

February 16, 2012

To whom it may concern,

This afternoon I had the opportunity to observe Adam Olson instructing MUTC420 Electronic Music Synthesis. Below I will detail the many positive aspects of Mr. Olson's classroom environment, classroom management, and content delivery, as well as offer a suggestion from the perspective of an outside observer.

Mr. Olson is clearly well-liked by eight students in the course. Relaxed banter fills the time before class starts and ceases when he closes the door at 12:30. Within the first couple of minutes of class, he has interacted personally at some length with every student, and they seem comfortable with one another. Admirably, in a course taken almost entirely at the computer, I did not observe a moment of digital distractedness on the part of the students (e.g., email, Facebook, etc.), and I take this as a tribute to Mr. Olson's high level of engagement.

The bulk of the session was devoted to exercises similar to an upcoming project on digital sampling. Mr. Olson, speaking from the back of the room so he can observe students' screens, proceeds through the process of recording samples and loading them into a software synthesizer, a process that requires students to keep pace with his example. When students fall behind, Mr. Olson has encouraged them to seek help from their peers while the rest of the class continues. Not only does this prevent individual students from monopolizing Mr. Olson's attention (during which other students may drift), but it also enables "tutoring" students to demonstrate their own competency.

Another very successful feature of the course is the way in which Mr. Olson randomizes his expectations for student response. If a question is posed that he feels the students should be able to answer themselves, a name of one student appears on the projector in a sharply pointed, comic-book-like bubble and Mr. Olson exclaims, "[student's name], you're on the call!" This keeps the students continually engaged, and I would like to have this in my own classes.

My only concern in the session is the "stickiness" of some of Mr. Olson's ideas. He demonstrates a deep expertise in the area and peppers the class with important if tangential information, such as details about the comparative features of different software options or when students should and should not normalize the audio of their samples. The students are immersed in computer software throughout the session and don't seem to take notes; I worry that these details will not be retained. Perhaps a collaborative Google document maintained by the entire class would reinforce Mr. Olson's teaching.

I would be happy to discuss what I saw in Electronic Music Synthesis further.

Sincerely,



Mitchell Ohriner
Assistant Professor of Music Theory