Let's Talk About It: Discussion, Participation, and the Music History Classroom

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The participation grade. The mere mention of it conjures an uncomfortable aura of mystery for instructors and students alike.[1] What constitutes participation? Is it just simple attention and preparedness or must it be verbal contributions? How many? Does speaking in small groups count?[2] How are instructors keeping track? Is it even possible to keep track across multiple sections with dozens of students in each? Is it all subjective? Perhaps most importantly, is the participation grade really encouraging the skills we want students to learn? After all, "participation" is only one component of classroom discussion, which also depends on listening and open-mindedness to be effective.[3] The discussions themselves can be even more daunting. Instructors can spend hours designing thoughtful and provocative questions only to be met with shallow answers, or worse, resentful stares.[4]

And yet, the participation grade sits stubbornly on the syllabus, a testament to research that shows the high value of discussion as a pedagogical tool. Both structured studies and anecdotal evidence consistently show the importance of classroom discussion: oral and interpersonal skills are as important in the workplace as writing and information retrieval; good discussion helps students practice collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving; dialogue encourages students to see through the eyes of others and expand their worldview, to "disagree without being disagreeable."[5] Because discussion and participation

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1. For more, see Jay R. Howard, *Discussion in the College Classroom: Getting Your Students Engaged and Participating in Person and Online* (San Francisco: Wiley and Sons, 2015), 141–42.

2. Howard, 5.

3. For more, see Matthew R. Kay, *Not Light, but Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom* (Portsmouth, NH: Stenhouse, 2018), 16.

4. For more, see Robert DiYanni and Anton Borst, *The Craft of College Teaching: A Practical Guide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 78–79.

5. Michael B. Smith, Rebecca S. Nowacek, and Jeffrey L. Bernstein, "Introduction: Ending the Solitude of Citizenship Isolation," in *Citizenship Across the Curriculum*, ed. Michael B. Smith,

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can be powerful pedagogical strategies, a number of scholars have outlined a set of best practices for their effective implementation. Most prominent is the importance of building trust and empathy between instructors and students, and between the students themselves, especially as college courses encompass students and instructors from a broad range of economic, national, and social backgrounds who arrive with an array of individual biases, conscious or otherwise.[6] Other scholars have focused on methods of designing discussion questions that produce further inquiry rather than lead to intellectual dead ends. Many recommend structured activities like small groups, "minute papers," and "think-pair-share," which can give quiet students a voice in the classroom.[7] Managing classroom dynamics to ensure good interpersonal communication and to keep the discussion on track is another common theme.[8]

However, the related matters of long-term planning and assessment strategies that support productive discussions have received comparatively little comment, especially in the context of music history courses, which pose unique challenges.[9] Traditionally, music history classes present material in chronological order, which means that students are often confronting some of the most difficult material early in the class. This has a dampening effect on participation in the crucial early days of the course. In nonmajor classrooms, the specialized vocabulary used to describe music can be a barrier, as students do not want to risk misapplying unfamiliar terminology in front of their colleagues. In classes for majors, divisions within the department (instrumentalists versus vocalists, a focus on education versus performance versus composition, popular versus classical musicians) can lead to a student body that is even more hesitant to interact with one another. If nonmajors may be afraid of misusing vocabulary

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Rebecca S. Nowacek, and Jeffrey S. Bernstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2. See also Cynthia Z. Cohen, *Applying Dialogic Pedagogy: A Case Study of Discussion-Based Teaching* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2018), 4, 24–25; Jody S. Piro, *10 Dilemmas in Teaching with Discussion: Managing Integral Instruction* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2016), vii–viii; DiYanni and Borst, *The Craft of College Teaching*, 80–82; and Howard, *Discussion in the College Classroom*, 5–7.

6. This theme is especially prominent in Fry, *Not Light, but Fire*. Many other scholars note its importance, including James A. Davis, "Classroom Discussion and the Community of Music Majors," this **Journal** 1, no. 1 (2010): 7–8.

7. See, for example, Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 79–81; Davis, "Classroom Discussion and the Community of Music Majors," 6–7; DiYonni and Borst, *The Craft of College Teaching*, 83–88; and Howard, *Discussion in the College Classroom*, 27, 43–44.

