

12-31-2013

Building Connections in the First-year Undergraduate Experience

June Countryman .

University of Prince Edward Island, jcountryman@upei.ca

Andrew Zinck

University of Prince Edward Island, azinck@upei.ca

Follow this and additional works at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cjsotl_rcacea
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2013.2.2>

Recommended Citation

Countryman, June . and Zinck, Andrew (2013) "Building Connections in the First-year Undergraduate Experience," *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 2.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2013.2.2>

Available at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cjsotl_rcacea/vol4/iss2/2

Building Connections in the First-year Undergraduate Experience

Abstract

Concerned about the success rate of new students in our program we designed and implemented a compulsory set of experiences which aim to support students in their transition from high school to university by 1) developing their sense of belonging to a community of learners and by 2) articulating with them the interrelationships among their first year core courses. We initiated various strategies which we have refined in response to student feedback over the past three years. In this paper we describe the pedagogical moves that constitute our initiative and the lessons we learned. We explore essential academic and personal issues that first-year students in all programs face. We share our research findings and address the big ideas that could be applied to any discipline or multi-disciplinary program.

Préoccupés par les taux de rétention des étudiants de première année, les auteurs ont conçu et mis en oeuvre un ensemble d'expériences obligatoires dont le but est d'aider les étudiants à effectuer la transition entre l'école secondaire et l'université. Ils ont établi deux objectifs : (a) développer chez les étudiants le sens d'appartenance à une communauté d'apprenants et (b) démontrer les corrélations qui existent entre les cours de base de première année que les étudiants suivent. Diverses stratégies ont été entreprises et plus tard améliorées, à partir des rétroactions fournies par les étudiants au cours de l'étude de deux ans. Cet article présente une explication des actions pédagogiques de cette initiative et explore les questions essentielles académiques et personnelles auxquelles sont confrontés les étudiants de première année dans tous les programmes. Les résultats de cette étude sont résumés et les idées générales qui peuvent s'appliquer à n'importe quelle discipline ou à des programmes multidisciplinaires sont présentées en détail.

Keywords

academic engagement, first year university experience, significant learning

We are professors in a small Bachelor of Music program in Eastern Canada, where we both instruct core courses required of all first-year students. We were troubled by the number of students who struggled with the combination of academic, personal and social demands of university life, as evidenced by attendance issues, late and poorly done assignments, and verbal admissions of feeling overwhelmed. We determined that a first-year initiative situated at the department level—outside individual courses but more intimate than the campus-wide offerings—might help our students negotiate a successful transition from high school to university. We designed our initiative, *Music Immersion*, and we received permission from our university Research Ethics Board to conduct an action research project so that we might systematically study the effects of *Music Immersion* on student learning. In this article we describe the components of our initiative, which consisted of a series of experiences we required all first-year students to undertake, and we outline the participatory action research process we employed. Student participation in the research aspect of *Music Immersion* was, of course, voluntary. We then present the conclusions we drew from our data analysis. We embed findings from current literature on undergraduate student engagement that were helpful in both framing our project and analyzing the results. We conclude with our discoveries and ideas that might be applicable to other teaching contexts.

The Music Immersion Initiative

We were motivated to address the issue of first year students' success in our program because of a troubling retention trend. In each of three academic years prior to the introduction of *Music Immersion* one-quarter to one-third of our first year music students did not return for their second year of study. Some students were not successful in their core music courses; others did not meet the minimum musical performance standard and still others, although successful in terms of earned credits, found the program too stressful, which we understood anecdotally to mean some amalgam of “too much work” and “too much pressure”. We know that some drop-off in enrolment is typical in a university music program because of its highly specialized nature. We wondered, though, whether a specific initiative to address the first year music student experience would make a difference in terms of student success, as evidenced by retention numbers.

In response to these concerns we developed the *Music Immersion* initiative, a series of interventions for first-year students that occur periodically throughout the academic year. We found support in the research literature for creating early interventions and for providing sustained, proactive attention at key points (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews & Nordstrom, 2009; Kaufka, 2010; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008; Palmer, O’Kane & Owens, 2009; Tinto, 2006).

Our course design and assessment practices are influenced by Fink’s (2003) taxonomy of significant learning, and we acknowledge the contribution that this framework makes to our conception of optimal student experience. Fink categories significant learning as resulting in “some kind of lasting change that is important in terms of the learner’s life” (p.30). Six categories constitute Fink’s taxonomy

- foundational knowledge;
- application;
- integration;
- human dimension;

- caring; and
- learning how to learn.

As we will make clear below, two of the categories — integration and learning how to learn— are particularly germane to our specific project.

