

**Fluency Without Literacy:**  
**Teaching Music Theory to Students Who Cannot Read Music**  
*Campfire Discussion Presentation*

**Response styles**

- Notecards for each section (or first two sections)
- Discussion with neighbor
- Group discussion

**0. Introduction (7 min. each)**

- Trevor
- Danny

**1. Concepts and Skills (12 min)**

What should a student know or be able to do upon completion of the music theory core?

- Why are these skills or concepts important?
- Are these skills and concepts important for all types of music students?
- What are the most important skills and concepts?

**2. Delivery Methods (12 min)**

What is the best way to get students to acquire these skills and learn these concepts?

- What concepts or skills, if any, require staff notation to understand?
- Are there concepts or skills for which notation can hinder fluency?
- Do alternatives better serve knowledge or skill acquisition in these cases?
- In your teaching, are there topics for you avoid notation?

**3. Modifications (12 min)**

How might a music theory curriculum be changed to serve more students?

- What is the cost of these modifications to skill or knowledge acquisition?
- If a task requires notation, what is the cost of not teaching this skill/task?
- Do the benefits (or advantages) outweigh the costs?

**4. Wrap-up (5 min)**

## Introduction (Trevor)

In the typical college music theory classroom, students are expected to be fluent in reading and writing music in at least treble and bass clefs. Indeed, the success of a student in a music theory class is usually predicated on his or her ability to quickly and easily parse traditional staff notation, whether through analyzing a musical score, part-writing exercises, or some other task. Yet there are numerous examples of acclaimed songwriters, performers, and composers who could not read music—such as Irving Berlin, Paul McCartney, Stevie Wonder, and Danny Elfman. The great success of these artists implies that fluency with musical notation is not necessarily a pre-requisite for understanding musical structure in a profound way. That is to say, understanding music theory may not require music literacy. Some people even argue that music reading can inhibit musical understanding, because it puts a layer between the listener or player and the music itself. The ability to read music is, of course, strongly associated with certain styles, most notably classical music. But given that classical music now accounts for only 1% of listenership in the United States, a central question for the continued relevance and health of college music programs is to what extent traditional notation and related symbolologies are necessary for music instruction.

As some context for my own interest in this issue, I would like describe my current teaching situation, which I think is somewhat unique. After graduating from Eastman in 2012 with a PhD in music theory, and after teaching music theory and aural skills for one year at Ithaca College, I have spent the past six years as a faculty member in the Recording Industry department at Middle Tennessee State University just outside Nashville, TN, where I coordinate and teach coursework in commercial musicianship. The Recording Industry department offers degrees in three concentrations—music business, audio production, and songwriting—which are degree programs usually housed in the music department at other institutions. But the Department of Recording Industry at MTSU is an entirely separate entity from the College of Music at MTSU, because in the early 1970s (or so the story goes) the music faculty at MTSU decided that they did not want a degree program centered on popular music housed within the music department. So these degree programs were given their own home in what is now called the College of Media and Entertainment. And I cannot help but point out that as of last fall, the music department at MTSU had 276 undergraduate majors, whereas the Recording Industry department had 1,104 undergraduate majors.

But even though Recording Industry majors at my school are not technically music majors (unless they double major), they are essentially music students, and it is important for them to learn music theory. If, for example, one of our audio engineering graduates is in a recording session and someone says “Can we punch in on the 5 chord?”, that graduate needs to know and hear what and where the 5 chord is. We could send our students through the theory coursework in the music department to gain these skills, but it was decided long before my time that this would not be ideal. For one reason, music theory coursework in the music department at MTSU is, not surprisingly, still strongly tied to the Western classical canon, and most of the Recording Industry students are, not surprisingly, uninterested in that repertoire. So Recording Industry students take their own dedicated music theory coursework, which is devoted exclusively to popular music.

I should say that most of my students enter the first-semester music theory class already knowing how to read notation, often from playing in a middle-school or high-school ensemble, although like many music majors, many of them read only a single clef fluently. But I also have a lot of students—like guitar players, singers, and electronic music folks—who have never read music before, but they have great ears. Because I only have a limited amount of time to get all of these students hearing and thinking about musical structure, I tend to de-emphasize music notation whenever possible. I still have my students learn note names on the treble and bass clefs, but I do not expect fluency. Instead, in the day-to-day lessons and homework assignments, I mostly use a combination of letter names and harmonic notation—like Roman numerals, jazz chord symbols, or Nashville numbers—as well as form charts and keyboard exercises to teach concepts ranging from fundamentals, like spelling intervals and triads, all the way through advanced concepts, like tritone substitution, modal mixture, and applied dominants.

Admittedly, I do not teach many topics that would be found in a traditional music theory class. My students are not realizing figured bass lines nor do I ask them to write four-part chorales. That said, I do teach smooth voice-leading, because it helps my students play the keyboard in an efficient and stylistic manner, and it helps them understand harmonic organization more deeply. But I do not care about parallel fifths or leading tones resolving up or sevenths resolving down. Instead, I focus on general principles of harmony, melody, form, and rhythm, and I hope for my students to recognize those principles by ear or recreate them at the keyboard or through singing.

I would be happy to describe the particular assignments I use in my classes, and I know Danny would, too, but we wanted to structure our time together today more in a way that gives space for some reflection and rethinking about a topic that is sometimes taken for granted. For the sake of this campfire discussion, I think we should avoid the question of whether music majors should or should not be able to read music. Obviously, reading music is a useful skill, and as such, every college graduate in music should know how to do it, at least on some level. The more relevant question, I think, is to what extent is music notation necessary to teach musical structure, and to what extent does using music notation to teach musical structure potentially help or hinder that goal? The answer, I believe, is an important component in the broader goal of fostering equity, opportunity, and inclusion in the music classroom.

I want to give the floor over now to Danny Jenkins, who will take the framework I have just presented and discuss his own journey in becoming interested in this issue.