8. See, for example, John Capps, "The Case for Discussion-Intensive Pedagogy," in "Teaching Philosophy," special issue, *The American Philosophical Association Newsletter* 17, no. 2 (2018): 5–7; Piro, *10 Dilemmas in Teaching with Discussion*; and DiYanni and Borst, *The Craft of College Teaching*, 82–83.

9. These challenges are summarized in Davis, "Classroom Discussion and the Community of Music Majors."

or showing a lack of knowledge, those anxieties can be even more devastating in a classroom for majors, whose identity and social standing are often predicated on musical skill and literacy.

Many of these challenges can be met with thoughtful assessment and long-term planning of topics so that students approach potentially difficult or sensitive issues in stages. In what follows, I lay out several strategies of executing a semester-long plan for building healthy relationships between students and the instructor, and among the students, focusing primarily on what can be done in terms of frameworks, scaffolding, and assessments, rather than on the day-of classroom dynamics. In conjunction with pedagogical research, I have developed these strategies over thirteen semesters at the University of Georgia teaching a general-education class on popular music in the United States. The class enrolls between 140 and 180 students from a variety of majors and backgrounds. The students meet in lecture twice a week and then attend one additional breakout discussion section of 25 to 35 students taught either by myself or a teaching assistant drawn from the university's graduate programs in musicology, composition, or performance.[10] Although this initial design comes from a class meant for nonmajors, I have adapted these strategies in a broad range of music history classrooms for undergraduate majors, as well as for graduate students, and indicate modifications that may be necessary throughout.

The First Class

Although most of this article focuses on semester-long planning, the first discussion section deserves an extended comment since it is a crucial component of establishing the norms of the classroom.[11] In order to establish a collegial atmosphere and the boundaries of acceptable interaction, the instructor explains the pedagogical value of discussion versus lecture, and defines what safe space means in the context of the course. Some students feel like they have nothing to learn from one another, or expect the instructor to impart to them the relevant knowledge, or are skeptical that discussion will have value outside of university settings.[12] To counter these assumptions, the instructor begins by giving students a peek behind the pedagogical curtain. First, we collectively define two

10. I owe those teaching assistants a great deal for their help in constructing and refining these strategies, especially Marta Kelleher, Franziska Brunner, Joshua Bedford, Mary Helen Hoque, C. J. Comp, Jennifer LaRue, Cameron Steuart, and Hanna Lisa Stefansson.

11. Many scholars agree on the importance of using the first class to define parameters and explain pedagogical goals directly to students. See especially Howard, *Discussion in the College Classroom*, 28, 30–33; and DiYanni and Borst, *The Craft of College Teaching*, 80.

12. For more, see DiYanni and Borst, *The Craft of College Teaching*, 80.

modes of teaching: the "tour guide" model and the "fitness trainer" model.[13] In the former, the instructor provides information to be passively absorbed by the student, whether in the form of lectures or assigned readings. In the latter, the instructor recommends exercises for intellectual development, but just as one would not benefit from pushups done by their trainer, the instructor cannot do the intellectual pushups for the student. The instructor also explains that, while names, dates, definitions, and descriptions of events are best conveyed in the tour-guide model, concepts and critical thinking are better taught in the fitness-trainer model. Providing an alternative metaphor for the relationship between student and instructor helps students to think of themselves as more than merely sponges meant to absorb content.[14] As Paulo Freire reminds us, "liberating education consists of acts of cognition, not transferals of information."[15] We tell students that information transfer is necessary to bring them up to speed and to provide frameworks within which exploration can happen, but the processes of contextualizing facts, weighing evidence, unpacking rhetoric, and analyzing historical patterns often produce multiple answers depending on point of view.[16] More than simple information retrieval is necessary to sort through those answers in order to arrive at a conclusion, however provisional.

The exploration of these metaphors serves as a segue into a discussion of safe spaces and collegiality.[17] The term *safe space* has many uses and has been politicized in recent years, both inside and outside of the academy, and so needs some clarification.[18] The instructor describes the "safe space" of the classroom in two ways. First, students are safe from receiving a poor grade for disagreement with anyone, including the instructor. Stated in contractual terms, students should contribute to class discussions, and in return, instruc-

13. I borrow the language of "fitness trainer" from Howard, *Discussion in the College Classroom*, 32. My "tour guide" model is a variation on Paulo Freire's "banking" metaphor for education. See Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 71–72. Freire critiques this model; his metaphor is deliberately dehumanizing. However, as I do not want students to believe professors who use this model are dehumanizing them, and because some amount of "banking" is probably necessary in large-enrollment classes, I employ the alternative metaphor of the tour guide.