We began planning our *Music Immersion* project by outlining what we believed were obstacles to engagement for some first-year students, based on our years of teaching experience with first year undergraduates. While the lack of well-established work habits—especially in the areas of time management and preparation for classes—poses considerable challenges for some students, and the reading of academic texts is a significant obstacle for many incoming students; we wanted to identify the broader impediments to engagement with learning.

Kuh (2009) explains that the construct *student engagement* “represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (p. 683). The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), first administered in the USA in 1999, measures student engagement across five dimensions: (a) level of academic challenge, (b) active and collaborative learning, (c) student-faculty interaction, (d) supportive campus environment and (e) enriching educational experience. In planning *Music Immersion* we reviewed the NSSE benchmarks and recognized that we were addressing aspects of each one.

Articulating what we had determined to be obstacles to some first-year students’ academic success, and reviewing selected literature on student engagement led us to clarify our goals for our first-year initiative. These goals, outlined below, are non-hierarchical and mutually reinforcing.

1. Connections

We want to assist students to develop a greater awareness and understanding of the interrelationships among their first year courses within their program. While it seems particularly obvious in a specialized program where five of their course titles include the word *music*, we observed again and again that many students compartmentalize their courses (music theory, aural skills, music history, keyboard harmony, studio lessons and ensembles) as separate entities, minimizing the disciplinary interrelationships.

Core message: *All the parts relate.*

2. Self-efficacy

We know that a key aspect of improving student success is to address students’ perceived self-efficacy— their beliefs about their own abilities (Bandura, 2001). First-year music students have the advantage of small class sizes, but also the requirement to constantly “perform” in class, musically and verbally. An important goal for us was to provide recurring, tangible assurances to students that they are musically knowledgeable and capable.

Core messages: *This is hard work and You know stuff.*

3. Learning Community

We want to help our first-year students to develop a genuine identification as a member of a community of learners. While collaborative learning experiences are part of many of the introductory music courses, our sense was that most students still worked in isolation once class was over. We emphasized the powerful learning potential in working with peers and in developing the habit of requesting help from professors.

Core message: *Knowledge is socially constructed and Asking for help is a sign of strength.*

4. Metacognition

We built self-reflective experiences into the project to help students to develop greater awareness about the process of knowing, of considering *how* they learn, and not just what they learn. Reflection is essential in order to make learning meaningful (Fink, 2003).

Core message: *How you think and feel about your learning matters.*

We posit that an on-going commitment to helping our students in each of these areas can result in the overall goal: improved student engagement.

Participatory Action Research Project

We designed a qualitative research study to enable us to examine the successes and challenges of our *Music Immersion* initiative. We understand participatory action research as a self-reflective study of practice, *in situ*, undertaken to improve that practice. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) note that participatory action research involves a spiral of self-reflective cycles: planning a change, acting and observing the process and consequences of the change, reflecting on these processes and consequences, re-planning, acting and observing again, and reflecting again. We conducted our study through two academic years (2009-2011), which allowed us to enact this cycle of reflecting, discussing and re-constructing.

Our research question was: in what ways might a program of regular, targeted, non-course-based interactions between first year students and two professors improve students' successful academic transition to university, based on both student self-reports and on retention numbers? We sought educational change with our *Music Immersion* initiative; we wanted our first-year students to develop a learner identity that challenges their prevailing mental images of learning as a lonely, solitary endeavor and of courses as distinct and unrelated entities. We wanted students to experience the power of a social constructivist approach to learning, and to see themselves as active participants in a learning community.

Our project was participatory in that it engaged students in interrogating their challenges and victories as new university students, both collectively and individually. As research participants they knew that the purpose of *Music Immersion* was to improve their academic experience, that the initiatives we shared with them were experimental, and that we believed their honest feedback was crucial to *Immersion's* effectiveness.

Reflexivity

Our project enabled us to examine systematically the effects of our targeted initiatives, theorizing our practice, as Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) point out, by “learning, with others, by doing—changing the ways in which we interact in a shared social world” (p. 568). For the three years prior to developing *Music Immersion* we had regularly shared pedagogical ideals and challenges. We initiated this project as a result of many conversations about how we might tackle our mutual concerns about some first-year students’ academic engagement. We took a reflexive approach to this research project where we constantly monitored our ethical responsibility to our students; we kept our roles as *Music Immersion* intervention leaders and as professors distinct to these first year students, but acted on anything we learned in *Music Immersion* that could enhance the student experience in our respective courses.

The insider nature of this action research study required us to consider deeply the issues of participant autonomy and freedom from coercion. We designed procedures for anonymous student responses and we carefully articulated to students the rationale for researching the *Music Immersion* initiative. We also worked to establish a sense of shared ownership of the *Music Immersion* initiatives, by regularly inviting feedback from our students.

