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Graduate Instructor Peer Observation in Music Theory Pedagogy

ALYSSA BARNA and SAM REENAN

Peer observation involves instructors attending each other's classes for the primary purposes of reflection and growth. Among faculty, observation is often limited to the context of tenure and promotion. The experience of observation is even more rare between graduate instructors, who very often do not engage with their peers in a community-focused manner. This article presents a three-phase study that gathers both quantitative and qualitative data on peer observation in the field of music theory. We collected data from both faculty and graduate instructors, and a peer observation system for graduate instructors was implemented concurrently. The article concludes with results and suggestions for development and implementation of a peer observation program at your institution, highlighting the reciprocal benefits of the observational experience for music theory instructors.

In many colleges and universities, graduate students provide essential services to the school through instruction and teaching assistance. In the field of music theory, the task of undergraduate (and less frequently, graduate) instruction can depend significantly on the work of graduate instructors. With this responsibility in mind, we sought to examine the dynamics of classrooms taught by graduate instructors. In particular, we wanted to explore several questions: How are graduate instructors being trained for the task? Is the training sufficient, and do new teachers leave their programs with ample confidence in the classroom? How often do graduate instructors or teaching assistants observe their peers teaching in the classroom? For that matter, how often do faculty observe their colleagues? And more generally, what should teacher training look like in twenty-first-century music theory programs? This article provides a first scholarly account of graduate-instructor peer observation in music-theory pedagogy. Before this study, any evidence of peer observation in the field of music theory has been anecdotal at best. Here, we study peer observation through surveys and interviews across the field of music theory as well as our own experience, and we suggest some steps towards developing best practices in teaching, especially amongst graduate instructors in music theory.

We are grateful for the feedback provided from the *JMTP* editorial team and the three anonymous reviewers of this article. We also thank Elizabeth West Marvin and Matt Bribitzer-Stull for their helpful suggestions on earlier drafts of this work. The cornerstone of this article is the wealth of information gleaned from discussions with our faculty and graduate instructor interviewees; we deeply appreciate their time and effort.

We define "peer observation" as *an established, voluntary procedure in which graduate instructors or faculty attend each other's classes for the primary purposes of reflection and growth*. In the context of our study, this reciprocal definition of observation is essential—other forms of pedagogical development (such as mandated observation in a pedagogy course, faculty supervision, or mentoring in the context of promotion cases) create power dynamics that allow for certain types of discussions to flourish while impeding others. While we acknowledge the crucial role of mentoring in teacher training, we view peer observation as a vital component in its own right, because it creates a space for discussion free from the possibility of evaluation. Peer observation, by definition, takes place only among members of the same rank: graduate instructors observing other graduate instructors, or faculty members observing other faculty members. We advocate for peer observation at every level, from undergraduate tutors to senior faculty, as an invaluable tool for continuous pedagogical growth. Here, we provide a three-pronged approach to exploring graduate instructor peer observation in music theory. First, we collected data from across the field of music theory through a ten-question survey disseminated throughout the field. Second, we engaged individuals in semi-structured interviews to learn more about peer observation programs in their various forms. Concurrently, we piloted a graduate instructor peer-observation program at the Eastman School of Music (where we were graduate instructors at the time) to explore firsthand the potential benefits and challenges associated with peer observation.

Our study was motivated by several research questions. First, we asked how pedagogy training and observation were currently operating at our institution and other peer institutions, in order to see for ourselves the benefits of reciprocal observations. Second, we sought to define and develop a culture of professional development surrounding classroom teaching. To the end, this project centered around the main goal of fostering collegiality and self-reflective pedagogy. The results of our survey, interviews, and our own collective experiences were clear: peer observation enriches the teacher training experience, promotes teaching as a community endeavor, uncovers creative solutions in day-to-day instruction, and builds confidence in the classroom.

I. Review of the Literature

In order to design a peer-observation program at our institution, we explored the role of observation across multiple disciplines. In seeking literature that covers this topic, however, we were surprised by the lack of attention given to observation of any kind across American scholarship, be it faculty or graduate instructor observation. In the limited publications we did encounter, several themes emerged regarding the role and benefits of observation. The first was concerned with the dynamic of the observer-observee relationship. In "Peer Observation in Higher Education—A Reflective Approach," Jill Cosh (1998) argues for teachers to observe as a means of reflecting on their own pedagogy, instead of considering observation strictly as a means of assessment of others. Cosh contends that when teachers observe they become more self-aware about their own pedagogy and provide feedback to the observed. She recommends the use of an evaluative form, followed by a discussion between participants after the observation. Some previous scholarship (as well as our own experience) indicated that feedback might be a common cause of consternation among instructors. Sue Shortland addresses the mindset of both the observer and the instructor in relation to feedback and articulates the need for peer observation partners to act as "critical friends," engaging each other from a position of trust, respect, and mutual gain (2010, 297).

A second common theme concerned the expected outcomes of observation. Deborah Peel's work "explores the nature of [Peer Observation of Teaching,] which is simultaneously socially constructed as both a developmental tool and a performance measure" (2005, 490). Peel outlines a dichotomy between developmental and judgmental observation.[1] Judgmental observation is documented for performance reviews, annual reports, or tenure and promotion materials. It is from developmental peer observation, however, that a sense of mutual growth and community can arise. For peer observation to be truly developmental, participants must agree to reciprocal

1 David Gosling similarly distinguishes between types of peer observation, referring to what he terms a "'management model', a 'development model' and a 'peer review model'" (2002, 4). For our study, the most pertinent element of this trichotomy concerns the "purpose" of each model. The "management model" is rooted in evaluation and the exercise of power, as its aims include "[i]dentify[ing] underperformance, confirm[ing] probation, appraisal, promotion, quality assurance, assessment." The "development model" still depends on a notion of mentorship, as observers with "expertise" determine whether instructors "demonstrate competency [and] improve teaching competencies." Finally, the "peer review" model strives for "engagement in discussion about teaching" as well as "self and mutual reflection" (5). Therefore, we do not adopt the term "development[al]" as defined by Gosling, but instead use Peel's distinction.

observations; this ensures a sense of collaborative pedagogy and fosters collegiality and community. O'Keefe et al. similarly encourage reciprocality to ensure mutual benefits and an overall collegial atmosphere. Their study, which involved peer partnerships and a certificate program to incentivize participation, saw clear results. Participants "reported increased confidence in teaching, confirmation of good practice, exposure to new ideas, a feeling of institutional support and a greater sense of collegiality," which led instructors to move beyond concerns about "being the subject of 'evaluation' and 'criticism' by emphasising existing strengths of collegiality and trust amongst peers" (2009, 1064). In *Making Teaching Community Property* (ed. Hutchings, 1996) several authors also emphasized the reciprocal nature of observation. This source compiles short reports and case studies from diverse institutions and includes ample approaches to pedagogy as a community endeavor, addressing co-teaching, team teaching, peer observation, and collaborative inquiry. Finally, while peer observation can seem disconcerting at first, several studies (Richardson 2000, Sullivan et al. 2012, Denton 2019) have shown that the process of normalizing such community approaches to pedagogy (e.g. through casual teaching observations, pedagogy meet-ups, or college observation weeks) helps to build strong bonds among teachers and confident individual instructors.

