methods can be streamlined via technological resources and innovative pedagogical practices. Obviously, we should choose the latter option.

Several years ago the beginning conducting course at the University of Kansas was modified. The
Teaching with technology

Music education students enroll in the “Fundamentals” class concurrently with “Band Clinic,” a laboratory course in which students play wind and percussion instruments in a band setting. Several basic tenets guide the conducting class:

- Twelve videotaped modules presented weekly throughout the semester deliver all instruction in a sequential series. All conducting techniques are demonstrated, providing students with a visual model that can be reviewed at the students’ discretion. An accompanying text gives written module objectives, descriptors, and content concerning conducting terminology and transposition.
- All musical examples in the text are notated in condensed score form. A select student wind ensemble records each example for use on the videotape. One measure of metronome clicks precedes all aural examples so that the students can practice and develop a reliable preparatory beat. Grade I-III wind band compositions serve as the musical examples. This format enables students to interact (usually for the first time) with the scores for compositions that are analogous to their development as conductors.
- A videotape player is made available to students during regular office hours and several evenings weekly to view the videotapes. The instructor or a graduate teaching assistant is available on a regularly scheduled basis to answer questions and provide critiques of conducting competency.
- At the end of the semester, students are videotaped conducting a live wind ensemble on an assigned Grade III band composition. Several experienced conductors familiar with the objectives of the instructional program evaluate the videotapes. The evaluation includes assessment of baton grip, beat patterns and styles, preparatory beats, use of the left hand, cuing, dynamic indicators, tempo stability, cutoff gestures, and eye contact. Students also take a written examination that covers terminology and transposition.
- When students successfully complete the course, they are eligible to enroll in choral, band, and orchestra clinics as conductors. The clinic ensembles consist of students in the fundamental conducting skills class who perform on secondary instruments introduced in beginning instrument classes. These required courses enable the young conductors to apply the skills acquired in the “Fundamentals” course in a real-life teaching situation. The basic technical conducting skills initially assimilated in the wind band context successfully transfer to the choral and orchestral mediums.

The rewards

Several benefits have accrued with the adoption of this beginning conducting program. Because students all receive the same content, sequence, and organization of instruction, they enter the band, choral, and orchestra clinic courses with identical fundamental skills and basic competency in terminology, transposition, and score-reading abilities. These skills result in increased capabilities in the clinics, in subsequent fieldwork associated with music education methods courses, and in the student teaching/internship semesters. A great deal of cooperative learning occurs in this program. Students regularly engage in informal assessment and evaluation with peers in the course. Students enrolled as conductors in the clinic courses provide further models for mechanical and musical conducting proficiency. Lastly, the course heightens student awareness of the importance of conducting competency. Since students are regularly evaluated and placed in actual conducting/rehearsing situations, the relevance of developing conducting expertise is enhanced.

Many other essential courses for music education majors may also prove amenable to restructuring. The content of secondary instrument classes, music theory, arranging, and nuts-and-bolts topics such as program administration, marching band show design, literature for performance ensembles, and acoustics, for example, might be more efficiently and effectively transmitted by time-saving methodologies.