Music Immersion Components

We began the first iteration of *Music Immersion* in September 2009 and we required all first-year students (N=20) to participate in the initiative. The program consisted of the following three components

1. Two full-group sessions followed by short, anonymously written reflections in response to the sessions (September and January).
2. Individual interviews with 20 participants and anecdotal data collection (October, November, and February).
3. Anonymous reflective surveys at the end of each term, December and April (see Appendix A).

We describe each of these program components, which also constituted our sites for data collection

Group Session #1: Introduction to Music Immersion

We introduced *Music Immersion* on the Friday of the first week of classes in September 2009. We used this meeting to explain the components of *Music Immersion* and we articulated our purpose: to support students in their first year of university study. We noted that students should expect the workload in the program to be intense and that they should be responsible with attendance, assignment completion and seeking help from professors when needed as these were proactive moves. We then organized the students into small groups to discuss case studies that describe hypothetical new university students in various situations. Sharing in the full group followed, and we found the level of engagement high as students voiced both doubts and solutions to dilemmas they may themselves encounter in their first-year journey.

We ended this introductory session with an explanation of our research process, the concept of informed consent, and our ethical responsibilities as researchers. We emphasized that *Music Immersion* was separate from their courses and completely unrelated to any academic evaluation. We distributed the consent forms (see Appendix B) and reiterated that, while their involvement in *Music Immersion* was required, their participation in the research component was voluntary.

Individual Interviews

We conducted individual interviews with each first-year student three times during the academic year, in mid-October, late November and mid-February. A week prior to these interviews, we requested email updates, including anecdotal comments and/or provisional grades, from all music professors and sessional instructors who were teaching participating students. One of us prepared an electronic summary of this submitted information for each student. Students signed up for individual, 10-minute interviews with one of the two authors.

We began each interview by inviting the student to read his/her on-screen summary and the compilation of information from each of the student's professors, and to comment on this snapshot of their academic progress. We discovered early on in the project that having the student digest the information first is much more effective than having the professor lead a conversation about the report. The impact of seeing all of their data in one place is often powerful, particularly for students who are not excelling. We were initially surprised at how "new" this information seemed to be for many participants. We encouraged the student to articulate his/her interpretation of the information, which required that s/he take ownership, at least in that moment. We asked the student to strategize possible next steps and we offered suggestions and encouragement.

Group Session #2: Interdisciplinary Session

In early January, we co-led a more formal, music-focused class, held during the regular meeting time of one of our courses. Our intent in this session was to demonstrate and underscore the disciplinary skills and knowledge that students have acquired or honed since September. We provided a disciplinary problem to solve: decoding a short, unfamiliar musical score. First, students sight-read the multi-part choral composition, utilizing peer leadership to make it through to the end of the composition. Next, we prompted students to analyze the score's melodic and harmonic language and compositional devices. Then we scaffolded a discussion of the music's stylistic features, prompting students with leading questions to help them to collectively determine the probable historical/stylistic era and the performance practices that their analysis might imply. In this exercise, students demonstrated their growth in musicianship skills, theory and analysis, and musicological understanding. Naturally, individual success rates varied, but the emphasis throughout the session was on collaboration.

Following this problem-solving exercise, we invited the students to think about their individual and collective accomplishment and to consider how successful they would have been with the same exercise back in September. In both cohorts of *Music Immersion* the reaction to this verbal invitation was the same: instant and spontaneous "high-fives", "props" and hoots of laughter, as they recognized the new skills and understandings they had acquired in only one semester. We gave them a few minutes to bask in this celebratory bonding and then highlighted the integrated nature of their learning that this problem-solving exercise demonstrated. This real-

world music problem could only have been solved by using understandings from their core courses in theory, aural skills, music history and performance (studio lessons and required ensemble rehearsals). We ended this session with a *Quick Write*¹, asking students to reflect on the impact of their first semester of university work.

Anonymous Surveys

In the end-of-year survey (see Appendix A) we invited students to reflect on their academic progress. The survey questions were designed to target students' perceptions of their study skills, practice routines, barriers to success, and evidence of progress, and requested that students articulate specific moves they have made to ameliorate academic difficulties. We asked these questions for each core area of the program, risking redundancy, in an attempt to stimulate targeted reflective thinking.

Data Collection and Analysis

We received ethical approval to collect both written responses and anecdotal comments from two cohorts of first-year students. While students' participation in *Music Immersion* was mandatory, their involvement in the data-gathering aspect of the initiative was voluntary, a distinction we took great care to make. All students (N=20 in 2009-2010; N=18 in 2010-2011) gave informed consent. Student surveys and *Quick Write* responses were completed anonymously (students used self-chosen pseudonyms) and were not made available to the researchers until after grades submission at the end of each of the academic years in which the research project was conducted.