Despite the dearth of literature, we see many connections between the themes outlined above, the structure of our study, and the music classroom. Developmental and judgmental terminology, for example, gave us language to describe the feeling of competition that is often present between peers in music departments and conservatories. While competition can spur self-improvement, it can also provoke hostility. We therefore consider it essential to foster developmental observation in order to assuage feelings of criticism and evaluation. Teachers must model the collegial relationships we hope students will cultivate amongst themselves. Shortland's term "critical friends" invokes a collaborative relationship that feels especially useful in performative situations: whether in a chamber music ensemble or amongst peers in an aural skills classroom, students must trust each other musically and pedagogically with regards to feedback.

The interactive measures that we encountered in our study of the literature ultimately became crucial to our approach to personal, pedagogical growth: the use of a form and a follow-up conversation are central elements of the observation process that we incorporated into Phase 3 of this study. We attempted to address possible apprehensions head on and hoped to begin laying the groundwork for a culture where peer observation would be normalized. With a focus on active self-development,

the observation relationship yields mutual benefits for all instructors involved.[2] Additionally, Peel's distinction between developmental and judgmental observation was a useful framework for our group discussions of observation among peers at our institution, as well as in semi-structured interviews. The reality is that music theory is a small field, and the strong bonds and community-building emphasized in the literature are essential to the growth of professional relationships amongst teachers of music theory at any level. While the sources discussed above come from much larger academic fields (such as medicine or education research), the sample sizes used in most studies was modest (in the range of 10 to 42), and most followed an approach similar to the three-pronged procedure we outline below.

II. The Study

The present study involved three phases.[3] In late fall of 2018, we deployed a survey (Phase 1) for an initial account of the state of the field from the broadest perspective that we could ascertain. The survey was open for two weeks. After several weeks of reviewing the data, we launched Phase 2, a series of semi-structured interviews, in spring 2019. Throughout the 2018–19 academic year, we also developed and implemented a peer observation program at the Eastman School of Music (Phase 3), which we designed with help from the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

Phase 1 consisted of a ten-question survey shared with the smt-announce listserv and sent directly by email to music theory faculty at numerous institutions across North America. The survey is provided as Appendix 1. A limitation of the study concerns self-selection bias. Although the survey was shared widely, only the most proactive members of the community were likely to respond. By sharing the survey directly with faculty across North America, and asking them to disseminate within their department, we hoped to offset some of the self-selection bias, although we still acknowledge our influence on the population. We intended to reach out to faculty at every institution in North America where we were aware of a graduate program in music theory, although we cannot be sure that we accomplished complete coverage, nor can we be sure that the faculty we contacted shared the survey per our request.

2 Johnathan McCloud provides a summary and synthesis of observational models (including Cosh) in his dissertation "Understanding Peer Observation: A Review and Synthesis of Peer Observation Literature in Higher Education" (2015).

3 All survey and interview materials were approved by the University of Rochester's Research Subjects Review Board (RSRB).

Phase 2 of our study consisted of semi-structured interviews, either in person or over video conference, with faculty and graduate instructors at targeted institutions. Six institutions were selected. The choices were based on the responses to the survey from Phase 1 that indicated the possible presence of a robust system of peer observation at the institution. One faculty member and one graduate instructor from each school were interviewed (in one case each, two graduate instructors and two faculty from the same institution were interviewed).[4] The interviews centered on a series of guiding questions, shown in Appendix 2, but the conversations were free-wheeling by design, and in many cases the guiding questions were simply a starting point, leading to variable topics of discussion.

Phase 3 of our study involved a concurrent, year-long peer-observation pilot program that we established at our institution. Eight graduate instructors (a focus group of six peers as well as ourselves, the two investigators; two more peers joined in the spring) engaged in reciprocal peer observations, completing observation forms that provided insights into the kinds of feedback peers might provide in a classroom setting. Two types of forms evolved through pilot testing: (i) a general peer observation record, that invites the observer to comment on a wide range of pedagogical focus areas, and (ii) a targeted observation sheet that provides a space for isolating a single area of interest. These forms are provided in Appendix 3 and 4 of this article. We met with the focus group of peer observers periodically to collect impressions on the process, ideas for refinement, and feedback on the program's impact on pedagogy. Crucially, peer observers were strongly encouraged to follow each observation with an informal, in-person conversation with their reciprocal partner.

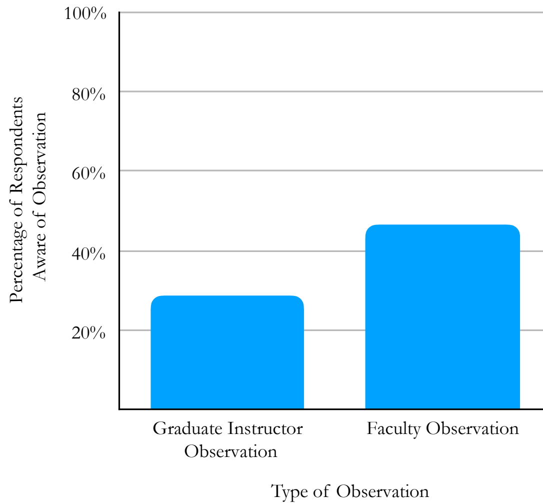
4 The selection process was fairly restrictive. We considered only schools that met at least one of the following criteria: (i) had evidence of a system of peer observation among graduate instructors, (ii) had responses from both graduate students and faculty, or (iii) described a peer-observation system in the open-ended response section.