14. For more on this notion, see Carmen Werder, "Fostering Self-Authorship for Citizenship: Telling Metaphors in Dialogue," in *Citizenship Across the Curriculum*, ed. Michael B. Smith, Rebecca S. Nowacek, and Jeffrey S. Bernstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 60–61.

15. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 79.

16. For more, see Smith et al., "Introduction," 6; and Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 94, 96–97.

17. I do not use the words "civil" or "professional" in this context since these have been used to silence rightfully passionate discourses on controversial subjects. I have found "collegiality" more effective, as it encourages a sense of cordiality between students without problematic associations. Collegiality also alludes to the norms of the workplace they will need to understand in their postgraduate careers.

18. For more on the term, see Kay, *Not Light, but Fire*, 14–16.

tors will not retaliate for disagreement. Freed from the need to merely repeat information back to the professor for grades, students can create and explore their own viewpoints, discarding or building on existing ideas and intellectual habits as needed. As I remind students, we, as instructors, are trying to teach how to think, not what to think. Second, the instructor asks students to treat discussions as they would the lab sections of science classes, that is, with a focus on process rather than product.[19] It may be helpful to remind students that scientific discovery is as much the result of failures as successes; trial and error are essential parts of the learning process. This means that class discussions serve as safe spaces for them to try out ideas where they will not be penalized if they do not work. Discussion is a safe space in which to be wrong, and to try again without penalty. The metaphor of scientific inquiry may also help students conceptualize their relationships with their colleagues. No scientific discovery is the result of a single person's inquiry; scientists are constantly building on each other's research. To that end, we should remind students that no single person will have the right answer, and that knowledge is generated collectively, so developing the ability to listen as a means to both critique and affirm perspectives is crucial. But the instructor also reminds them that this only works if everyone in the room—both students and the instructor—refrain from ad hominem remarks, totalizing statements about cultures or social groups, and generalizing based on individual experience. We tell students that we do not want to discourage individual disclosure, but that they should remember that anecdotes are not data. It also helps to remind students that everyone—again, including the instructor—has said something boneheaded in a public setting that they regret, so extending compassion toward one another is crucial to progress. We ask students to challenge ideas rather than people.

All of this is appropriate for nearly any classroom, but there are also challenges that are specific to music history and musicology courses. Students arrive in the classroom with a variety of ideas of what constitutes "good" and "bad" music, whether in the perceived value of certain ensembles or instruments (orchestral music versus wind ensemble, for example) or in common genre hierarchies (popular music versus classical music, or rock versus pop). These issues can become a proxy for larger questions of gender, class, race, etc.[20]

19. For more, see Matthew A. Fisher, "A Commentary from Matthew A. Fisher," in *Teaching Citizenship Across the Curriculum*, ed. Michael B. Smith, Rebecca S. Nowacek, and Jeffrey S. Bernstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 31–32; and Capps, "The Case for Discussion-Intensive Pedagogy," 6.

20. See, for example, Diane Railton, "The Gendered Carnival of Pop," *Popular Music* 20, no. 3 (2001): 321–31; and Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 19–27.

Biased misconceptions like "country music is only for uneducated rednecks"[21] or "hip hop encourages violence"[22] can surface early in the course and without much warning, destabilizing the safe space we try to maintain. While these issues can be fruitful topics for later discussions, trust must be well established before exploring the roots and implications of these attitudes. In the early days of the course, instructors remind students to be respectful of each other's preferences by helping students to differentiate between taste ("I don't like this music") and judgements of quality ("this music is bad"). They also remind students that, even though music may be marketed toward a specific demographic, listening and consumption patterns are much more complex than such marketing implies.

Throughout the semester, the instructor should take care to reinforce those norms as much as possible, whether by identifying and redirecting inappropriate comments, or by encouraging students to speak up even if they are not sure whether they are correct, and expressing gratitude when they do. Once the boundaries of acceptable interactions have been established and the grading mechanisms explained, the course can move to content. But just because the instructor says the classroom is a safe space does not mean students will believe that it is. Before expecting the class to be open to exploring difficult issues, the instructor must earn the group's trust. Furthermore, students must learn to trust their colleagues. A staged approach to structuring the semester is one way to build those relationships on both fronts.