In addition to the written responses, we gathered two other kinds of data. We collected anecdotal comments during the individual interviews by scribing student remarks that seemed germane to our inquiry. We then showed the student the verbatim transcription and asked her/him to verify our scribing. These recorded comments were assigned a second pseudonym, again chosen by the participant. Additionally, we each kept a research journal, in which we jotted down impressions and ideas following each *Immersion* event.

At end of the first year of *Music Immersion* we made two changes to the data collection process, resulting from our own recorded observations and from reading the two sets of student surveys. We eliminated the December reflective survey because it seemed not to provide any insights that we were not already learning anecdotally. By completing the survey (Appendix A) in April, students were provided the opportunity to reflect on their first-year journey as a whole, which may have minimized the tendency to give perfunctory responses to questions they had answered only a few months earlier. We also streamlined the use of pseudonyms, realizing that the use of two pseudonyms per student was unnecessary. In both cohorts we detected no concerns about anonymity and found that some students signed everything with their real name, despite our reminders

Music Immersion required periodic input from all instructors of first year students. As a result we shared with our colleagues at regular departmental meetings our general impressions from the various *Music Immersion* initiatives. This provided opportunities for us to verbally clarify our intentions and interpretations, which functioned as a form of ongoing inductive

¹ *Quick Write* is a reflective writing strategy. Students are given a prompt and a short time (two to five minutes) to respond in writing. See Fisher & Frey (2008).

analysis. Individually, we recorded our observations, questions and ideas following each *Music Immersion* event. At the conclusion of the academic year we each reviewed our research notes, the written student data, and our collection of anecdotal comments, and manually coded for evidence of student awareness or growth with respect to each of our four goals – connection, self-efficacy, learning community and metacognition. We also noted surprising comments and clues about ways to improve each component of *Music Immersion*. In our joint meetings, we used our coded data to discuss and debate the student responses, and what these responses communicated about our progress in addressing our goals.

Findings

We use the four goals of *Music Immersion* initiative as organizers for presenting our data interpretations. Verbatim student comments from two cohorts of first-year students provided snapshots of student thinking related to each of our program goals. The extent to which these sentiments are influenced by researcher effect is, naturally, impossible to determine; nevertheless, we claim that the unique power of *Music Immersion* lies in the multiple opportunities it provides us to engage students, both individually and collectively, both face-to-face and through surveys, with our key messages. We posit that it is the regular reiteration of these key messages that increases the potential to influence students' engagement with their learning.

Goal 1: Connections among Courses

The goal of developing students' understanding of interrelationships among their core courses would seem to be an easy one in a program as specialized as music. Our prior teaching experiences indicate that this is frequently not the case. We suggest that students become habituated, through six years of junior and senior high school, to experiencing school subjects as discrete entities marked off by bells and room changes. While our students know, in an abstract sense, that their courses in music theory, musicianship skills, music history, keyboard proficiency, studio performance and ensemble performance are all related, the embodied experience of "doing school" is powerful. In order to disrupt the prevailing conception of courses as disconnected events, and learning as fragmented and compartmentalized, we continually address the idea of integrative learning.

Integrative learning "asks students to connect skills and knowledge from multiple sources and experiences, apply theory to practice in various settings, utilize diverse and even contradictory points of view and understand issues and positions contextually" (Youatt & Wilcox, 2008, p. 25). Our goal was to increase our students' capabilities to integrate their learning, both between the embodied knowing of solo and ensemble performing and the verbalizable knowing of theoretical/ musicological discourses, and among the various courses that comprise the languaged part of advanced musical study. These following student comments reveal a range of understanding concerning integrated learning:

Peter: These required courses all need each other – without one the rest wouldn't make sense.

Topher: The music courses all feed off one another and to fail one really affects every other class.

Maryanne: I think the courses relate a lot at times; other times you feel like you're going off in all directions.

Mavis: For the first part of the year the courses didn't seem to relate at all, but as we learned more and more everything started connecting! It was a very exciting discovery – makes me feel smart!!

Integration is one of Fink's (2003) six facets of significant learning, a taxonomy intended to frame course design as a vehicle for growing self-directed learners. Fink notes that "the act of making new connections gives learners a new form of *power*, especially intellectual power" (p. 31). We acknowledge that *Music Immersion* will not cause every student to integrate their learning, and that recognizing that connections exist does not automatically lead to students' enacting them.

Goal 2: Self-Efficacy

Many new university students experience both academic culture shock and the emotional shock of negotiating new social relationships and, in some cases, moving to a new living environment. According to Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld (2005), two elements are essential for a student's successful transition to university: (a) making compatible friends who provide social support, and (b) developing a relationship with at least one academic staff member. These researchers emphasize the importance of conveying to students that experiences of academic and emotional shock are normal. As Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld confirm "especially important was emotional support for feelings of self-confidence and ease in the self, but instrumental, informational and appraisive support gave students confidence in terms of their academic work" (p. 720).

