

Teaching composing in the secondary classroom: Developing a grounded theory

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ABSTRACT

In this article I describe the development of a grounded theory of the teaching-composing process. The theory explains the teaching of composing as it is carried out by three secondary school music teachers.

Keywords

Teaching composing, grounded theory.

INTRODUCTION

This article describes a study designed to develop new knowledge concerning the teaching of composing in secondary school classrooms—more specifically, to develop this knowledge through the construction of a grounded theory of the teaching-composing process.

Although there are numerous models of the *creative* process (Amabile, 1996; Arieti, 1976; Beardsley, 1982; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Wallas, 1926) and models of *composing* processes (Bahle, 1934; Bennett, 1976; Graf, 1947; Sloboda, 1985), and *students' composing* processes (Webster, 2002; Wiggins, 2003), the literature does not include models of the *teaching-composing* process. In order to develop such a model, I employed grounded theory methodology to explore and make sense of the teaching-composing knowledge of my research participants.

RESEARCH METHOD

When a researcher has gathered qualitative data about a central phenomenon, grounded theory allows the researcher to formulate a theory 'grounded' in that data. Grounded theory "explains an educational process of events, activities, actions, and interactions that occur over time" (Creswell, 2005, p. 396). I used grounded theory to generate a theory about the educational process of teaching composing, based on three teacher-participants' knowledge of this phenomenon.

Approaches to grounded theory have varied and evolved over the past forty years. Grounded theory procedures tend to follow one of three designs: the 'systematic design' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the 'emerging design' (Glaser, 1992), or the 'constructivist design' (Charmaz, 2000). For the most part, I followed the grounded theory procedures of the 'systematic design' espoused by Strauss & Corbin (1990). In keeping with this design, I followed the data analysis procedures of open, axial, and selective coding,

and the development of a visual model of the theory generated.

Procedures

This research involved three principal participants. Jesse has taught composing for twenty years, Bill for seventeen, and Mike for six. All three participants teach music at public secondary schools in Ontario, Canada.

Data Collection

I followed the same data collection procedure with each of the three teacher-participants. First, I conducted preliminary semi-structured interviews, seeking to learn about the participants' knowledge, experiences, and practices of teaching composing in the music classroom. The interview sessions lasted between one and two hours in duration. Subsequently, I spent 5-8 days in the participants' schools and classrooms. During this observation period, I collected data from a variety of sources, employing a range of data collection tools.

At the heart of the data were the words of the participants themselves. During interviews and discussion I encouraged Jesse, Bill, and Mike to share their personal knowledge through anecdotes and stories. I used my own stories of composing and teaching as models and triggers to elicit the stories that constituted and represented their own store of personal teaching-composing knowledge. The participants told stories about themselves and about their teaching experiences. As Munby, Russel, & Martin point out: "[T]eachers often express and exchange their knowledge in the narrative mode of anecdotes and stories" (2001, p. 877). By asking the teacher-participants to tell me stories, I was able to access their personal knowledge of teaching composing.

Next in importance amongst the data sources were the field notes I created to describe the teaching practices and classroom events I observed. I employed "thick description" in my writing, as championed by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973). I strove to richly describe not only the human behaviour that I observed, but also enough of a context to allow a reader to make sense of that behaviour. These field notes were not mere descriptions of settings, characters, and events, but a fiction-like storying of my observations.

When I had completed the fieldwork with each participant, I transcribed all the interviews and dialogue I had recorded. I also transcribed and edited my field notes. I emailed all transcriptions to the participants. To verify their accuracy, I asked each participant to make deletions, additions and suggestions as he saw fit. When the files were returned to me, I made the modifications suggested, and began the data analysis.

Data Analysis

In a grounded theory research process, data analysis involves three stages. Open coding consists of identifying categories (or themes) of information within the data sources (e.g. interview transcripts). The second stage, axial coding, consists of relating the categories identified as being salient within the process under examination (in this case, the process of teaching composing). I carried out this stage by building an axial coding matrix with headings, categories, and sub-categories. The third and final stage is selective coding—the actual development of a theory. Selective coding involves systematically relating all the salient categories identified within the process to each other. Accordingly, in addition to writing a series of propositions and sub-propositions explaining and interrelating the categories in the model, I built a visual model demonstrating the connections and interrelationships between the categories of the teaching-composing process.