IIa. Phase 1—Results from the Survey

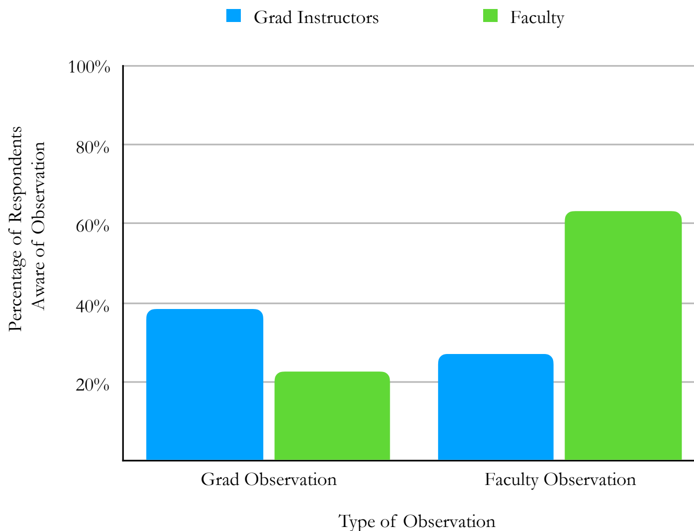
The ten-question survey was conducted via SurveyMonkey. Results are summarized in Example 1. A total of 57 individuals participated in the survey.[5] In the case of graduate-instructor peer observation (that is, graduate instructors observing other graduate instructors), 16 of the 56 respondents (28.5%) stated that they were aware of a system at their institution. Graduate instructors were more likely to report awareness of such a system than were faculty—38.5% of graduate instructors (10/26) were aware of a system of graduate instructor peer observation, as opposed to 22.6% of faculty (7/31). A potential confound that could not be independently examined concerns the observation of graduate instructors by faculty. It is possible that some respondents claimed to be aware of graduate instructor peer observation at their institution, when in reality they were referring to a type of intergroup mentoring relationship between faculty and graduate instructors, which does not align with our definition of peer observation. As for faculty peer observation, 26 of the 56 respondents (46.4%) reported awareness of a system at their institution, and faculty were far more likely (63.3%, 19/30, as opposed to 26.9%, 7/26) to know of such a system. Programs of faculty peer observation tend to be understood as compulsory (61.8%, 21/34) rather than optional (39.2%, 13/34). A majority of responses (52%, 13/25) suggest that faculty peer observations serve a dual purpose, functioning in the advancement process and as a tool for professional development. Only 8% of respondents (2/25), however, associated faculty observation exclusively with professional development.

5 Some answers were left blank, so although there were 57 total respondents, some n values in the statistics below reflect the total number of respondents for a particular question. Throughout this study, the sample size for survey results as well as the interview pool reflect the fact that relatively few music theory departments include numerous graduate instructors able to directly observe each other. However, the concerns and suggestions of the present study extend to all music theory educators—focusing on graduate instructors reveals the specific fallout of those concerns at the early training stages of music theory pedagogy, a period at which best practices are most easily instilled. Additionally, it is worth noting that some comparable studies of faculty peer observation also employ low sample sizes (for example, O'Keefe *et al.* [2009] collected data from 23 participants).

a) Total responses (n=56) about awareness of graduate instructor and faculty peer observation.

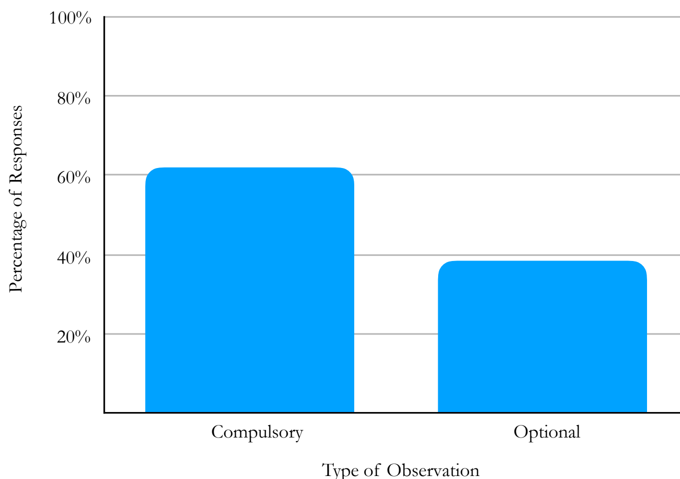


b) Responses about awareness of observation distinguished by rank as graduate instructors (n=26) and faculty (n=30 for responses about graduate observation, n=31 for responses about faculty observation).

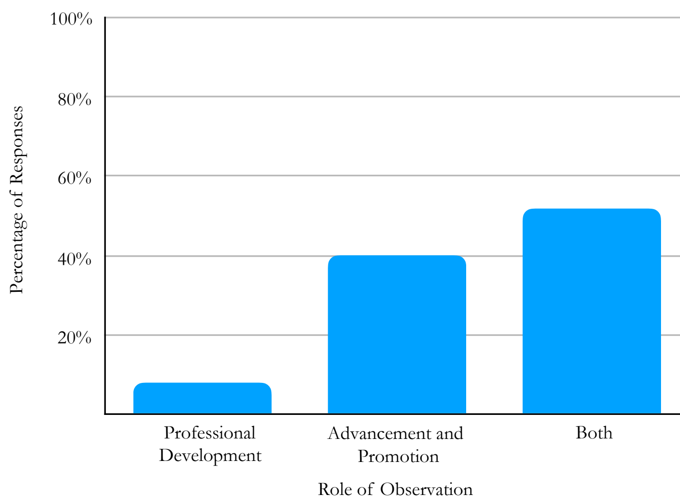


Example 1.
Graduate-instructor peer observation responses.

c) Percentages of observation programs that are compulsory or optional (n=34).

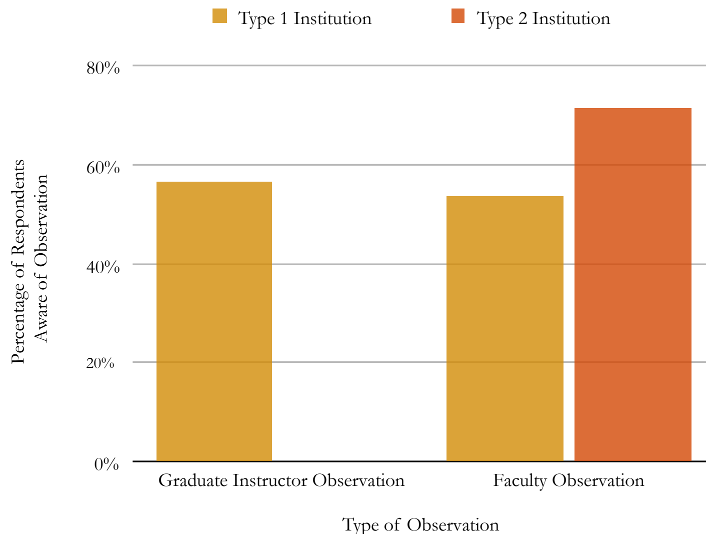


d) Percentages of observation programs that are intended for professional development, advancement and promotion, or both (n=25).