Music Immersion, situated outside of individual courses but closely connected to the academic reality of first-year students, was ideally positioned to assist in strengthening students' beliefs about their abilities. We discovered that some students were helped by our repeated confirmations that the program is indeed challenging and the workload heavy. Students commented as follows:

O'Reilly: It sounds weird, but realizing that everyone else is in the same boat with the workload and the stress has actually helped me.

Topher: Even though I feel like I'm still struggling I *have* learned and I need to remember where I started and where I am now.

Lexi: I feel relieved knowing that I'm not the only one who gets stressed by all the work!

Another important aspect of addressing self-efficacy involves reassuring students that they bring a wealth of knowledge and skills to their new situation. Reminding students of the specific expertise that brought them to the program appeared to boost self-efficacy beliefs for some, and at least began the process of self-reflection for others, as is illustrated in the following excerpts from students' written and oral responses:

Jackson: I need to continue being positive, keep an open mind and keep focused. I need to keep the attitude that I will eventually get this.

Franny: I have the ability to do this. For one reason or another I don't do it. Part of me is scared to do it. I feel bogged down with the workload but I think it is because I don't understand what I am fully doing.

Chelan: I learned that negative self-talk can block your ability to learn. That is huge for me.

Joni: That session (the January multidisciplinary session) had a pretty big impact. It helped assure us that we are indeed progressing even though sometimes it doesn't feel like it.

The reality that one's self-efficacy beliefs are crucial in achieving academic success was new information for many of our students.

Goal 3: Learning Community

In a small department like ours, a feeling of belonging is potentially easy to achieve. Our students spend a great deal of time in the music building, with daytime classes, practice sessions, and evening rehearsals. They have lockers and a kitchen/ lounge, which provide a home base on campus, an important factor in creating a sense of belonging (See Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005).

Palmer, O'Kane, and Owens (2009) theorize the liminal space that new students occupy, "a transient, betwixt space between home and university" (p. 38), and the importance of a "turning point" (p. 41) event or experience within the first six to eight weeks "that stands out, and which triggers and results in the student developing (or not) a sense of belonging to university life" (p. 38). In our experience, two Music Department social events—a student-faculty soccer party and a student-run frosh party—functioned as turning point experiences for many of our students in terms of social belonging.

Belonging to a social community may be easier to achieve than belonging to a learning community. Our *Music Immersion* project created opportunities for us to emphasize that knowledge is socially constructed and to encourage students to work collaboratively. The following comments confirm that some students were experiencing the beginnings of learning community.

Liza: We all know each other now so we're helping each other.

Amanda: I can't believe how much Joe (classmate) helps us. He finds ear training so easy but he's really patient with us and won't give us the answers so we can really learn it – we've never done this kind of thing before you know.

Maxwell: Four of us are getting together every Sunday night to work on history – it helps me so much to talk with my peers about what this stuff means.

Goal 4: Metacognition

Metacognition is “the procedural knowledge that is required for the actual regulation and control over one’s learning activities” (Veenman & Spaans, 2005, p. 160). *Music Immersion* invites students on multiple occasions to take active charge of their learning.

Fink (2003) includes *learning how to learn* as one of his six facets of significant learning. We use his three subsets of this facet—learning to be a better student, learning how to acquire and construct knowledge and learning how to be a self-directing learner (p. 50)—to guide our work. Research directed at examining first-year students’ epistemological beliefs (Anderson & Hounsell, 2007; Walker et al., 2009) reminds us of the importance of ascertaining students’ beliefs about knowing and learning early in the first year of university studies, of recognizing the idiosyncratic, tenacious and often tacit nature of these beliefs, and of making students aware of their own learning beliefs. Unmasking students’ beliefs about knowing is the important first step in developing metacognitive skills. Jarvis’s comment illustrates this elusive concept.

Jarvis: My Prof used the term *thematic connection* in class and I felt stupid because I didn’t know what it even meant. But later I looked it up and realized it’s not really hard, you know, just a new way of talking, and it’s on me to learn how to interpret it.

The invitation to students to reflect on their learning, through interviews, surveys and *Quick Writes*, resulted in some indications of metacognitive thinking because students were required to articulate thoughts about their learning processes and challenges. The interviews, in particular, required students to set goals, self-assess, and strategize next steps as a result of instructor feedback. Students responded to their experiences in the following ways:

Mao: The interviews and reflections are really helpful in allowing me to see how I’m *really* doing and not how I *think* I’m doing.

Ian: The one-on-one interviews have helped me to know what I need to work on and what I’m succeeding at – a nice confidence booster in some areas and a wake-up call in others.

