

Online Education in the Classroom

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I was very interested to read the article in the last issue of Canadian Folk Music magazine (46/4, Winter 2013) entitled “Notes from the Field: Three Perspectives on Teaching Music Online”, with contributions from Meghan Forsyth (MUN), Janice Tulk (Cape Breton U) and Gillian Turnbull (Ryerson). The three contributors described their unique and interesting online ventures in teaching within the context of distance (i.e., out-of-class) education. Their descriptions of various solutions to student interactions and collaborations that normally occur in the classroom were illuminating, and familiar to those of us who have used distance education, or know of friends who have completed courses and even certification in an online format. Nevertheless, online courses in music have unique challenges, given the listening component of the course material. This aspect was ably addressed by the three contributors.¹

I also use the forces of online education, but within the context of teaching live lectures within the bricks and mortar of a lecture hall, not as a distance education platform. Let me explain.

For the last four years, I have been using a web-based program provided by my university, called the WebCT “Blackboard Learning System”.² For all intents and purposes, it functions like an online education program, but in fact is described as a “classroom management system”. For reasons unknown to me, UBC chose Blackboard over Moodle. There are several websites devoted to the differences between the two.³

I began with Blackboard’s Vista format, and then recently converted to their Connect upgrade. Blackboard designs their software to be open-ended so that university and college educators in every corner of a campus, from dentistry to music, can adapt it for their department and individual needs. Each student accesses the course content via their personal Connect webpage. For now, Blackboard at UBC is a voluntary program, but it won’t be long before it’s mandatory.

I should provide the following caveat at the top of this article so that you can place my description in its proper context. I have classes composed of 30 to 40 students who are enrolled in my third- and fourth-year undergraduate courses. Because the courses are advertised within the School of Music, most of the enrollees are from there. But the courses are also open to the university as a whole, so I see people “from other walks of (academic) life”, many of whom are avid music fans and often have as much practical

music training (mainly on the piano) as the music students.

I know that mass “introductory music” courses for non-music students are often “cash cows” for universities, involving hundreds of young people in search of three “special interest” credits. Publishers that provide textbooks for Western Art Music, World Music, and Popular Music Introductions for non-music students smell big money to be made in these kinds of courses, but my heart goes out to the teachers who have to shepherd such a vast number of disparate individuals with varying levels of interest and commitment. Regardless, mass courses are a prime medium for online education.

So what are the online components of my classroom, you ask? Certainly all the ones you read about in the “Notes from the Field” article, as well as others that I have added.

Textbook

Online. And free. Because ethnography lies at the heart of my courses and I believe, the disciplines I teach, Dr. Simone Kruger’s book, *Ethnography in the Performing Arts*, is ideal. Given that it is designed to be used by students in all the performing arts (music, theatre, dance, etc.), the book is especially appropriate for music students. Of course, one could make a hard copy of the online book by printing its pages (for circa \$80) and I understand that a publisher is seriously considering making the book available in hard print (with expanded sections). It is an excellent resource for undergraduate students (and – Who are we fooling here? – graduate students in need of a primer). Another feature I like is that its educational material draws from English experiences rather than the usual source, the U.S. There is a different sort of assumptions to make the teeth grind, but their allusions to Coronation Street, instead of Sesame Street, are endearing to me. My personal shibboleth, I readily admit. The students are required to write

Some of you may have found yourselves puzzled over the lack of a “textbook” in the classic sense – a chapter book that mirrors the lectures. I don’t rely on the mass-produced “survey” style of textbooks (Nettl, Miller, etc.) that bounce from country to country (missing Canada), chapter by chapter. My course does not consist of a Cook’s Tour, with footnotes. It is designed to allow students to view any music culture they encounter in the future, with a critical mind. Their notes are also the basis of their written assess-

ments, so missing classes has very serious consequences. There is also no possibility of skipping classes and relying on the study of the textbook in an all-nighter cram session before the exam.

Readings

Online. Not “photocopied excerpts contained in reading packages, available in the bookstore” (at a cost). Reading packages were once a cheap alternative to expensive textbooks, and tailored to individual teachers’ needs, but as the copyright ice age continues to descend on the campuses, this option is fading into history. Using online readings was troubling to me at first, and I admit I’m still feeling my way through the jungle of conflicting ideas.

In my classes, all readings are from online databases that offer journal articles, and, most interestingly, from eBooks now available in the library. But the freedom of these sources comes with a price. I no longer use articles and excerpts found in hard-copy books that lie in wait in the stacks of the library. This turn from real to virtual is mirrored in the library as it undergoes enormous changes; browsing in the stacks is a distant memory, where the brunt of the collections are now being accessed by robot devices from three-storey-high shelves. Those paper-bound sources patiently wait for graduate students who want to go deep into their subject areas, but for undergrads in the early years, they exist in a remote, even forbidding, corner of the commons. There is always the option of placing hard-copy books with required reading on reserved sections of the library, but they are only available for limited amounts of time, and may have other inconveniences.

