

The Status of Music Education Conducting Curricula, Practices, and Values

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to gather information about (a) the demographics, degree programs, course offerings, and instructors' perceived pedagogical values in music education divisions, (b) the roles, education, experience, and pedagogical values of the instructors, and (c) information about conducting course structure, content, and the relative emphasis instructors placed on areas of Shulman's (1986, 1987) PCK framework. One-hundred sixteen ($N = 116$) conducting instructors from NASM-accredited colleges responded to an online questionnaire. Music education divisions require two conducting courses for a variety of degree specializations. Instructors are mostly male, well-educated, Full or Assistant Professors, and have extensive college-level, though comparatively little K–12 teaching experience. Shulman's PCK framework served as a theoretical lens to examine pedagogical values of the instructors' and their perceptions of the pedagogical values of their institutions' music education divisions. Conducting instructors and music education divisions place similar rank value on the three broad categories of Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge framework (1: musical content knowledge, 2: music pedagogical content knowledge, 3: general pedagogical knowledge). Most music education majors (76.1%) do not have a concurrent field experience while enrolled in conducting courses, and few opportunities to conduct school-aged ensembles exist, suggesting a lack of authentic context learning/conducting experiences. Implications for practice and further research are presented below.

Background

A paucity of research exists concerning the status of conducting education for undergraduate music education majors in the United States. The most recent status studies are close to a decade old — some are significantly older — and are not specific to music education majors.

- Runnels (1992) – Textbooks as the main instructional materials; students had opportunities to conduct their classmates and occasional performances with large ensembles; not music education-specific, but the survey instrument was a useful framework for gathering data from conducting instructors.
- Boardman (2000) – Examined the values conducting instructors placed on various conducting topics; found significant differences in topics conducting instructors taught vs. what they considered important; emphasized need to examine the value dimension of conductor education.
- Romines (2003) – Found that conducting instructors typically had 20+ years of teaching experience (ranging elementary – college); survey design informed the present study.
- Manfredo (2008) – Found a lack of alignment between conducting coursework and music education instrumental methods coursework; suggested further research into aligned curricular design in music teacher prep programs.
- Varvarigou & Durrant (2011) – Created a theoretical framework for choral conductor education in the U.K. Found six integrated and necessary structures: (a) the instructors, (b) the students, (c) the music (repertoire), (d) the sequence and length of conductor education, (e) the course goals, and (f) the socio-cultural context(s) in which the instruction/learning takes place. Suggested that “an effective choral conductor educator should ideally adopt a *pedagogical* approach that enables learners to grow within their learning context” (p. 331).
- Shulman (1986, 1987) – Proposed a framework emphasizing general content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK); useful for investigating the value dimension of curricular design/policy.
- Chandler (2012) – Investigated PCK skills and values in choral methods courses; most useful framework for collecting data on course topics, instructor demographics, and the value dimension in music education.

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Purpose

To aid music education faculty make better decisions about the music education conducting curriculum by gathering information about the demographics, degree programs, and pedagogical values in music education divisions; the roles, education, experience, and values of the instructors; information about conducting course structure, content, and the relative emphasis instructors placed on areas of Shulman's (1986, 1987) PCK framework.

Method – Online Questionnaire

Instrument:

I created a **40-item questionnaire** based on previous research (Boardman, 2000; Chandler, 2012; Manfredo, 2008; Romines, 2003; Runnels, 1992), and posted it to an online survey site for better response rates and to minimize error (Shannon, Johnson, Searcy, & Lott, 2002).

Participants:

Following universal sampling procedures (Fowler, 2014), I initially contacted all NASM-accredited music education coordinators ($N = 544$) to send the questionnaire to **instructors of undergraduate music education conducting courses**.

- One-hundred sixteen responses ($N = 116$) (response rate = 21.32%, 4.2% error rate at a 95% confidence interval)

Data Analysis:

I ran a battery of descriptive and inferential statistics to examine institutional demographics, the instructors and their values, and course content (SPSS GradPack 24).

Results

Institutional Demographics

- Institutions surveyed were 62% public, 38% private
- Music Education degrees: BME (40.4%), BM (37.7%), BA (14.9%), BS (2.6%), other (4.4%)
- Music education majors required to take 2 conducting courses with other non-music-education majors ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 0.60$, range = 0–4)
- Common conducting offerings: “vocal conducting” (79.3%), “instrumental conducting” (77.6%), or ensemble non-specific “conducting” (48.3%)
- Most music education majors (76.1%) **do not** have a concurrent field experience requirement while enrolled in conducting courses