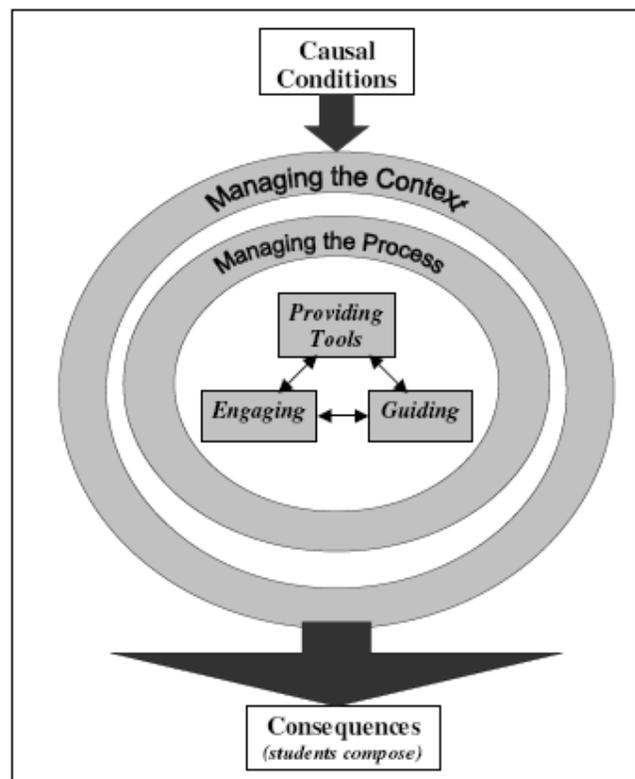


Figure 1. Visualization of the Teaching-Composing Process

THE THEORY

Explaining the Visualization

This visualization of the teaching-composing process (Figure 1) represents a grounded theory developed from analysis of the personal knowledge of three secondary school music teachers: Jesse, Bill, and Mike. Creswell (1998) described the role a visualization of the theory plays in presenting grounded theory research:

A final embedded structure is the presentation of the “logic diagram,” the “mini-framework,” or the “integrative” diagram where the researcher presents the actual theory in the form of a visual model. The elements of it are identified by the researcher in the axial coding phase, and the “story” in axial coding is a narrative version of it. (p. 181)

The visual model of the grounded theory is designed to represent the relationships between the categories, as described in the following paragraphs (the “story” of the theory).

The box at the top of the visualization represents the *Causal Conditions* of the teaching-composing process—factors that may influence teachers to teach composing. These factors include the teacher having personal experience of composing, the teacher’s valuing of student composing, the teacher’s recognition that *students* value composing, and curriculum requirements.

An arrow leaves this box and connects to a grey ring that represents the teacher actions associated with *Managing the Context*. The teacher manages the context within which classroom composing occurs with such actions as respecting and connecting to students’ interests, respecting and connecting to students’ needs, and ensuring the classroom is a safe and supportive place for students to explore ideas and share their creative work.

Within this ring a smaller ring represents the teacher actions associated with *Managing the Process*. The process implied is teaching composing—the teacher self-manages, determining how and when to deliver teaching-composing strategies, and which ones to use. This self-management involves ‘teaching from the side’—providing resources, assistance, and guidance, but otherwise leaving students to work on their own; drawing from and sharing personal special composer knowledge; and engaging in ongoing development and modification of teaching-composing practices.

Within both rings are three rectangular boxes representing types of teaching-composing strategies that teachers employ. The strategies are organized between three subheadings. The strategies associated with *Providing Tools* include instilling composing confidence, teaching music theory and compositional techniques, enabling opportunities for students to work in collaboration, and making possible computer-facilitated composing. *Engaging* strategies include designing assignments; inspiring;

motivating; showcasing student work; and maximizing student ownership, involvement, and enjoyment. *Guiding* strategies include such teacher actions as sequencing tasks, encouraging exploration, and providing and facilitating feedback.

The boxes that represent the strategies connect to each other with double-headed arrows. My intention here is to represent the non-linear and non-sequential nature of teachers' employment of teaching-composing strategies, and the fluidity and interaction between them.

A large arrow descends from the bottom of the diagram to a box representing the *Consequences* of the teaching-composing process. The arrow is large to signify that all of the aspects of the process identified above it result in the outcome of students composing, which in turn leads to students experiencing success, students exercising self-expression, students experiencing enjoyment, and students continuing to compose both in the classroom and beyond.

Propositions

The creation and presentation of propositions assists in making sense of the data and explaining how the grounded theory works. As Charmaz (2005) explained: "Grounded theorists...create statements about the implications of their analyses" (p. 508). Accordingly, I created a list of propositions to further explain and illustrate the theory I had developed—a theory to explain the teaching-composing process.

