

Teaching Western Theory in Shortcuts: An Autoethnographic Case Study of Pedagogical Gaps in Undergraduate Peer Tutoring

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In undergraduate Western music theory education, core concepts such as harmony, key relationships, intervals, and notation are often taught through shortcuts. These include memorized shapes, mnemonics, and quick tricks, rather than the reasoning behind them. Such shortcuts feel easier for both teacher and student at the moment. But they leave students without a real understanding of the theory, one they can apply flexibly later. This gap usually stays hidden in the early years of study. It surfaces later, in the third and fourth year, when students are expected to build on knowledge they never actually had. The result is compounding confusion, longer learning curves, and lower confidence. Many of these students later become teachers themselves. When they do, they risk repeating the same shortcuts with their own students, creating a cycle of confusion that passes from one generation of learners to the next. This study aims to: (1) document specific shortcuts used in Western theory instruction, as observed through undergraduate peer-tutoring; (2) examine the conceptual gaps these shortcuts create, and how they resurface in later coursework; and (3) propose a simple scaffolding framework to support more sustainable, foundation-first theory teaching. This study uses an autoethnographic case-study approach. It draws on the author's own experience as an undergraduate peer-tutor, trained to ABRSM Grade 8 level in Western music theory. Eight recurring shortcut patterns are documented, covering harmony, key signatures, modes, intervals, notation, and ear training. These are analyzed thematically and discussed alongside existing literature on procedural versus conceptual learning in music education. The analysis suggests these shortcuts share a common pattern: they teach the surface-level output of a concept without the reasoning behind it. This creates a delayed-failure effect, where confusion is postponed rather than resolved, and only becomes visible once students reach advanced coursework. The study suggests that adding even brief conceptual grounding alongside any shortcut could reduce this long-term confusion, and help break the cycle before it reaches the next generation of learners.

Keywords: *Music theory pedagogy; procedural shortcuts; conceptual scaffolding; peer tutoring; autoethnography*