The Instructors

Table 1: *Descriptive statistics about the respondents (conducting instructors)*

Birth assigned sex		Faculty appointment		Applied specialty	
Male	76.5%	Music education	61.2%	Brass	51.0%
Female	23.5%	Conducting	19.0%	Voice	22.5%
Academic rank		Other	11.2%	Percussion	8.3%
Professor	36.7%	Applied studio/performance	8.6%	Woodwinds	8.2%
Associate Professor	32.7%	Degrees in conducting		Other	6.0%
Assistant Professor	14.3%	Masters	21.9%	Piano	4.0%
Lecturer/Instructor	6.3%	Doctorate	21.9%	Strings	0.0%
Other	6.0%	Both	12.0%	Took a conducting pedagogy course	
Graduate Teaching Assistant	4.0%			No	60.8%
Clinical Professor	0.0%			Yes	39.2%
Conducting courses took (undergraduate/graduate)		<i>Mean</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>SD</i>
		6.24	6	5	3.22
Teaching experience (in years)*					
Elementary school		2.4	0	0	5.8
Middle school		4.6	3	0	5.7
High school		5.6	5	5	5.6
College/university		17.4	18	18	10.9

*Two ($n = 2$) respondents had no elementary or secondary teaching experience.

Course Content

- Classes meet 2–3 times a week ($M = 2.41$, $SD = .77$, range = 1 – 5) for just under an hour each ($M = 56.09$ minutes, $SD = 13.86$, range = 30 – 110 minutes)
- Individualized instruction comprises 1/3 of class time ($M = 35.13\%$, $SD = 24.36$, range = 0 – 80%)
- Half (50%) use a textbook, with 86.4% using supplemental written materials
- Over half (57.1%) use a systematized movement theory (e.g., Laban, Dalcroze, Alexander, or a combination)
- All (100%) reported conducting classmates as part of conducting coursework
- Half (51%) conduct college ensembles; 20.4% reported no such opportunities
- Three quarters (73.5%) of music education conducting students do not conduct elementary or secondary school ensembles as part of conducting coursework
- Instructors reported the relative emphasis of different knowledge/skills within Shulman's (1986, 1987) PCK framework (see Figure 2)

Table 2: *Relative Emphasis of Elements of PCK Model in Conducting Courses*

Knowledge/Skill	Mean	SD
Musical Content Knowledge/Skill (CK)		
Styles (e.g., legato, staccato)	5.07	0.89
Control points (e.g., fermatas, cut-offs, anacrusis)	4.89	0.75
Dynamic variation	4.80	0.81
Simple patterns	4.78	1.04
Left hand expressive gestures	4.64	0.95
Score study / analysis	4.43	1.04
Tempo variation	4.42	1.09
Compound meter patterns	4.29	0.84
Asymmetrical patterns	4.04	0.87
Rehearsal techniques	3.95	1.41
General Pedagogical Knowledge/Skill (PK)		
Nonverbal communication	5.16	0.90
Responding to student needs	3.91	1.57
Planning for effective learning	3.88	1.74
Organizing/managing the learning environment	3.72	1.66
Utilizing varied instructional strategies	3.66	1.76
Knowledge of learner characteristics	3.27	1.66
Knowledge of education purpose/values	3.27	1.42
Music Pedagogical Content Knowledge/Skill (PCK)		
Knowledge of instruments/voice	4.39	1.47
Ensemble rehearsal/diagnostic skill	4.36	1.43
Music concept explanation/demonstration skill	3.86	1.58
Student-music engagement skill	3.84	1.67
Music teaching techniques knowledge	3.75	1.58
Music learning assessment knowledge	3.50	1.66
Music curriculum implementation skill	3.16	1.61

Note: 1 = none, 2 = little, 3 = some, 4 = moderate, 5 = considerable, 6 = heavy.

Discussion and Implications

1. More instructors are spending more time on individualized instruction, consistent with students' wishes for more individualized feedback in conducting courses (Silvey & Major, 2014).
2. Instructors have relatively little K–12 experience – more in secondary than elementary. Elementary or secondary teaching experience were not significantly or strongly correlated to relative emphasis on PCK categories.
3. Conducting instructors value aspects of the PCK model irrespective of their students' degree program/career aspirations.
4. Female conducting instructors placed significantly greater emphasis on various General Pedagogical Knowledge and Pedagogical Content Knowledge skills than male instructors.
5. It is possible that most music education faculty do not feel compelled to tailor conducting courses to music education majors' specific needs. Since 76.1% of music education majors enrolled in conducting courses *do not* complete a concurrent field experience, it is also possible that music education faculty believe the unique needs of music education majors are being met through field experiences. As such, there are few opportunities for authentic context learning/conducting (ACL) experiences in undergraduate music education conducting.
6. Conducting courses are in a prime position to benefit from ACL experiences (Berg, 2014; Fant, 1996). Further research into the reciprocal nature of concurrent ACL field experiences could help music teacher educators strengthen and synergize music education conducting curricula. ACL experiences give music education students the chance to behave, plan, and think like teachers, something they are not typically getting in their undergraduate conducting coursework (Ballantyne & Packer, 2004; Haston & Russell, 2012b; Varvarigou & Durrant, 2011).
7. Instructors with appointments in conducting value score study and rehearsal skills more highly than instructors with appointments in applied performance; music education faculty should include conducting faculty in curricular/program design (Haston & Russell, 2012a).

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