

This class, entitled ‘Sounds of Music: West, East, Past, Present,’ was a first for the CUHK music department, in which we not only pioneered the use of micro-modules, but also effectively sought to flip the ‘boring’ music history classroom with the ‘fun’ practice rooms next door.

Among our highlights: We recreated ancient tunings from Greece and China, playing them together in class via a sound synthesizer; We recorded the birdsongs on CUHK’s campus and compared our findings in class; We listened to a masterwork of Western classical music, Gustav Mahler’s ‘Song of the Earth’ (based on Tang Dynasty poetry), sung in Cantonese and learned why we could not understand what was being said; We projected our ‘sonic visualizations’ on the ‘big screen’ in the Digital Scholarship Lab; We tested our ears with various auditory illusions one finds in musical sounds; We even tried to make sense of Aristotle’s notoriously problematic ‘Problems’ about sound, puzzling over such paradoxes as why high sounds are low and low sounds high. All the while, we kept our musical instruments handy and played what we learned in class. Last, but not least, we even went to a Chemistry Department lab about ‘resonance.’ The students’ evaluations about the class were predominantly positive, but the best evaluations were those that were unsolicited from students from my other class that audited on occasion. One wrote, ‘By the way, Professor, I love your lecture about Song of the Earth so much. The video that was taken [with the T.A.] was absolutely fun and I like that way to let students learn and it was really attractive. I guess this kind of video making is also suitable for our class too! It would be great fun for our to understand the music history well.’

We did, however, encounter challenges along the way. First and foremost, the flipped-classroom was a new learning environment for the students, vastly foreign from a more passive learning environment, such as the lecture and rote memorization of slides.

Exploring things in groups, problem-solving and (equally important) identifying problems to solve, and having open-ended inquiries--while the teacher abandoned the lecture podium to interact with the class--were unsettling for a number of students. Was the teacher actually teaching? What does it mean to learn to teach yourself? ‘This course has created a lot of pressure on students’ wrote one student in the evaluation. Of course, I foresaw and accepted this challenge from the start, reassuring the students about their discoveries and processes as necessary. Then there were other obstacles in that students still preferred to be practicing music, over-practicing and being over-rehearsed for end-of-term concerts, at the expense of their academics (a problem familiar to academics in schools of music, yet out-of-place for a liberal arts college within a research university). One could rightly ask why class and practice rooms would even need to be flipped at CUHK in the first place.

Overall, this class was a success and the continued development of e-learning and flipped-classrooms in some courses of the music department at CUHK is promising.