A Bigger Picture

We were so focused on *our* messages for the *Music Immersion* initiative that it was not until we began data analysis at the end of the first year that we started to recognize that students were giving us parallel messages about *their* needs. The students’ messages to their professors, as we interpret them, are cumulative. We enumerate them here, and illustrate them with sample student quotes.

Belonging: Students told us repeatedly about the need to “feel like I belong.”

Peter: I’m becoming very comfortable here.

Jenna: I’m starting to feel like I have a place here.

Liza: All the students are a big family and that makes it easier to learn.

Chester: I friggin' love it here. It's challenging and it makes me work hard but it's also teaching me amazing life skills.

Care: Students emphasized that they need to feel cared for and reassured about their progress.

Sandy: This immersion program helps me feel that someone is taking the time to be there and help. That has reassured me.

Serena: I appreciate the interviews greatly. They show me exactly where I am and give me a chance to talk about it with someone who does care whether I pass or fail.

Summer: I liked seeing all my marks and Profs' comments in one place. I also enjoyed having a Prof that I could talk to about the things I'm struggling with.

Josie: Continue to encourage students. Be available for help and keep showing us that you care about our marks.

Chelan: I liked seeing my progress report at each interview. I think Profs will say more in written comments than they do in person.

Martin: The interviews were fantastic! They breached the gap between professors and students, so that we're less scared to approach you later.

Understanding: Students often expressed that they needed their professors to recognize that they find the program demanding. We emphasized the intensity of the program in each session. In return, we learned that some of our students felt nurtured and protected by our acknowledgement of the work load.

Maryanne: Struggle is normal. Seeking help is normal. I feel better knowing that!

May: What you said about "catching negativity" really struck home. I think I've been being too negative and it was wonderful to have the chance to stop and appreciate what we have accomplished as musicians so far this year.

Respect: Students often used phrases like *being respected* and *feeling accepted* in both their verbal and written responses.

Cassie: Being able to talk with Profs and knowing that I am respected for who I am makes the courses easier and more fun.

Agency: Students articulated the importance they attach to the feeling of having input into their first-year journey. Many students indicated that, through *Music Immersion*, they gained a sense of "having a voice". We contend that when students feel empowered to speak about their educational concerns and to know that they are being heard they begin to take more ownership in their learning process.

Peter: I really liked that you consulted us about our thoughts about the program.

Martin: I wonder why other schools don't do this kind of research into their students' well-being. I have friends at other music schools and they are always amazed at how involved everyone is here.

The comments here appear supportive of the *Music Immersion* initiative, and indeed, among the hundreds of written and scribed comments we have collected, none were negative or even neutral. We do not, however, interpret this as evidence of spectacular success. In the first iteration of *Music Immersion* (N=20), one student left the program in December and three more withdrew at the end of the year. In the second iteration (N=18), two students failed to meet program requirements and a third switched to another program. These numbers are typical in our program because of the sometimes shocking misfit between a student's image of music as a career path and the reality of university music study.

Conclusions

Music Immersion is now a regular part of our program and students continue to indicate that it makes a positive difference. Our retention rates have improved considerably since beginning this initiative. Although we cannot necessarily claim a direct causal relationship, the impact on the students is clear through their periodic informal requests that we consider expanding *Music Immersion* to include second-year students.

We acknowledge that our teaching context is unusual in its small numbers of students and its package of common core courses. Nonetheless, we believe it is possible that components of our project to improve student engagement can work in other contexts. We suggest that the following four features of *Music Immersion* transcend our specific situation.

1. Students get used to talking with professors. They do not come to the academy with that habit, and so the interview sessions establish a pattern for future interaction. We learned that it is not enough to tell students at the beginning of the year to come for help, or to occasionally remind them about office hours. Professors need to be proactive, to *require* first-year students to visit our offices, and to establish the habit of having conversations about learning.
2. For students, the relational element comes first. Feeling cared for and respected by their professors were prerequisites for these first-year students. Some students engaged only minimally, or with great difficulty, in learning situations where a trusting relationship was lacking. We are reminded of the profound responsibility professors have to create optimal conditions for learning.
3. Working with first-year students at a departmental or program level provides the opportunity to offer them a glimpse of the potential that university study holds. We invite students to begin a journey of building genuine knowledge coherence—a network of interrelated knowledge and skills that we each strive to own, and to use in community.
4. An academic culture that models self-reflection and reflexivity, that demystifies its own workings and invites and encourages students to embrace its epistemological challenges has a better chance of engaging students than one that does not take this approach. This is

the essential first step in reaching toward a positive vision of education, a vision Abbs (2003) describes perfectly:

Education exists to set up a conversation down the ages and across the cultures, across both time and space, so that students are challenged by other ways of understanding and, at the same time, acquire ever new materials—metaphors, models, ideas, images, narratives, facts—for shaping and reshaping and testing again that never finished process, their own intellectual and spiritual lives (p. 17).