Mixing Chronologies and Staging Topics

Recent pedagogical scholarship has recognized the utility of building skills slowly, especially when they involve written communication, whether at the microlevel of forming a research question or within the broader process of creating and executing a research agenda that results in a long-form paper.[23] Teaching skillful interpersonal communication benefits from the same basic principles.[24] While the exact steps in the process do not easily map onto dis-

21. Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 23–24.

22. Ben Llewellyn-Taylor and Melanie C. Jones, "*DAMN*ed to Earth: Kendrick Lamar, De/colonial Violence, and Earthbound Salvation," in *Kendrick Lamar and the Making of Black Meaning*, ed. Christopher M. Driscoll, Anthony B. Pinn, and Monica R. Miller (London: Routledge, 2020), 249–51.

23. See, for example, Sara Haefeli, "From Answers to Questions: Fostering Creativity and Student Engagement Through Writing," this **Journal** 7, no. 1 (2016): 1–17; Jeffrey Wright, "Teaching Research and Writing Across the Music History Curriculum," this **Journal** 7, no. 1 (2016), 35–42; and Carol A. Hess, "Score and Word: Writing About Music," in *Teaching Music History*, ed. Mary Natvig (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 193–204.

24. See, for example, Capps, "The Case for Discussion-Intensive Pedagogy," 8.

cussion skills, the underlying principles still apply: a gradual shift from information retrieval to the exploration of different approaches to the content and the production of a new analysis and interpretation; beginning with low-stakes assignments before moving on to high-stakes assignments; and giving students opportunities to revise their work.[25]

However, many music history classrooms proceed chronologically, often with the most difficult or unfamiliar material first: medieval music in an early-music classroom, twelve-tone composition in a twentieth-century survey, or Native American practices in a class on music in the US, for example. The chronological approach can therefore pose problems for building crucial discussion-based skills. The more historically distant the musical practice, the less successful students will be in the information-retrieval stage simply because they do not yet know enough to ask the right questions and contextualize the relevant facts. These early stumbling blocks might hamstring the interpretation and analysis phase. Furthermore, in some courses, the chronology of material might force engagement with sensitive issues before the safe space is truly established, leading to unsuccessful discussions. For instance, in a survey on US popular music, a lecture about the Native American roots of some Spanish-language Christian music introduces the troubling history of forced conversion, which might not be addressed effectively in discussion so early in the semester. The question of what's at stake in a lesson is always pedagogically important; in the case of discussions, however, the stakes are emotional and cultural rather than determined by grade percentage. Discussions interrogating fields of cultural power have the potential to destabilize deep-seated notions of what culture is and what culture does.[26] It is much easier to have discussions about potentially difficult topics after a rapport has been established, rather than trying to build those relationships during those discussions. Potentially difficult topics should be introduced slowly, even if chronology does not support such an approach.

One solution is to proceed chronologically with lectures or historical material (names, dates, events, anything delivered via the "tour guide" model), while using discussions to relate historical issues to contemporary ones, or, if the class is focused on more contemporary music, vice versa. Abandoning chronology in discussions gives instructors time to build skills (academic and interpersonal)

25. These are codified, among other places, in the University of Georgia's Writing Intensive Program. See "WIP Course Guidelines," The Writing Intensive Program at the University of Georgia, accessed September 8, 2021, https://wip.uga.edu/wip-courses/wip-course-guidelines/.

26. For more, see Rona Tamiko Halualani, "De-Stabilizing Culture and Citizenship: Crafting a Critical Intercultural Engagement for University Students in a Diversity Course," in *Citizenship Across the Curriculum*, ed. Michael B. Smith, Rebecca S. Nowacek, and Jeffrey S. Bernstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 44–46; and Haefeli, "From Answers to Questions," 5.

and to establish trust before tackling potentially sensitive or controversial subjects. Without such staging and scaffolding, students often retreat to their comfort zones, and lose their open-mindedness.[27] Early discussions can introduce basic concepts that will be useful for the rest of the course: the utility of primary sources, the value of comparing/contrasting recordings, or basic music-theoretical constructs. Starting with basics gives students time to develop healthy relationships with both their colleagues and the instructor, forming a discussion "training camp" in the words of Matthew Kay.[28] Moreover, these early experiences help to foster what John Capps calls "meta-discussion": a period in which instructors establish the criteria on which students will be evaluated and offer strategies about how students can participate and build their communication skills.[29] If ad hominem attacks or otherwise inappropriate criticisms arise, the instructor should gently identify them, and provide an example of a more constructive mode of feedback. Later discussions focus on applying those skills in different contexts, potentially sensitive ones.