Example 1 (cont'd).
Graduate-instructor peer observation responses.

Graduate-instructor peer observation predominates in what we term "Type 1 institutions," programs that offer the PhD degree in music theory or that have on average ten or more graduate students. "Type 2 institutions" have a smaller student population and do not offer a PhD. As shown in Example 2, of the 37 distinct institutional responses to the survey, 23 were considered Type 1, of which 13 reported some system of graduate instructor peer observation. No Type 2 program reported awareness of a peer observation program for graduate instructors.[6] Faculty peer observation is no more prevalent in either type of program, although Type 2 programs skew towards a higher tendency for faculty observation programs (10 of these 14 programs reported some system of faculty peer observation). At only 2 institutions, faculty and graduate instructors were *both* aware of graduate instructor peer observation programs; on the other hand, remarkably, 8 institutions yielded a graduate instructor response indicative of a program of graduate instructor peer observation whereas the faculty response suggested no awareness of that same program.



Example 2.
Prevalence of peer observation at Type 1 (n=21) and Type 2 (n=13) institutions.

6 This data point may not be surprising—for many Type 2 programs, the small number of graduate students may preclude a full-blown observation program. Additionally, it is possible that non-PhD pursuing theory instructors may be less motivated to engage in extracurricular theory-pedagogy developmental exercises.

Responses to the open-ended questions on the survey—which allowed participants to describe the programs at their schools—yielded several takeaways. In order to analyze these responses from Questions 7 and 8 of the survey, we first discarded any that failed to accurately address the question at hand.[7] Following that, we separately coded the qualitative responses for common themes and came to a consensus about those themes, which generally can be summarized in three broad questions:

1. How might one go about peer observation, and what kinds of benefits might result? I.e. Why might one participate in peer observation in the first place?
2. In what ways do power dynamics come into play, and how does peer observation interact with and eschew such issues?
3. What are we to make of contradictory responses within the same program? Is it suggestive of ineffective faculty engagement?

First, several respondents expressed a lack of understanding of how to observe a class or instructor. This included concerns about whether or not to use forms for feedback, whether to observe the class or the instructor, and the like. Further, the tangible benefits that one might accrue from peer observation were unclear to respondents. Second, the survey responses tended to use language that insinuates certain kinds of power dynamics: for example, senior graduate instructors were described as "managing" their junior peers, faculty mentorship programs were described (perhaps by design) as one-directional, and graduate instructor peer observations tended to be mandated by coursework. Such power dynamics often gave way to somewhat transactional language, as when instructors were described as "soliciting" feedback from observers, the former receiving all the benefits while the latter was bestowing wisdom. Third, there were some striking contradictions in the free responses—within the same institution—between graduate instructors and faculty, some presenting opposing views on the presence or role of peer observation. As mentioned above, there were several instances when a graduate instructor would indicate that peer observation was part of their teaching program, while faculty at the same institution would say that no such program exists. As we coded the data, we noticed a wide overlap between our initial inquiries and research questions and the responses from music theory colleagues, particularly in relation to the design of peer observation and its role in teacher training.

7 In a handful of cases, respondents misunderstood our definition of "peer observation" and described mentoring or supervisory situations, in which a faculty member would observe a graduate instructor.

IIb. Phase 2—Semi-structured interviews

Methodology

The second phase of our project involved collecting qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with a select population. We chose the population based on responses from the initial survey (criteria for these selections are described below), although we cannot be sure that those we interviewed had previously participated in the survey due to its anonymity. Many of the free responses on the initial survey concerned not only what was occurring at that institution, but also the broader concept of observation. In selecting interview candidates, we prioritized choosing both a faculty member and graduate instructor from a Type 1 institution whenever possible (as our primary interest centered on graduate-instructor peer observation), although we did not receive responses for all requests for interviews. We aimed in particular to learn more about institutions that described particularly innovative or challenging peer observation situations. The six institutions in question represented what might be regarded as the most well renowned music theory programs in the United States; most of the programs have several music theorists on faculty, and in almost all cases have graduate instructors (Ph.D. or Masters) who actively teach music theory (one school only has undergraduates). In total, we interviewed eight graduate instructors and seven faculty members.[8] Interviews were performed via video conference and, in some circumstances, in person. Interview questions can be found in Appendix 2. The questions arose from responses found in the Phase 1 survey, as well as drawn from literature review. (For example, Kevin Casey and Barbara Stengel provide case studies at their home institutions of team and collaborative teaching, which made us wonder if any of our interviewees have ever had such an opportunity [Hutchings 1996, 64–67, 70–72].) By interviewing multiple people at the same institution, we were able to discover different perspectives on a single program—often from instructors at different stages in their careers (early-stage graduate students, late-stage graduate students, faculty)—and compare and contrast these experiences.

8 At some institutions, we interviewed two faculty and two graduate students. Initially, we ran into some difficulty securing responses to our interview requests. In order to address that, we sent multiple requests to some individuals at the same institution, and in two cases multiple individuals accepted our invitation. We acknowledge that fifteen individuals is a small cross section of the music theory community. However, our focus on the graduate instructor situation—and particularly, on the role of peer observation—necessarily limited the pool of possible interviewees.

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Results from Phase 2

Throughout the interviews, faculty generally reported few opportunities for observation with their colleagues. When observation did occur, it overwhelmingly served a judgmental purpose for a tenure and promotion case. Two exceptions arose, however, that show the disparate nature of the culture of faculty observation. In one case, a faculty member reported that observation is not even required for their tenure and promotion cases, nor is it a regular developmental activity. In a different case, a faculty member discussed how observation was an integral aspect of faculty development, and there were several professors and administrators (including the dean) who would periodically visit their classroom.

Among the conclusions we drew from the interviews was that the use of observation documents or forms in developmental or judgmental observation is infrequent. Five of the fifteen interviewees reported using forms at some point, and in all but one case the observation was mandatory under the supervision of a faculty member and required while enrolled in a Music Theory Pedagogy course. The forms that were used varied widely, from one that requests micro-timing every minute of the class, to another that uses columns for "pros" and "cons." Four of the eight graduate instructors interviewed reported taking a Music Theory Pedagogy course in which observation was required. It should be noted, however, that this type of observation—while useful and productive—does not fit our definition of *peer* observation. Once the faculty instructor of the Pedagogy course requests to see the forms, it disturbs the careful power balance that should be central to peer observation. Further, that faculty member may grade the students or might take action on observed instructors based on the observation project, which invokes judgment instead of creating a purely developmental experience.