The adoption of *Music Immersion* as a regular facet of our first-year students' program indicates our strong conviction that the initiative makes a positive difference for many students. It is a time-consuming project, and in this milieu of shrinking resources and added responsibilities it is sometimes tempting to let it go. We do not, however, because we have experienced firsthand how, when we make genuine and concrete efforts to invite students into a community of learners, we help them to meet the challenge of becoming university students with confidence and a sense of personal agency that is required for the "never finished process" that Abbs describes.

References

- Abbs, P. (2003). *Against the flow: Education, the arts and postmodern culture*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Anderson, C., & Hounsell, D. (2007). Knowledge practices: 'Doing the subject' in undergraduate courses. *The Curriculum Journal*, 18(4), 463-478.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09585170701687910>
- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 1-16. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.1>
- Brinkworth, R., McCann, B., Matthews, C., & Nordstrom, K. (2009). First year expectations and experiences: Student and teacher perspectives. *Higher Education*, 58, 157-173.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10734-008-9188-3>
- Fink, L. D. (2003). *Creating significant learning experiences: An Integrated approach to designing college courses*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2008). *Improving adolescent literacy: Content area strategies at work* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Kaufka, B. (2010). Beyond the classroom: A Case study of first-year students' perceptions of required student-faculty conferences. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 10(2), 25-33.
- Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (2005). Participatory action research: Communicative action and the public sphere. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.) (pp. 559-604). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kuh, G. (2009). What student affairs professionals need to know about student engagement. *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(6), 683-706.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0099>
- Kuh, G., Cruce, T., Shoup, R., Kinzie, J., & Gonyea, R. (2008). Unmasking the effects of student engagement on first-year college grades and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(5), 540-563. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jhe.0.0019>

- National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). (2010). *Benchmarks of effective educational practice*. Retrieved from http://nsse.iub.edu/pdf/nsse_benchmarks.pdf
- Palmer, M., O’Kane, P., & Owens, M. (2009). Betwixt spaces: Student accounts of turning point experiences in the first year transition. *Studies in Higher Education, 34*(1), 37-54. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075070802601929>
- Tinto, V. (2006). Research and practice of student retention: What next? *Journal of College Student Retention, 8*(1), 1-19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2190/4YNU-4TMB-22DJ-AN4W>
- Veenman, M., & Spaans, M. (2005). Relation between intellectual and metacognitive skills: Age and task difference. *Learning and Individual Differences, 15*, 159-176. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2004.12.001>
- Walker, S., Brownlee, J., Lennox, S., Exley, B., Howells, K., & Cocker, F. (2009). Understanding first-year university students: Personal epistemology and learning. *Teaching Education, 20*(3), 243-256. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10476210802559350>
- Wilcox, P., Winn, S., & Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005). ‘It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people’: The Role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 30*(6), 707-722. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075070500340036>
- Youatt, J., & Wilcox, K. (2008). Intentional and integrated learning in a new cognitive age: A Signature pedagogy for undergraduate education in the twenty-first century. *Peer Review, Fall*, 24-26.

*Appendix A***Music Immersion Program End-of-Year Questionnaire**

Your Pseudonym: _____

1. Based on recent experiences this semester, rate your ability in the following skill areas by circling the number that best describes your assessment (**1=beginning, 2=developing, 3=proficient, 4=accomplished**):

General

| | |
|--|---------|
| a. Time management | 1 2 3 4 |
| b. Goal setting | 1 2 3 4 |
| c. Reading academic texts | 1 2 3 4 |
| d. Writing using appropriate academic conventions | 1 2 3 4 |
| e. Conducting basic library research | 1 2 3 4 |
| f. Reflecting honestly on your working/learning habits | 1 2 3 4 |
| g. Working positively with others | 1 2 3 4 |
| h. Identifying and seeking help when necessary | 1 2 3 4 |

Music History

| | |
|---|---------|
| i. Completing homework tasks in music history | 1 2 3 4 |
| j. Completing assignments in music history | 1 2 3 4 |
| k. Preparing for and completing in-class assessments in music history | 1 2 3 4 |

Music Theory

| | |
|--|---------|
| l. Completing homework tasks in music theory | 1 2 3 4 |
| m. Completing assignments in music theory | 1 2 3 4 |
| n. Preparing for and completing in-class assessments in music theory | 1 2 3 4 |

Aural Skills

| | |
|--|---------|
| o. Practicing homework tasks in aural skills | 1 2 3 4 |
| p. Completing dictations in aural skills | 1 2 3 4 |

Keyboard Harmony

| | |
|--|---------|
| q. Practicing homework tasks in keyboard harmony | 1 2 3 4 |
|--|---------|