Mixing chronologies helps students to connect historical phenomena to their contemporary lives. Important cultural themes of music history are prominent in many eras: music and ritual (whether religious or not); patronage and musical economics; music as expression and maintenance of identity; cultural syncretism and appropriation; the blurred lines between popular and art music; and more. Instructors can attach discussion about such themes to a variety of different lectures. For example, a discussion about the role of contemporary religiously affiliated musicians or styles would easily pair with lectures on subjects such as Burgundian chapels, J. S. Bach in Leipzig, shape notes, Olivier Messiaen's career as an organist, or Sofia Gubaidulina's musical spirituality, among many others.

The nonchronological approach also gives the instructor a chance to balance student workload. As noted, courses on the earlier periods of Western music history often confront students with the most challenging material early on, and end with the most familiar. The opposite can be true of later parts of the Western survey, which progress from the familiar world of the common practice to the lesser-known modernists and postmodernists. Careful allotment of discussions can smooth out course difficulty, making the semester flow more evenly. As the difficulty of lecture material ebbs, the difficulty of discussion material flows, and vice versa. Assignments that require more preparation or denser reading can accompany lectures on more familiar music, while less onerous assignments can follow more difficult lectures. Discussions may

27. For more, see Cohen, *Applying Dialogic Pedagogy*, 78
28. Kay, *Not Light, but Fire*, 17.
29. Capps, "The Case for Discussion-Intensive Pedagogy," 8.

be suspended altogether on weeks when students have a major exam or large assignment due in the class.

The following series of discussions serves as an example of how the non-chronological, staged approach can work in a popular-music history classroom within a general-education setting. This sequence may not be appropriate for all instructors. For example, in the lecture before the discussion on Christian Contemporary Music (Discussion #2), I make sure the class knows that I am Jewish. Without that information, students may think I am trying to proselytize. Along with the purposes described below, the framing of the discussion also allows me to demonstrate that I respect music from outside of my own traditions and experience. As with all pedagogical planning, instructors should take their own identities into account.[30] By outlining the stages of methods and goals, I hope to provide a framework, not a roadmap.

Discussion #1

The first few lectures introduce technical language that is common in most appreciation textbooks to describe music (melody, harmony, rhythm, meter, etc.).[31] The first discussion asks students to apply this language and its associated terms, first on their own as part of a preparation assignment.[32] During a breakout discussion period, the students divide into groups to compare their findings. This gives them a chance to get to know each other and to practice providing encouragement and criticism constructively while the instructor listens for problems and answers questions. One advantage of teaching this subject early on is that, if a disagreement between students does arise, it will likely be easy to resolve without long-term resentment; few feathers are likely to be ruffled in a disagreement over whether a song is syncopated, dissonant, etc. These groups then present their findings to the class as a whole, with the instructor clearing up misconceptions, and reinforcing understanding.[33] This presentational element helps the class become comfortable in the large-group context. Subsequent discussions also include lots of partner and small-group work, as some students need time to become comfortable speaking in front of the entire assembly.

30. For more, see Kay, *Not Light, but Fire*, 168.

31. I use the structure from Mark Evan Bonds, *Listen to This*, 4th ed. (London: Pearson, 2017).

32. For these exercises, I use the first minute of The Beatles, "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," The Marvelettes, "Please Mr. Postman," and Frank Sinatra, "They Can't Take That Away From Me."

33. Cynthia Z. Cohen observes that a thoughtful approach to guiding students' use of vocabulary is an especially good method of building trust. See Cohen, *Applying Dialogic Pedagogy*, 94.

