

A Collection of Teaching Tips: Teaching through the Pandemic

Serving up success: Devising a “class menu” for online teaching

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This teaching brief describes a “class menu,” an instructional approach which optimizes individual choice and autonomy to augment online teaching for a small-enrollment studio course focused on musical theatre performance.

Teaching and learning context

THRE 355: Musical Theatre Auditions and Performance is a practice-based studio course for up to 18 students, in which performers apply theoretical and historical approaches to developing their musical theatre performance skills and techniques (singing, dancing, and acting) in a studio setting. The course culminates in a public cabaret performance by each student.

Given the medical advice from the Center for Disease Control and professional advice from groups like the National Association for Teachers of Signing urging performers, choirs, and musical groups not to gather for in-person performances until a vaccine or treatment for COVID-19 becomes widely available, it was clear in Spring 2020 that the coaching and audition segments of this course would require short and long-term changes.

Applied teaching strategy

Inspired by the need for flexibility, student agency and autonomy in a now online course, I devised a “class menu,” an approach in which relevant outcome-based assignments were used to evaluate student progress. Assignments with a variety of written, verbal, tactile, visual, aural, and creative components were assigned a value to provide multiple paths to completion suitable for a variety of learning styles.

The students were encouraged to choose their assignments with the expectation of meeting a pre-determined number of threshold points and “complete” the class menu as demonstrated in the following instructions:

“You must collect 250 points in this course, and you have some say on how you decide to earn them. Choose from the following menu and make sure that the assignments below add to 250 points:

1. Post an idea for a vocal/physical warm-up on Canvas discussion board: **10 points each; may post up to 3 for up to 30 points.**
2. Try out a suggested warm-up and post about results: **10 points each; may post 3 for up to 30 points.**
3. Film yourself leading a warm-up and post: **25 points; may post 2 for up to 50 points.**

4. Quarantine Wellness plan: **doing two or more of these activities and posting about results = 10 points per week. May earn up to 60 points for the following activities:**
 - Take an online yoga class
 - Meditate
 - Eat at least one full serving (1/2 cup) more (than you usually do) of fruit and veggies
 - Take a long walk (at least 15 minutes)
 - Cook a nutritious meal for yourself
 - Dance (at least 15 minutes)
 - Do an online vocal lesson (at least 15 minutes)
 - Doing one of these activities = 5 pts per week
5. Research about, revise and re-submit your theatrical résumé: **25 points.**
6. Research a popular cabaret performer in a major market (NYC/LA/Chicago/etc.) and post information/videos of their work: **25 points.**
7. Reach out to an established musical theatre performer on social media/via email and make a connection with them/discuss the business/the effect of this period of time on the industry (submit screenshots or email threads for proof): **50 points.**
8. Complete your market research analysis assignment: **50 points.**
9. Write quarantine-based PSA parody lyrics for an existing musical theatre song and post on Canvas: **50 points.**
10. Film yourself performing parody PSA with your own lyrics (or others): **100 points.**
11. Virtual duet – filmed and posted on Canvas: **100 points.**
 - If possible, with your partner – may be done synchronously (captured in real-time via Skype/Facetime/Google Hangouts/etc.) or asynchronously (filmed independently and edited together)
 - If your partner is unavailable, you may use a puppet or stuffed animal or another creative partner substitute.
12. Self-Tape Submission: **100 points.**
 - All students will create and submit a self-tape of two contrasting audition-length cuts to be adjudicated by myself and Mary Jo DuPrey (a musical theatre director/vocal coach to Jon Bon Jovie). You will be expected to find karaoke tracks for musical backing, present a slate and both musical selections in one uninterrupted cut, with thought toward making it as professional as possible given whatever resources you have. Additionally, you will submit written character analysis documents and a clear beat/tactic lyric sheet to me for both cuts. These self-tapes will be due by **Friday April 17** – feedback will be returned to you for self-growth and improvement.”

Connection to course-learning objectives

In addition to honing performance skills, a key component of this class focused on student preparation for transitioning into the professional theatrical world. This task was accomplished through the coursework that required students to (1) create and organize professional materials, (2) network with professional theatre artists, and (3) perform publicly for their peers. The class menu was created to reflect and support these three-course prongs.

Why this strategy worked

The course menu was introduced as a flexible way for students to demonstrate achievement through personal choice and autonomy. To receive a satisfactory grade, students ought to accumulate 250 points and choose from a selection of available assignments, from making a post to a relevant discussion forum to participating in wellness activities and filming their own performances. Assignments could be completed and performed solo or in partnership with peers.