Written Responses

Meeting Challenges

2. What has been the greatest challenge you have experienced so far this semester in **music history**? Describe the strategies you have used to meet this challenge and the progress you have made toward it.
3. What has been the greatest challenge you have experienced so far this semester in **music theory**? Describe the strategies you have used to meet this challenge and the progress you have made toward it.
4. What has been the greatest challenge you have experienced so far this semester in **aural skills**? Describe the strategies you have used to meet this challenge and the progress you have made toward it.
5. What was the greatest challenge you experienced this semester in **keyboard harmony**? Describe the strategies you have used to meet this challenge and the progress you have made toward it.
6. Describe how you have handled the challenge of **time management** so far this semester. How successful have you been with this challenge?
7. Include any additional comments you have regarding your progress so far in the music program.
8. Looking at the first-year music program as a whole, how do you view the way the first-year courses relate to each other (if at all)?

Immersion Impact

9. What impact (if any) have the interdisciplinary group sessions (held near the beginning of each semester) had on your learning experience this year?
10. What impact (if any) have the individual interviews/reflections had on your learning experience this year?

Looking to Improve

11. What could you start/stop/continue doing to improve your learning experience in the music program next year?
12. What could your instructors (individually and/or collectively) start/stop/continue doing to improve your learning experience in the music program next year?

Additional Comments

13. Please include any additional comments below.

Appendix B

_____, 2009

Consent Form:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project which will explore the impact of a new initiative for first year Music majors at [REDACTED]. We are undertaking this initiative, 'music immersion', to help improve the academic success rate of Music students through these means:

1. highlighting and reinforcing the interrelationships among the core music courses: music theory, music history, aural skills and keyboard harmony. This will be introduced in one or more team-taught mega classes and will be reinforced throughout the year in individual courses
2. providing students with individualized progress reports at the fourth and eighth week of each semester. These meetings will provide you with feedback on your progress in all of your music courses.

[REDACTED] and [REDACTED] will carry out all research for this project. This letter outlines the study itself and information about your participation. If you require further information or explanation please see either professor personally or contact them at countryman@upei.ca or azinck@upei.ca

Rationale for the study: Music study at the university level is very demanding. In our experience many students enter the program with good performing skills and a love of music, but with little or no understanding of the academic side of music study. The academic courses (music history, aural skills, music theory and keyboard harmony) are taught by four different professors, use different methodologies and languages and require different skill sets to be developed. It is easy for students to miss the interrelationships among these subjects and between these subjects and one's applied instrument. This research study seeks to qualitatively assess the effectiveness of several new initiatives to address these issues.

Overview: Your participation in this research study will consist of providing feedback (via questionnaires and written reflections) on several integrated classroom activities throughout the year. This written feedback will be handed back to us, but we want you to use a pseudonym of your choice. At the end of each semester we will ask you to fill out a more detailed survey of your experiences. This survey will be done anonymously, using a second pseudonym, and the professors will not see these anonymous comments until after your final marks are submitted in April, 2011, so that you will feel completely free to provide honest feedback

We would like to be able to quote you in the written report that will summarize this research project which is why we ask you to create pseudonyms for both the short questionnaires (where we will know who you are) and the more detailed end-of-semester surveys (where you will be anonymous to us) so that, should we want to use your exact words we can attribute them to one of your two pseudonyms.

Finally, with your permission, we will write down any anecdotal verbal observations you offer us about this project. We will show you the transcript of your words for you to verify, and if acceptable to you we will assign them to your first pseudonym.

Our analysis and interpretation of the data from this project will ultimately result in an academic paper that we will hope to have published. Quotations from your interview may appear in this research paper but your identity will be completely protected – you will be referred to only by one of your two pseudonyms. All data generated by this study will remain confidential.

Benefits to you: Participation in the activities that seek to give first year Music majors a better academic start is required as part of your course work. The providing of feedback about these experiences is optional. Your participation in this feedback collection will help your professors provide you with the best possible learning opportunities. You will also, we believe, enjoy the experience of participating in a qualitative research study.

Risks to you: There are no external risks to participating in this study. All the raw data will be kept in confidence and you will not be identified by name. All data collected during the study will be secured in a locked file and after three years will be shredded.

You may, at any time, withdraw from this study with no negative consequences. All data relating to you will immediately be destroyed. You may contact the [REDACTED] Research Ethics Board at 566-0637 or by e-mail at macphee@upei.ca if you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this study.

Time line: This research project will run from September, 2009 to April, 2010. The research report will be written in Spring, 2010.

Research Consent:

This research study has been explained to me by the researchers. I have read and understood the conditions under which I will participate in this qualitative research study and I give my consent to be a participant.

I will retain one copy of this consent form for my personal records.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Thank you.