We also asked graduate instructors and faculty about resources on campus that may facilitate teaching development, specifically with regards to observation.[9] Of the eight interviewed, only two graduate instructors reported using the resources provided by centers on their respective campuses, although all but one graduate instructor reported knowledge of the existence of such a resource center. The types of resources most often used by the graduate instructors we interviewed appeared to be funded teaching fellowships that supplemented the typical teaching assistantship. The aforementioned two students were both teaching fellows at their universities, and

9 At the University of Rochester, graduate instructors can reach out to a Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, although representatives from that program do not offer observation surveys to instructors.

received extra funding to carry out teaching projects, observations, and mentoring of other graduate instructors. One fellow designed a peer mentorship program (similar in scope to our program discussed in Phase 3, but distinct in that more experienced teachers would mentor their less experienced colleagues), while the other fellow was able to observe a variety of peer instructors across the university, outside of their home department. Ultimately, both found it hard to fully establish the culture of observation and mentorship that they sought through their program. One of the most difficult aspects of observation programs appears to be successfully launching a program and building a culture that involves consistent, department-wide observation; this was an issue that we encountered in our own experience as well. The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at the University of Rochester offered a program called "College Observation Week," in which several faculty members across any disciplines on campus opened their classrooms to observers.[10]

Of particular interest to faculty (and sometimes cultivated by a center for teaching on campus) was the idea of team teaching or co-teaching a course. Only two faculty members noted that they had successfully co-taught a course, although all interviewed expressed interest. The biggest barrier for co-teaching is allocation of equitable teaching loads amongst the teachers. One successful co-teacher noted that their colleague taught "for free," indicating that the course only counted in the load of one of the instructors. Another faculty member negotiated with their administrators to allow both co-teachers to receive credit towards their teaching loads, provided that they still permitted the combined enrollment of their normal courses (e.g., if both teachers typically taught solo courses capped at 20, their co-taught course would need to be capped at 40). One interviewee stated that they were excited about the idea of teaching interdisciplinary courses with colleagues outside of music, but once "the red tape hits," the bureaucracy of the situation initiates a sharp decline in the potential and perseverance of the faculty to make the collaborative course run.

Returning to the notion of self-reflection and awareness, throughout the interviews we continually reflected on our own experiences with creating and sustaining the peer observation program at our institution. While our interest in each instructor and their program was genuine in all cases, we also sought out small details

10 As a music instructor, the experience of observing paleontology classes was a remarkable learning experience and proved first-hand that cross-disciplinary pedagogies engage with many of the same issues. One instructor, in discussing theories of evolution, asked questions that could easily be adapted for the music theory classroom: the tangled branches of an evolutionary chart reminded me [Alyssa] of the evolution of musical style and definitions of genre. Pedagogically, it was interesting to see similar strategies used in the science classroom to cultivate thoughtful and active discussion.

we could harvest and implement into our existing program. Therefore, not only were the processes of observation reflective (as described in Cosh 1998), the *discussions* of observation amongst instructors encouraged self-awareness and development. A primary hindrance in achieving reciprocality and self-awareness in observation is the presence of implicit power dynamics among peers. Despite all best efforts to mitigate judgmental feelings, many graduate instructors suffer from insecurities and often feel there is a hierarchy amongst their graduate-student colleagues. The same could be said for junior faculty and their mentors: although they are "peers" on paper, the mentorship role can take on latent undertones of judgment when tenure and promotion are on the line. Several graduate instructor interviewees mentioned specific cases of this discomfort: a recurring instance involved a peer (typically a graduate instructor in the later stages of their degree) serving as the course supervisor, with teaching assistants working under them. The power dynamics become explicit when a faculty member observes a graduate instructor, which can exacerbate the potential feelings of anxiety; one graduate instructor expressed this sentiment, stating that it became especially "difficult to be observed by [a] faculty member" when the observer was a leading expert in pedagogy.

Overall, the fifteen people that we interviewed generally expressed enthusiasm at the idea of developmental peer observation. While many have not attempted to implement such a system, those that had tried noted difficulty making significant changes in the culture of an existing academic program, whether as a graduate instructor or faculty member. For example, in academic research institutions that prioritize the rigor and quantity of music-theory research over pedagogy and teaching, the desire to implement an observation program may take a backseat to other research endeavors. Ph.D. programs incorporate mandatory coursework and maintain high expectations for research output, but many fail to offer structured pedagogy training or observation programs beyond a single first-year seminar. Likewise, tenure files may take into account student evaluations of teaching, and junior faculty are usually offered or required to engage in mentoring, but peer-to-peer observation and discussion would have no formal impact on, or tangible boost to, a tenure portfolio. Because graduate instructors look to their faculty for mentorship on writing and publishing, we recommend that faculty be leaders in observation as well, to foster new pedagogical experiences for their students. Faculty ought to establish a culture of pedagogical development amongst themselves, providing models of peer observation, pedagogical discourse, collaborative teaching, and collegiality.

IIc. Phase 3—Our new peer observation program

Methodology

Prior to Fall 2018, Eastman had no established program of voluntary graduate instructor peer observation. That is not to say that observation never occurred—rather, peer observation was a part of the graduate instructor experience under the aegis of two music theory pedagogy classes and a Masters in Music Theory Pedagogy degree program that included mandatory observations. Additionally, faculty supervising a core course in the theory curriculum would often observe graduate instructors of that course. In Fall 2018, we organized a graduate instructor peer observation group that included six graduate instructors; the program grew to eight in number by Spring 2019 and to twelve by Fall 2019. The original stated goal was rather modest: "to develop some sort of system where we can observe each other in the classroom." Graduate instructors were invited by email and were welcomed to participate as little or as much as they would like. We designed the two forms in Appendices 3 and 4 of this article for organizing their thoughts, and they were only asked to follow two guidelines: first, try not to surprise an instructor (instead, ask permission ahead of time to attend a class); second, strive for reciprocality ("you attend my class, I'll attend yours").