I do not intend to imply that the following statements apply to *all* teachers of composing. They simply do NOT. The assertions apply to a very *few* teachers of composing—the three described in my study. The statements are hypothetical. They are presented here as assertions so that they may be both refuted and substantiated by further research. That is the purpose of grounded theory—to make suggestions as to how a process works. The following propositions represent a *proposed* way—a possible way—of viewing and understanding the process of teaching composing.

Causal Conditions

- Teachers have prior personal composing experience.
- Teachers value students composing.
- Students show interest in composing.
- The curriculum requires that students compose.

Strategies - Providing Tools

- Teachers provide the tool of composing confidence—they let students know that composing *is* accessible to them.
- Teachers provide the tool of music theory.
- Teachers provide the tool of compositional technique.
- Teachers provide the tool of working in collaboration.
- Teachers provide the tool of computer facilitated composing.

Strategies - Engaging

- Teachers engage students with compositional freedoms and constraints.
- Teachers inspire students (assist with idea generation) by...
 - presenting compositional models
 - offering ideas to explore
 - assigning engaging composition tasks
- Teachers motivate students through use of...
 - positive reinforcement (praise and encouragement)
 - nagging (reminding students of assignment expectations and deadlines).
- Teachers provide opportunities for the showcasing and sharing of student work.
- Teachers strive to imbue students with ownership over—and personal involvement in—their work.
- Teachers build opportunities for students to experience enjoyment in their composing.

Strategies - Guiding

- Teachers provide opportunities for students to receive aural feedback. Students are able to hear their works-in-progress when...
 - composing with instruments in hand
 - peers perform the compositions
 - the teacher performs the compositions
 - computer software performs the compositions
- Teachers provide feedback in the form of suggestions.
- Teachers carry out formal assessment.
- Teachers encourage students to seek, offer, and receive peer feedback.
- To guide students, teachers sequence tasks—provide a step-by-step path for students to follow through the composing process.
- Teachers encourage exploration, and allow students the time, space, and freedom for creative discovery.

Managing the Context

- Teachers respect and connect to students' worlds.
- Teachers respect and connect to students' needs.
- Teachers ensure the classroom is a safe and supportive place for students to explore ideas and share their creative work.

Managing the Process

- Teachers 'teach from the side'—providing resources, assistance, and guidance, but otherwise leaving students to work on their own.
- Teachers draw from and share their special composer knowledge.
- Teachers reflect, and engage in ongoing development and modification of teaching-composing practices.

Consequences

- Students compose.

- Students experience success.
- Students exercise self-expression.
- Students experience enjoyment.
- Students gain composing confidence, and continue to compose—both in the classroom and beyond.

Evidence of the Propositions

In order to validate the grounded theory, I returned to the data to find evidence to support it. I sought to illustrate the propositions with text segments from the interview and observation field note transcripts. In addition, I sought corroborating evidence from the teaching-composing literature. Due to the restrictions on this article, only a sample of this discussion—evidence for one proposition—is included here:

Teachers ‘Teach from the Side’

In the composing classroom, teachers manage the teaching-composing process by managing themselves; teachers consciously manage the way they carry out teaching-composing strategies. For example, teachers of composing often eschew the front-and-centre role to teach from the side—like a coach (Berkley, 2004; Dogani, 2004; Odam, 2000). Teacher-participant Mike explained: “I try to inspire them by taking a step back, by giving them the tools in advance. I’m there as a resource, but otherwise, I try not to get in the way.” This approach embodies Schafer’s ideal vision of creative music teaching:

the teacher may initiate a situation by asking a question or setting a problem; after that the role as teacher is finished. One may continue to participate in the act of discovery but no longer as a teacher, no longer as a person who already *knows* the answer. (1986, p. 245)

Teachers working within this paradigm provide resources and support, but otherwise leave students to work on their own; the teacher assumes the role of an enabler.

With the ‘teaching-from-the-side’ approach, teachers often allow students to design their *own* composing projects. Teacher-participant Bill described his initial role in such a situation as, most importantly, providing encouragement and saying: “Go for it!” Students can be given ownership over their work in terms of content as well as process. Teacher-designed assignments do not always elicit a student’s best work, or learning. Teacher-participant Jesse reported that in his classroom: “I have no problem with them working on other things...and sometimes the assignment [that I provide] is not the best thing for them to be working on. Because they’re finding things [when they work on their own projects] that I cannot do.” In some instances the best learning comes ‘from the side’—when students put aside the course assignments and work on their ‘own stuff.’