Assessments (Formerly Known as Exams)

Online. Mid-term and end-of-term exams are of two varieties: good, old-fashioned paragraph answer tests, and listening tests. Both are available online in a one-time-only, three-hour window of opportunity over the length of a long weekend. Students are instructed to write the exams anywhere they like – in their local coffee shop, in their jammies at 3:00 in the morning in their bedroom (it happens, or so I’m told), or on a long-distance flight to Hong Kong. The questions resemble open-book exams, in that they are obviously open to cheating. We know that students will have Wikipedia open on their device, so the exam questions have to be conceptual, requiring analytical thinking using the tools of critical theory dispensed in class. “Describe two things that are the same, and two things that are different, in a baroque solo-sonata and a rock and roll guitar band. Explain your choices.” The wonderful aspect of using Connect is the poten-

tial to correct wrong answers, and comment on right answers, online. For teachers of classes with more than 50 students, it is possible to create online multiple choice questions that Connect will answer automatically. In both exam scenarios, the students receive their mark the instant their exam is corrected. They can also see how their marks are accumulating online, as they chase the magic number of 100.

Listening exams turned out to be quite tricky to create online. By “listening exams”, I am referring to simple recognition. Other kinds of listening assessments, such as on-the-spot analysis, are easily done in the written online exams, where students are provided sound bites to analyze. I have found that it is not possible to assume students have a basic listening literacy. One of my most famous experiences in this regard is a story I’ve told in a previous issue of this magazine, where a majority of students, many new to Canada, had no idea who Joni Mitchell was, or what she sounded like. The “mature” students in my class are visibly shocked whenever this story is told.

Gone are the days when I could provide CD copies in the reserve section of the library, thanks to Bill C-11, the Copyright Modernization Act of 2012. Even before that date, many universities took the high road and voluntarily created restrictions on the use of copyright material for teaching purposes, like photocopy and CD reproductions. Now the students are on their own, and they seem to love it. Copyright became a complete non-issue. Instead, I now have to contend with Music Recognition Software (MRS). Because MRS requires at least four seconds to recognize a melody, all my music examples are less than four seconds long. The interesting result of this severe restriction is that the students have to know the music very, very well. A large component of my listening examples are comprised of CanCon (Canadian Content) titles. The Great Canadian and First Nations popular music songbooks, and the equally Great Canadian fiddle books, are unknown to most, so it is their first step in experiencing Canadian music culture.

Office hours

Online 24/7 via email.

Classroom Discussions (Once Known as Classroom Participation)

Online. Twice a week, the students fire up the discussion board component of Connect and shoot the breeze about any topic in the lectures that made them stop and think. I’ve even seen students helping each other out with information from my lectures. I monitor the “tweets” and add comments of my own, and

the reward for the students is a mark for each week's contributions, a serious incentive to be fully engaged (and have fun).

Syllabus. Course Expectations. Goals and Objectives. Lecture Summaries. Key words. Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Written Characters with Translations.

Online. Online. Online.

So what is *not* online? The actual lectures! I say this with an exclamation point because some of you will recognize everything I've described as a typical distance education course.

Students actually attend live lectures where I am there to explain, illustrate (with iPad-driven presentation software), and answer questions. I live and teach by McLuhan's maxim: "It's misleading to suppose there's any basic difference between education & entertainment. This distinction merely relieves people of the responsibility of looking into the matter." (McLuhan 1957).

The Future?

I have no doubt that live lectures, the last and most precious of this new educational world, will soon disappear, or dramatically transform into media-like podcasts, available 24/7. Instead of one student paying \$800 to attend live lectures and online course content, ten times more attendees will pay \$80 each to "see" the entire course online, including the lectures.

Even the very purpose of education will be subject to change. Witness the growth of MOOCs, Massive Open Online Courses. Massive divisions of tertiary education will move from a necessity for a future career to a recreation, as envisioned by continuing education advocates for decades. I am not a futurist by any means, but I wonder about the following scenarios. Schools of music in universities will cease offering performance degrees and music lessons, which are too expensive to maintain. They will leave that area of music education to the

conservatories, which have always handled mass music performance education far more successfully. Schools of music will become niche. Students at the undergraduate level will resemble graduate students who have "MOOCed" their way through the introductory (Baccalaureate) levels of music instruction until they require one-on-one guidance. Young people who love music will explore recreational music-making as it becomes a more viable and realistic option. Left to their own devices (as opposed to the agendas of schools of music), they will turn away from Western Art Music as they look for inspiration from popular music, electronic explorations (e.g., Garage Band), and global sources that are also hybridizing with the West, occasionally even turning away from their own music traditions.

Be that as it may, if you want to read more about my courses, and related material, you are welcome to visit my UBC blog, under Dr. Norman Stanfield.⁴

Bibliography

McLuhan, Marshall. 1957. "Classroom Without Walls." *Explorations* 7: 22-26.

Notes

¹ Board member David Gregory, recently retired from Athabasca University, could probably write the book on distance music education, his livelihood of many decades. Then there's RCME (Royal Conservatory of Music – Examinations), which provides another interesting template.

² An overview of Blackboard is available on its website, <http://www.blackboard.com/>; further information on how it works can be found in the Wikipedia entry, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackboard_Inc.

³ See, for example, <http://www.emergingedtech.com/2010/11/moodle-2-versus-blackboard-brief-comparison/> or http://elearning.uvic.ca/documents/doc_view/3-detailed-moodle-blackboard-comparison.

⁴ <http://blogs.ubc.ca/normanstanfield/>.