We constructed the two feedback forms for distinct approaches to observation. The "Peer Observation Record" is a general, ideally comprehensive account of a classroom observation. This document went through several drafts, as we came to learn that peer observation is as much about absorbing the classroom experience as it is about documenting the effective and ineffective moments in the course of the class. We therefore made sure to leave ample space on the main note-taking sheet (page 2), with guiding focus areas for the observer to draw from on page 3. The record includes several components: (i) a place for the instructor to describe their intended outcomes and their responsibilities in the classroom; (ii) a general feedback box; (iii) ample space for considering focus areas within the realms of preparation, classroom management, and feedback and assessment; (iv) a timeline for recording the pacing of a class; (v) and a space for next steps.[11] We suggested that peers meet for an in-person

11 This approach is based in part on the stages and cycles of observation suggested by Bell 2002 (cited in Sullivan et. al 2012): (a) Pre-Observation, (b) Observation, (c) Post-observation Feedback, (d) Reflection. Additionally, the Peer Observation Record form in Appendix 3 is inspired by the procedure outlined by the Leicester Learning Institute, at the University of Leicester, which can be found at the following link: https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/lli/developing-learning-and-teaching/enhance/peer-observation-of-teaching-1/peer-observation-of-teaching-process.

conversation after an observation, where they could share their thoughts and develop any next steps to bring into the classroom. The Peer Observation Record is best used when a partnership is in the beginning stages—when the process of observation is new for either the observer or the instructor, or when the pair of individuals has never before observed each other. Our second document, the "Focused Observation" form, allows an instructor to request that an observer concentrate on a single element of teaching practice in the course of the classroom observation. We were motivated to create this document because, after a few reciprocal observations, we found that instructors often became more comfortable having guest peers in the classroom and would make specific requests (e.g., "Could you focus on whether I give clear and concise feedback to student questions?"). This form is best applied once the reciprocal peer observation relationship is well established and mutual trust and rapport exist.

Results

Analyzing the data collected in Phase 3 is necessarily a qualitative, *ad hoc* enterprise. At its peak, we had eight instructors participating in our program during the 2018–19 academic year study, and the data we collected came in two formats: (i) informal group conversations with the entire cohort; and (ii) anonymized peer observation forms voluntarily submitted to us by the cohort. Our approach to sifting through these qualitative data was primarily theme-based. We separately studied the notes from our group meetings and the documents, coding comments into various themes, and then compared the themes, questions, suggestions, and takeaways that we each drew from the notes from our cohort. The results below represent the most common shared results from that process.

In the course of the 2018–19 academic year, the cohort of graduate instructors logged over forty hours of observations and met as a large group three times for discussion of the observation program. Some important realizations came out of these group discussions. First, it rapidly became clear that—as useful as written feedback can be—far more could be gained from the short, informal, in-person conversations between observer and instructor. While the contents of such dialogues could not be collected or assessed in the present study, evidence from the focus-group discussions suggests that these peer conversations may have had the most immediate positive impact from the observation program at our institution. Second, although our institution has an established reputation for pedagogical training, group discussion often exposed a sense among instructors that more could be done to "teach oneself to teach," so to speak. Peer observation was, then, a practical lesson in teaching—an

opportunity to learn from simply witnessing a peer manage their classroom. Finally, the issue of reciprocality was addressed, as some participants felt frustrated that they were unable to observe others teaching the same class at the same time. We contend that peer observation offers its best results when understood as a process valuable by its very nature. The specific class that one observes is not nearly as important as the critical, self-reflective, and collegial exercise that peer observation entails.

Observation forms yielded a wealth of information, ideas, and creative solutions to day-to-day classroom experiences. On them, instructors could voice common concerns that reflect broad issues in music theory pedagogy.[12] In order to assess the insights from these forms, we had our peers share their observation forms and then we read through the forms to identify common themes, concerns, and innovative solutions. The results can be summarized in the form of four themes with associated questions:

1. Student Engagement
   a. Am I getting through to the students?
   b. Are the students actively attentive?
2. Course Design
   a. How much flexibility do I have when I have a supervisor providing lesson plans?
3. Classroom Management
   a. How do I manage a classroom with heterogeneous proficiency levels?
4. Instructor Interactions with Students
   a. Are my student interactions clear?
   b. Am I directly addressing the core conceptual concerns of my students?

The most common instructor concern raised in our focus-group discussions relates to student engagement; instructors would often ask their observers to focus on questions like "Are the students listening and/or paying attention?" or "Am I getting through to my students?" Of course, student engagement can take many forms, and the observation program opened up a space for discussing the difference between students who are disengaged or inattentive and those who might be insecure, timid, or simply lacking in comprehension. Another shared concern among graduate instructors focused on course design, especially since this facet of teaching is often controlled by the supervising faculty member. In both written theory and aural musicianship, instructors questioned how well their courses struck a balance between exposition

12 In fact, in pedagogy more broadly as well, as many of the concerns itemized below also appear in scholarship on, e.g., the medical profession (Siddiqui et al. 2007, Adshead et al. 2006), and in higher education more generally (see especially Richardson 2000).

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of theoretical concepts and embodied, experiential learning. Classroom management was another common theme voiced by observers and instructors alike; in particular, observers wrote on several occasions about the challenges of heterogeneous classrooms and the consequences of teaching to a subset of the student body. The issue of managing students with a variety of skill levels appeared throughout many of the observations. While no definitive solutions could be determined, strategies were offered in abundance by our peers, including calling students into the classroom discourse by name, predetermining and providing roles within groups for group work, allowing for students to self or peer teach, and making space for less active students to speak up or submit feedback in non-verbal manners. Finally, instructors commonly wanted observers to provide feedback on their interactions with the students, inquiring whether the responses they offered students were clear, effectively aimed at the core of the problem, and efficiently conveyed. The in-class interactions between students and teachers were often the subject of much discussion, and they certainly reflect issues of student engagement and comprehension as well.

Much of the most fruitful observation-form feedback centered around perceived strengths and possible areas of improvement. Commonly, observers suggested or witnessed activities that invited students to move about the classroom, form and re-form groups, use board space, and tackle several modalities at once. Some general course design ideas also cropped up—in particular, a tendency to view the musicianship classroom as an "interactive sandbox," a space in which to support active learning and respond flexibly to students' engagement with an exercise, rather than as a lecture, practice, and/or rehearsal model. By focusing on strategy and group singing, observers noted that the musicianship class was able to capitalize on the group dynamics of an instructor-guided environment and eschew an unnecessarily narrow focus on rote skills assessment. Inviting undergraduate students to control aspects of the classroom, from the mundane to the consequential, also appeared in several observation forms. When students were asked to self-assess and self-correct in aural skills—"What would you [the students] improve on or change next time?"—observers reported vibrant in-class conversations and feedback. Additionally, when instructors would welcome students to take part in the decision-making process, to take some command of their learning environment, observers found that students were more comfortable asking questions, raising concerns, and responding directly to instructor feedback. Lastly, a common suggestion from peer observers was to reconsider the space of the classroom, moving chairs into a logical placement and structuring the design of the classroom to facilitate group interaction and student activeness.