While allowing students considerable autonomy, teachers nevertheless ensure students have the guidance and resources they need. Jesse explained: “My role, as I see it, is to help them through it.” These teacher-provided

resources may include the motivating factor of an upcoming performance opportunity, technical help, theoretical knowledge, assistance solving problems, or one-on-one coaching. Teacher-participant Bill described a characteristic approach to assisting student composers: “all I did was provide technical help, and help them make it real, and solve problems that they didn’t have the knowledge or experience to deal with yet.” Bill’s approach was to *facilitate* the students’ composing.

Another key aspect of teaching ‘from the side’ is getting out of the way. Apart from providing assistance when necessary, teachers of composing often leave the students alone (Fautley, 2004a). And although this suggestion may go against the grain for many teachers, it works! As Wiggins (2003) wrote about her own teaching-composing practice: “The change in quality and intensity of work that took place once I had learned to stay out of the students’ way was substantial” (p. 159). Teachers of composing know that students often work better without interference, and sometimes the best thing for the teacher to do is to leave the students alone. Jesse explained: “Because you don’t want to be a fifth wheel sometimes. Like this kid here playing a rhythm on the keyboard. He couldn’t do it before, but by working with someone [a classmate] who can, now he can do it.” Although teachers need to put guidelines in place, and make objectives clear (Jesse: “First of all, they have a deadline. They are responsible for that deadline. And if they go past it—and none of them have—basically the model works for me”), they can then relinquish ownership to the students—giving them the freedom to learn in the manner that works best for *them*:

We reconvene in the computer lab. “Sit next to someone who’s got some experience!” says Bill. “I’ve got a handout here, but like anything written down it may not be totally clear, so feel free to ask me or someone else or just figure it out.”

By encouraging students to problem-solve on their own, and view themselves and their classmates as the experts, rather than the teacher alone, teachers enhance the students’ sense of ownership, expertise, and pride over the work they do. Wiggins (2003) pointed out that a teacher-centred composing classroom “is counterproductive for students because it tends to stifle individuality and independent thinking” (p. 157). In contrast, when teachers teach from the *side*, individuality and independent thinking are encouraged and supported.

In summary, teaching ‘from the side’ involves encouraging students to design their own composition projects, providing students with the resources and guidance they need, but otherwise leaving students to work on their own. Berkley (2004) found in her study of teaching composing that “[student] autonomy and authority—were difficult to achieve through instruction and training but were easier to achieve through influence and facilitation...Teachers were observed to facilitate risk taking and constructive self-evaluation in students by acting as coach, advisor, and

informed critic” (p. 256). So teaching in this manner—from the side—is the best way to help students to develop autonomy and ownership over their composing. As indicated by the data in this study and supported by the teaching-composing literature, the ‘teaching-from-the-side’ approach is a significant and effective aspect of managing the teaching-composing process.¹

CONCLUSION

The grounded theory I have developed and propose here is informed by the knowledge of my three teacher-participants—three experienced teachers of composing in secondary schools. It is a substantive-level theory: “a low-level theory that is applicable to immediate situations. The theory evolves from the study of a phenomenon situated “in one particular social context” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 174). This theory does not have the same breadth of applicability as a theory of greater abstraction, such as a midlevel theory, a grand theory, or a formal theory (Creswell, 1998). This theory most certainly does *not* apply to all teachers in all circumstances, and was not designed to do so. The purpose of this theory is to contribute to a fledgling understanding of teaching composing. Future research in this domain will, I hope, serve to develop and refine the theory presented here.

Nevertheless, this grounded theory *is* based on a deep analysis of three experienced teachers’ knowledge of teaching composing, and many of the theoretical propositions are supported by the teaching-composing literature. Although more research might result in the expansion or modification of the theory, I am confident there is much here that is common to many composing classrooms, and much that will resonate with many educators who are teaching composing or who aspire to teach composing. In laying out this particular model, I hope I am able to offer a tool that will assist teachers in reflecting on and developing their own current or future teaching-composing practices.

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¹ However...when teachers adopt a ‘facilitating’ rather than ‘teaching’ role, the approach may limit students’ potential to develop as composers—Paterson and Odam (2000) believe: “Teachers must teach composing as well as facilitate it. They should not be afraid to have opinions and ideas and make musical suggestions” (p. 38).

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