Choice motivates students and offers various ways to arrive at and demonstrate achievement. With the course menu, students had the parameters guiding their learning journeys, and could exercise autonomy. This staging encouraged students to think for themselves, plan and reflect on their learning progress.

The suggested assignments provided guidelines for productive participation in course work and were not perceived as hard or easy; instead, they represented optimal paths for students to reach or exceed the milestones planned for the course. Each assignment was accompanied by a set of instructions that crystallized its purpose, specific steps providing a structure for engagement, and grading criteria for successful engagement and assignment completion.

The menu can be complex or straightforward, but it must accommodate online course navigation. I organized the course's menu in Canvas, the institutional course management system, for students to easily find their way and spend the time and effort on engagement rather than wayfinding (see Figure 1). I utilized Modules in Canvas to create a quick overview of all assignments, their point values and due dates and provided detailed descriptions in the syllabus.

Additional context for this strategy

As our department shifted from “emergency remote teaching” of the Spring 2020 semester to the innovative new styles of online/hybrid model of teaching theatre in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021. The class menu has been a useful enhancement to our practice-based and lecture-based courses across the 100-400 level course offerings. The menu appears to be best deployed in an asynchronous context, and within small-enrollment courses, as an option to augment other relevant assignments or class activities.

The menu has the potential to accommodate students who test positive for COVID-19 and/or are required to quarantine and still can successfully participate in the course from the comfort of their homes.

Although the focus of my home department is in the humanities, the choice-driven structure of the class menu could easily be reconfigured to work in STEM-based courses of any level.

Key takeaways

My students made many remarks about the course menu and its pedagogical implications. They appreciated flexibility, autonomy, and many options to engage with coursework and their peers, as evident from this course evaluation, “I thought the class menu idea was very helpful and allowed me to work on this class every week, engage with the class community, and dedicate time to my learning and vocal practice without feeling too much stress or pressure. I found the self-tape exercise incredibly useful, especially since the self-tapes are so common in the auditioning world, and I haven't had a class that guides actors through that process yet.”

My students appreciated the different routes in which they chose to arrive at success by capitalizing on their strengths. They reflected about their own learning and on becoming professional performers, “The class menu was a good fit. I liked all of the assignments I chose, because I felt they suited what I wanted to learn and improve on as a performer. I also really liked the self-tape audition project! It worked not only because of the COVID-19 crisis, but it is also a skill that will be really useful as lots of companies have people send in self-tapes. I also loved the weekly check-ins. It made me feel still connected to class members as well as the professor.”

The menu helped my students to understand that success comes in different forms and shapes. It facilitated peer-to-peer and instructor-to-students interaction as we were making our way through the pandemic, “These

assignments encouraged me not only to stay informed about the class but to make sure I was taking care of myself and would have something to share. I think he did an outstanding job ensuring that we were all okay and focusing on our own health during this time, while also giving us work to do that was beneficial and kept us engaged in the class.”

Finally, the menu unleashed student creativity as evident by the video shared below. As I was reinventing my teaching during the shift to remote delivery, my students also reinvented themselves, their learning, and their understanding of the performing profession.














▼ Class Menu	
	Class Menu Instructions
	Musical Theatre Warm-up Ideas and Results (up to 110 points)
	Your Favorite Cabaret Performer (25 points)
	Revise Your Résumé (25 points) May 1 0 pts
	Public Service Announcement Parody Lyrics (25 points)
	Musical Theatre Mentor (50 points) May 1 0 pts
	Preliminary Market Analysis Assignment (50 points) May 1 0 pts
	Public Service Announcement Parody Video Submission (100 points) May 1 0 pts
	Virtual Duet Submission (100 points) May 1 0 pts
Quarantine Wellness Plan	
	Quarantine Wellness Plan—Week 1 Results (5-10 points)
	Quarantine Wellness Plan—Week 2 Results
	Quarantine Wellness Plan—Week 3 Results
	Class Menu Compilation May 8 250 pts

Figure 1: the “Class Menu” set-up shown in Canvas. There is a Module in Canvas titled “Class Menu,” which contains a list of all assignments, their values and due dates, along with detailed descriptions included in the syllabus.



Figure 2: A screenshot of one of the students' videos called "Ya Got Covid" inspired by "Ya Got Trouble" from 'The Music Man'. Watch this performance: <https://bit.ly/3fz8r3F>. Shared with the permission from the student.