III. Conclusions and Recommendations

In the end, there is no "best" model for peer observation. In this study, we learned that most attempts at developmental peer observation enriched the teaching experience, even when they were not part of a larger program of observation and collaboration. Some combination of peer teaching development and mentorship certainly figures into the equation. One can gain much from a relationship based on mentorship, but the model on its own has some drawbacks. It is structured around a one-directional flow of advisorship, which is to say that any professional development on the part of the mentor can only be implicit. Peer observation, on the other hand, is fundamentally about reciprocality. Other models of peer observation that came up in our interviews and experiences include the idea of paired observation: rather than rotating through a larger group of people, two peers might pair off for a semester or a year, developing a longer-term relationship rooted in reciprocal observation, pedagogy discourse, respect, vulnerability, and trust. The point seems to be that spending more hours of our day thinking about, discussing, and watching teaching—no matter whether the class turns out to be a success or a train-wreck—results in confident, well-trained, and professional classroom teachers.

Throughout the three phases of the peer observation study, we hoped to devise a set of "best practices" that could be used by those seeking to implement such a program in their home departments. It became clear, however, that there are many paths to productive observational relationships. We have shared our own practices here and will conclude by offering themes and takeaways as suggestions. In the beginning stages of a peer observation program, we recommend two tenets for faculty members and administrators: spotlight resources and act as role models. Faculty members, whenever possible, should provide access to resources for observation; for example, provide forms for observation or set up a time for the Center for Excellence in Teaching (if available on your campus) to discuss their resources and programs for graduate instructors. Faculty should model the behavior of good observers by observing their faculty peers in a developmental setting, not just for measurement and assessment purposes. Faculty may occasionally encounter difficult discussions about pedagogy with colleagues across campus, typically in the form of committees focused on curriculum development and redesign or focused goals handed down from administrators. We recommend that peer observation be used as a tool to invite colleagues into the classroom to discover the student experience first-hand. One interviewee noted that, no matter the content of tough pedagogical conversations

in meetings, "when we're teaching, we're at our best." We strongly feel that peer observation can aid curricular development and foster goodwill across disciplines.

For graduate instructors, the themes and advice from our study are similar. While faculty should set the stage and model reciprocal peer observation behavior, graduate instructors should likewise pass down information throughout the years. Students in the later stages of their graduate programs can hold a meeting at the beginning of the academic year, inviting new students to take part: "We have a model of peer observation at our school. Here are some of the benefits and resources, and we invite you to be a part of it." This is also a fantastic way to include graduate instructors that are composers or performers who are not enrolled in theory degrees but are teaching theory, as they will provide a unique and valuable perspective.

Questions for further investigation still linger from this research study. Notably, both graduate instructors and faculty wondered if we are sufficiently training our graduate students. While some programs have wide coursework options in Music Theory Pedagogy, peer observation programs offer another opportunity for pedagogical growth with no grades or judgment at stake. As graduate instructors and faculty members, we believe we have a responsibility to our undergraduate students to provide the highest-quality instruction—instruction that is ideally steeped in self-awareness and critical reflection. Bridging the gap between pedagogy and research is an ongoing relationship, and one that varies between institutions. One faculty interviewee noted that we should strive to treat pedagogy and observation in the same manner that we treat peer review of our research: just as articles are sent out anonymously to colleagues for review, we should consider observation a form of peer review. Most scholars also solicit feedback from colleagues before sending off their work to journals and publishers—we can consider peer observation and the collegial development it promotes to be an opportunity for review and growth in the same manner.

While our study only included students enrolled in theory degrees and faculty who teach theory, it is important to note that theory and ear-training instruction at many institutions is taught by a variety of music scholars, performers, and/or contingent faculty. We see a peer observation program as a beneficial tool for instructors who might seek to refine their teaching skill set and strive for more efficient classroom techniques, while also pinpointing unintended habits that they might have developed. Further, your peers may also become your advocates: in the unfortunate circumstances of an increase in contingent instructors, many contingent faculty need to fight for their jobs. Having colleagues who have seen you teach and can

speak to your instruction can be invaluable. At the same time, it is important that any established peer observation program be sensitive to the unpaid labor completed by contingent faculty, and therefore the program should never be mandatory.

To increase the level of collaboration and reciprocality in observations, consider the usefulness and role of an outside neutral party. This third person would look at a collection of observation forms that have been anonymized by gender, race, and identity. Their goal would be to make notes on the presence of bias in any of the observations, such as the use of gendered language, even scanning for statements that reflect bias from the students in the classroom. While ample research has been released examining implicit bias, racism, and sexism in course evaluations,[13] there is little evidence presently of similar studies on bias in observation. Given that the tasks of evaluation and observation are similar, however, employing a third party to examine observations could be a positive step in identifying bias.

While our record-keeping and data demonstrates the short-term effects of observation, especially within the program at our institution, it is our goal to continue to investigate the observation process in order to track its long-term effects. Keeping anonymous-but-thorough data on ongoing observations is an important facet in measuring long-term effects. Additionally, future studies might take into account data on teaching quality, such as student evaluations, graduate job placement, tenure, and promotion. It is our expectation that, over longer spans of time, a culture of reflective pedagogy should yield demonstrably better teaching. The ultimate goal of observational programs, such as peer observation amongst graduate instructors, is effecting a change in the culture of graduate programs. The culture fostered by observation is ideally more collegial, less cutthroat or competitive, and symbiotic. While it will be difficult to measure long-term changes in culture, we are hopeful that these positive qualities gained from observation programs can promote an inclusive culture throughout different aspects of music theory departments, such as within coursework or at academic conferences.

13 The evaluation process has for years across many schools been plagued with issues of bias. By way of just one among many examples, a study released by Innovative Higher Education suggested that similar teaching styles performed by male or female teachers yielded dramatically different student responses. By accounting for perceived vs. actual gender, the study found that "the male identity received significantly higher scores on professionalism, promptness, fairness, respectfulness, enthusiasm, giving praise," and in overall ratings. Furthermore, this result did not depend on any individual instructor's teaching: "the *same* instructor received different ratings depending solely on their perceived gender. In other words, when the actual male instructor was perceived to be female, he received significantly lower ratings than when he was perceived to be a male" (MacNell, Driscoll, and Hunt 2015, 298–300).