Discussion #2

As students start to get comfortable with basic vocabulary, we move on to discussions of music and culture that brush up against potentially sensitive topics, but that center musical rather than cultural concerns. For example, a lecture on differences in early Protestant and Catholic hymnody is followed by a discussion focused on two versions of "God of This City," a Contemporary Christian song. The lecture emphasizes how historical Spanish Catholic traditions practiced in eighteenth-century missions on the West Coast cultivated beauty through consonant harmonies and graceful melismas; meanwhile, Calvinist traditions in eighteenth-century New England stressed participation by means of lining out and (later) shape notes, which align with a focus on the cultivation of one's personal faith through individual contribution to collective worship.[34] Later that week, students attend a breakout discussion inspired by Joshua Busman's comparison of two versions of "God of This City," one from a Northern Irish Anglican tradition, and another from a US Evangelical tradition.[35] The students do not read Busman's chapter, as it is too dense for a general-education course this early in the semester. However, the TAs read it before the class and use it to structure the discussion. Students simply listen to the songs and read brief accounts of both artists' relationships with the music.[36] Before class, students are asked to describe one musical difference between the two versions while applying the technical vocabulary covered in the preceding weeks. In discussion, the instructor introduces the idea that changes in musical characteristics (major versus minor harmonies, different instrumentation, different forms, etc.) can change the expressive goal of the song's presentation. The differences between the songs hint at the larger values of the two communities; the Anglican "God of This City" serves as a prayer for redemption, while the Evangelical one is

34. On these topics, see Richard Crawford and Larry Hamberlin, *An Introduction to America's Music*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), 23–30. In such contexts, it is important to emphasize that these differences are historical in nature, that both Catholic and Protestant faiths are living, dynamic traditions, and that these distinctions are no longer in effect in many congregations of the present day.

35. Joshua Busman, "'Yet to Come' or 'Still to be Done'?: Evangelical Worship and the Power of Prophetic Song," in *Congregational Music-Making and Community in a Mediated Age*, ed. Anna Nekola and Tom Wagner (Farham, UK: Ashgate, 2015), 199–214.

36. Students read "God of This City by Chris Tomlin," Songfacts, accessed November 11, 2024, https://www.songfacts.com/facts/chris-tomlin/god-of-this-city; and "How to Play 'God of this City' by Bluetree," uploaded by GivMusic YouTube account, February 26, 2009, YouTube video, 3 min., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxs5-ZtlzO8. Aaron Boyd of Bluetree briefly says he does not use a minor chord in one spot because it sounds "too Jewish," so students are warned about that before the discussion takes place. If the instructor thinks it's constructive, the statement can be brought up in class.

meant to cement bonds between the community.[37] During the second part of the discussion, the instructor asks the students to share how lyrics and music interact to convey meaning and value in the music they listen to on their own, whether religious or not. The instructor might even share some of their own music as an example (I do, but do not force my TAs to do so). Such examples introduce students to the idea that music can communicate and add meaning to text. This second part of the discussion also continues to get them comfortable with employing technical vocabulary to articulate their thoughts.

Furthermore, the discussion gives the instructor another chance to reinforce the norms of the safe space. The instructor makes sure all descriptions of expressive meaning are framed positively and couched in terms of difference rather than hierarchy. For example, one might refer back to the lecture, making it clear that both the cultivation of aesthetic beauty and broad participation in practice are equally valid pursuits. Should a student frame a response in a hierarchical manner, the instructor can ask them to rephrase. In the second half of the class, the instructor should make sure that any giggling or eye rolling in response to students' sharing their music are quickly addressed, reminding the class that musical taste can be intensely personal, and that sharing one's music with the class is an act of courage and generosity, of sharing something meaningful with one's colleagues. This can reassure students that all genres and all listeners will be afforded respect in the class.

Later discussions put identity and culture under the microscope alongside the description of sound. I have attached a breakout discussion about the history and implications of Kendrick Lamar's Pulitzer Prize for *DAMN.* to a variety of lectures. One option is to attach it to a class on hip hop's relationship to the sociopolitical conditions that gave rise to ghettoization and the cycle of poverty in the 1970s. I have also attached this discussion to a lecture on Duke Ellington's efforts to bring jazz into the concert hall and the Pulitzer committee's denying him a "special citation" in 1965, as the committee did not consider his music to be eligible.[38] Students listen to the album and read a debate between Jon Pareles and Zachary Woolfe about the award in the *New York Times*, in which the critics discuss whether the Pulitzer should ever be awarded to a "popular music" composition.[39] In the preparation assignment, students speculate on the differences between "art" and "popular" music, or whether there is a difference at all.

37. Busman, "'Yet to Come' or 'Still to be Done'?" 211.

38. See "Duke Ellington," The Pulitzer Prizes, accessed November 11, 2024, https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/duke-ellington.