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Appendix 1
The ten-question, RSRB-approved survey

A SURVEY OF PEER OBSERVATION AMONG GRADUATE STUDENT INSTRUCTORS OF MUSIC THEORY

This form describes a research study that is being conducted by members of the Eastman School of Music's Music Theory department, at the University of Rochester.

The purpose of this study is to determine how prevalent peer observation is among graduate instructors of music theory at the collegiate level, and to gain information on the types of programs that include peer observation.

We define Peer Observation as: an established procedure in which Graduate Instructors or Faculty attend each other's classes for the purposes of reflection and growth. Peer observation exists when this observation occurs among members of the same position: Graduate students observing other graduate students, or faculty observing other faculty.

Graduate Instructors are any graduate students who teach theory in a classroom setting, whether as Teaching Assistant or Instructor of Record.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free not to participate or to withdraw at any time, for whatever reason. Your participation is also anonymous. No matter what decision you make, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your participation of the survey will serve as evidence of your consent.

1. Institution ___________________
2. I am a... (Faculty | Graduate Student)
3. Approximate Number of Graduate Students in Music Theory ____________
4. Number of Faculty in Music Theory ____________
5. Number of Faculty who Supervise Graduate Instructors in Music Theory ____________
6. Degrees Offered (MA/MM in Music Theory | MA/MM or Certificate Program in Music Theory Pedagogy |Ph.D. in Music Theory | None of the above)
7. Are you aware of a system of Peer Observations for Graduate Instructors? (Yes | No)
    - If you have participated in peer observation, did you find this to be a positive or negative experience? Please share any reflections you have on what you learned from the peer observation program (either as an observer or as a teacher being observed).
8. Are you aware of a system of Peer Observations for Faculty? (Yes | No)
    - If yes, please describe this program.
9. If there is a program for Peer Observation among Faculty, does it exist for:
   (Professional Development |Advancement and Promotion | Both | N/A)
10. If a system of Peer Observation exists at any level, is it compulsory or optional?
    (Compulsory | Optional | N/A)

Appendix 2
The RSRB-approved, semi-structured interview guiding questions

- Describe the peer observation system(s) (faculty and/or graduate instructor) at your school.
- What kinds of support and observation services are provided by the Teaching and Learning Center(s) at your school?
    - If yes, have you taken advantage of those services; if no, why not?
    - Do graduate students have access to these services?
    - Have you heard of College Observation Weeks?
- What do you believe to be the purposes and goals of peer observation?
    - Follow-up: development vs. advancement;
    - If developmental peer observation exists at your school, how do you manage power dynamics to avoid the perception of judgment?
    - What is your impression of systems of observation that serve as assessments for advancement?
- How (if at all) have you encouraged peer observation (at either level)? What kinds of successes have you had, and what issues have you faced in doing this?
- Is there a mentoring program for graduate students and faculty? How does it work? Is the program reciprocal or do mentors and mentees observe each other and collaborate on their teaching?
- Have you ever co-taught a class? Would you be willing to team-teach?

Appendix 3

Peer Observation Record | Music Theory and Aural Skills

Instructor ____________________ Course ____________________

Observer ____________________ Date & Time ____________________

I. To be completed by the Instructor, prior to the class:

(i) What are the specific intended learning outcomes of this teaching session?

(ii) What is your perception of your role and responsibilities with respect to student learning for this session?

(iii) List any aspects you would like the observer to focus on:

II. To be completed by the Observer, during the class:

Overall Impression of Teaching Session and Further Recommendations

1

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*Select focus areas are provided on page 3!

It is strongly recommended that you print this page and fill in by hand.

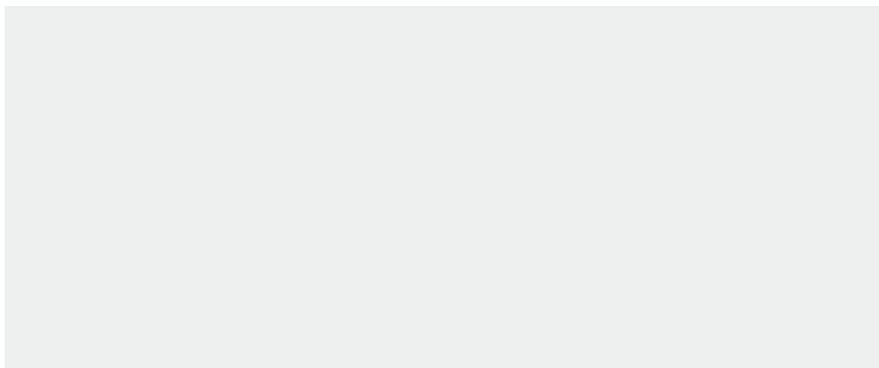
Focus Area	Identified Strengths	Areas for Improvement

Use the space below to document a timeline of class activities

2

III. Action Plan for the Instructor

An optional (but highly recommended) space to reflect upon the recommendations and feedback of your peer(s)



Teaching Areas to Consider

Preparation and planning

- Clarity and achievability of learning outcomes
- Demonstrated preparation (handouts, planning of activities, repertoire)
- Learning outcomes for session (explicit, achievable, achieved)
- Time management (allocation of time to activities, planned flexibility)

Classroom management

- Music-making within and throughout the class
- Implementation of a variety of teaching methods
- Delivery (clarity, pace, repetition, summary)
- Content accuracy
- Student participation, engagement, and attentiveness
- Strategies for diverse repertoire, inclusive teaching methods, teaching to all levels
- Instructor enthusiasm
- Use of technology

Feedback and assessment in the classroom:

- Questioning strategies (number /types of questions, wait time, cold-calling)
- Error detection and correction strategies
- Giving feedback to students (oral/written)
- Obtaining student feedback on teaching (oral/written)

The best way to ensure long-term effects on the way we teach is to meet together after observation to discuss planning, implementation, and next steps. Both the observer and instructor should reflect on ways to enact new ideas and improve pedagogy as a whole. Schedule 15 minutes to chat after your class!

3

Appendix 4

FOCUSED OBSERVATION MUSIC THEORY & AURAL SKILLS

Instructor	______________	Course	______________
Observer	______________	Date & Time	______________

INSTRUCTOR: Circle an area for your observer to focus on!

Pacing Musicality Student Engagement Clarity Instructor Feedback

Classroom Management Organization of Time Other ______________

WHY DID YOU SELECT THE FOCUS AREA ABOVE?

OBSERVER: Use the space below to offer detailed notes on the selected area above.

Timeline of the Class Period