39. Jon Pareles and Zachary Woolfe, "Kendrick Lamar Shakes Up the Pulitzer: Let's Discuss," *New York Times*, April 17, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/17/arts/music/kendrick-lamar-music-pulitzer-prize-damn.html.

During discussion, students unpack the various cultural forces that encourage us to sort music into one category or another; we focus especially on the relationship between class and race, which often determines who attends the kinds of institutions that teach "art music" composition. Students explore the idea that the sound is not always the primary factor in how and why we listen to music; when certain genres tend to be dismissed, the sound is sometimes associated with a group or set of circumstances that certain communities might want to disavow (for example, disco's relationship with queerness). This harkens back to the goals of the "God of This City" discussion from earlier in the semester, in which we unpacked how music can create meaning. The discussion about Lamar and the Pulitzer Prize brings race and class to bear on that process of creation. The discussion helps students recognize that communities organize meaning into hierarchies of value based on factors that have little to do with the ostensible "quality" of the music, a judgement that may have deeply troubling implications.

These three discussions are among the many that take place over the course of the semester. As students become more comfortable with the material and with each other, discussions can address more complex or fraught issues. But not everything can be accomplished during conversations in class. In a semester-long plan, assessment and feedback can also play important roles in building skills and relationships.

Assessment

Grading discussions poses problems on both philosophical and practical levels. Assigning grades can dampen discussion. Since students tend to choose a safe path to earning a good grade as a desired course outcome, assigning grades to discussions can have the effect of discouraging exploration and experimentation.[40] Grades can also promote competition rather than cooperation, which is detrimental to productive discussion and to creative thinking in general.[41] Furthermore, in classes with large enrollments, instructors may have trouble keeping track of student contributions to discussions and likely do not have time to grade dozens of assignments. Yet research has also shown that grades are correlated with better preparation, livelier classrooms, and increased retention of information, and that they can be a crucial mechanism for establishing expectations and providing feedback.[42]

40. See Alfie Kohn, "The Case Against Grades," *Educational Digest* 77, no. 5 (2012): 9.

41. See Kohn, "The Case Against Grades," 13; and Haefeli, "From Answers to Questions," 3–4.

42. See Howard, *Discussion in the College Classroom*, 146–47.

My solution is to take the focus off of "participation" and instead to grade "preparation" and "reflection" by means of assignments tailored specifically to the latter two processes. These assignments are worth only a few points individually, though they add up to a substantial portion of the final grade. They are graded primarily on completeness rather than correctness—especially the reflection assignments—which upholds the instructor's end of the obligation to maintain a safe space and to refrain from retaliating for disagreement. Feedback is only given in cases where points are deducted for incompleteness or when serious misconceptions are apparent (for example, the student mischaracterizes a reading to the point where the instructor suspects they have not done it).

Preparation assignments ask students to summarize readings in a few sentences, and to begin to engage with the subject of the discussion, also in a few sentences, as briefly described above.[43] Completed assignments are posted on public discussion boards so that students who are absent from class or who did not get a chance to speak on a given day can read and respond to them, and thus complete the reflection assignment. When practical, I make these assignments due at least twenty-four hours before class starts so that, if there are widespread misconceptions about the reading, the instructor has a chance to address those misconceptions with ample preparation time; early submission also allows the instructor to plan to focus on what students find interesting or difficult.

Recently developed practices of "ungrading" provide new strategies for effectively assessing what we think of as "participation" by shifting the focus to "reflection." In place of an instructor assigning grades, "ungrading" may ask students to assign their own grades based on critical consideration of their class performance.[44] Reflection assignments foster the development of metacognitive skills, as students learn to evaluate their own work rather than simply relying on external feedback.[45] To that end, every discussion is followed by the same reflection assignment, which clearly establishes expectations for discussions:[46]

1. Describe one important contribution you made to the discussion.

43. This strategy is recommended by, among others, DiYanni and Borst, *The Craft of College Teaching*, 84.

44. See Kohn, "The Case Against Grading"; and Jesse Strommel, "Ungrading: An FAQ," accessed February 6, 2020, https://www.jessestommel.com/ungrading-an-faq/. Jay R. Howard recommends this framework as one way to grade discussion in Howard, *Discussion in the College Classroom*, 153.

45. See Strommel, "Ungrading"; and Alanna Gillis, "Reconceptualizing Participation Grading as Skill Building," *Teaching Sociology* 47, no. 1 (2018): 15.

46. On designing questions for reflection, see Strommel, "Ungrading." For another model of a reflection assignment that accomplishes similar goals, see Gillis, "Reconceptualizing Participation Grading as Skill Building," 15. My assignment is much shorter than Gillis's model so that it facilitates ease of grading for TAs who are responsible for up to seventy students.

2. Describe one important contribution someone else (not the instructor) made to the discussion.
3. Pick one:
   - Describe something that happened in class that caused you to change your mind.
   - Describe something that happened in class that reinforced your point of view.
   - If there is anything you want to add to the discussion, please do so here.

The assignment is designed to foster dialogue rather than competition. Too often, students think of discussions as "debates" that they can "win." By giving equal weight to listening and changing one's mind as to having preexisting notions affirmed, the assignment makes clear that changing one's mind is not a failure or weakness, but a crucial part of intellectual growth.[47] As with the preparation assignments, feedback is only given in cases of an incomplete assignment or in special cases as described below.

These post-discussion reflections can also help balance classroom dynamics. The questions are designed to place the same amount of emphasis on listening—a skill that often gets lost when students attempt to talk "enough" to earn their participation grade—as on speaking. Discussion is a collaborative activity and cannot proceed effectively if all parties are talking over or past one another. Putting equal focus on listening and speaking helps inspire shy students to speak, since making at least one verbal contribution during class is required. It also may help talkative students share the floor with their quieter colleagues, since they know that they will be asked to summarize at least one point someone else has made. Moreover, it allows the instructor to ask the more verbose students if they would be willing to share their comments in the reflection assignment so that conversation can move on to the next topic.

The opportunity for feedback also provides a normalized channel of private communication between instructors and students. Guiding students toward effective interpersonal skills takes time, individual attention, and occasionally private communication, things that cannot always be accommodated during the class period. Feedback on students' reflection assignments can provide that space. For example, the instructor can praise a quiet student for their contribution and express a wish that they speak up more often. If given during class, such praise may embarrass the student or give an appearance of favoritism; it can be more effective to relay that praise privately. The same goes for students who might need some encouragement to talk less and listen more. Additionally,

47. For more, see Kay, *Not Light, but Fire*, 81.

if a student's account of their colleague's contributions is superficial or incorrect, private feedback allows the instructor to ask them to listen a little more closely.

This channel also provides an opportunity to confront troublesome ideas or misconceptions that come up in class. If a student says something problematic, even if we address these ideas and misconceptions during the discussion itself, reiterating our concerns in the private forum of written feedback gives us a chance to be more direct without risking embarrassing students in front of their colleagues. In such cases, we do not take credit away, as that would compromise our side of the safe-space bargain; after all, the student may consider such statements and misconceptions as mere "disagreement." Rather than shutting down students for making mistakes, reflection feedback offers an opportunity for continued conversation. The possibility of extended engagement with a student's ideas, individual attention, and privacy offered in reflection feedback has, in my experience, offered one of the most effective mechanisms for helping students to move beyond problematic attitudes.

As with the preparation assignment, more advanced classes may require less structured questions. As advanced classes are typically smaller and students often have a better rapport with their colleagues by a later point in their education, there may not even be a need for a reflection assignment, as many of the goals can be accomplished through in-class moderating.

Classroom discussion and the participation grade do not have to elicit dread in either instructors or students. A semester-long plan for building both interpersonal and academic skills enables the instructor to establish a "safe space" and to help students gain confidence with complex concepts. Mixing chronologies helps history come alive; it also evens out student workload and stress. I hope to have provided some potential answers to the questions I posed at the beginning of this article. Well-crafted assignments establish expectations so students know what is required of them in terms of verbal contributions. Such assignments also promote both listening and verbal skills. Instead of having the instructor keep track of all contributions, asking students to reflect on their experiences encourages metacognitive skills and eases the burden of grading in large classes. Evaluating on completeness rather than correctness helps to assuage student fears that grades will be "subjective" and informed by instructor biases. While all biases—the instructor's included—cannot be eliminated in a single course, the maintenance of the safe-space contract helps ensure that students will be treated fairly by the instructor and their colleagues. By dispelling the mystery around participation and discussion, we can shape the next generation of artistic citizens and prepare our students for the diverse careers ahead of them.