

Teaching Music Theory Using Blogging: Embracing the World of Web 2.0



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ABSTRACT

Music educators have been aware of the changing world in which modern professional musicians work. This was clearly evident in the numerous papers presented at the 2006 ISME-CEPROM international seminar. Thus far, changes or expansion of curriculum/programme content might have largely sufficed, with the basic teaching/learning paradigm remaining intact. But, with the rise of the Net Generation and a music marketplace that is increasingly globalized in its practice and outlook, music educators now need to meet these emerging challenges in order to better prepare our future musicians for the new networked world. Taking my point of departure from George Siemens's basic recognition that "We derive our competence from forming connections", this paper translates the notion of "connections" to propose a way of transforming our teaching of music theory through the use of blogging, one of the Web 2.0 tools, to meet the needs of n-gen musicians.

KEYWORDS

music theory teaching, Web 2.0, blogging, Net Generation, digital natives, enduring understandings

LATEST CHALLENGE FOR MUSIC EDUCATORS

Music educators have been aware of the changing world in which modern professional musicians work in. As was strongly evident at the 2006 ISME-CEPROM international seminar, the prevalence of diverse portfolio careers for professional musicians have resulted in the recognition of the relevance of pedagogical skills, business skills and even people skills training, amongst others, for music students (Barkl, 2006; Bennett, 2006; Bennett & Stanberg, 2006; Burt, 2006; Weller, 2006). The professional needs of popular-music musicians have also impacted mainstream music curriculum in terms of content and teaching approaches (Blom, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2006). Thus far, changes or expansion of curriculum/programme content as a response might have largely sufficed, with the basic

teaching/learning paradigm remaining intact. However, a new generation of students—digital natives (Prensky, 2001) or the Net-Generation (Tapscott, 1998)—are now entering our classrooms. These students have their unique learning profiles and will eventually join our increasingly globalized world where, for musicians, interaction across musical cultures is becoming commonplace, both in and outside of cyberspace. As music educators, we therefore have the responsibility of paying heed to this change in order to better prepare our future musicians.

THE WORLD OF WEB 2.0

To take up this challenge, we need to first understand the nature of what has been termed Web 2.0, a concept popularized by the O'Reilly Media (O'Reilly, 2005), though (it may be noted) Tim O'Reilly might not have been the first to coin the phrase (McCormack, 2002). Whilst some disagreement remains over its definition and its meaningfulness (O'Reilly, August 5, 2005; MacManus, August 22, 2006), it nonetheless signifies an emerging new world, and some education researchers have already called attention to its educational implications (Downes, 2005). Essentially, we now live in an increasingly networked world in which the World Wide Web—in being transformed from a "Read Web" to Tim Berners-Lee's ideal of a "Read-Write Web" (Lawson, August 9, 2005)—has become an important platform for various forms of social networking, including for the purpose of learning. The seven key characteristics of Web 2.0 identified by Ross Dawson capture well the Zeitgeist of this emergent milieu: participation, standards, decentralization, openness, modularity, user control, and identity (Dawson, 2007).

For educators, the possible impact on the teaching/learning process is obvious. As a platform for interacting with content, Web 2.0 is no longer just "a Web of data": its "microcontents" can now be easily accessed and remixed or modified "in new and useful ways" (MacManus, 2005). In other words, as made

evident in Stephen Downes’s portrayal of what he calls “E-learning 2.0” (Downes, 2005), online learning can be transformed from “content-consumption” to “content-authoring”. Students are thereby connected via e-learning applications in a communal e-learning environment with, nonetheless, individual space for personal learning as well as for creating and showcasing their work.

Such personalized yet syndicated learning activities, which are tantamount to a form of informal learning, are particularly relevant in the modern real world. It is perhaps fair to say that formal education, which increasingly constitutes less of our overall learning in comparison with informal learning, is now seen more as a stepping stone towards one’s lifelong learning journey than as a point of arrival upon completion. In George Siemens’s advocacy of Connectivism as a new learning theory for the digital age, he notes that “Informal learning is a significant aspect of our learning experience,...[be it] through communities of practice, personal networks [or] through completion of work-related tasks”; and that our competence is derived as much from “meaning-making tasks” as from “forming connections between specialized communities” (Siemens, 2004).

At the same time, we also note that the 21st-century working world is placing more premium on organizational learning whose key elements include interaction and collective learning (Smith, 2001). As such, Downes’s view of Web 2.0 as “an attitude” rather than a technology—“It’s about enabling and encouraging participation through open applications and services.” (Davis, 2005)—cannot be more apt as a pointer for educators when rethinking current teaching/learning paradigms in light of the emerging Web 2.0 world.

OUR N-GEN STUDENTS AND US

In aligning with this emergent “attitude”, one certainly needs to better understand the profile of digital natives. In *Educating the Net Generation* (Oblinger, 2005), Diana Oblinger and James Oblinger note that the Net Gen “have seized on the potential of networked media”; they prefer collaborative learning, adopting “a peer-to-peer approach,... where students help each other.” As “prolific communicators”, they reveal their “crave” for interactivity: “they gravitate toward activities that promote and re-inforce social interaction—whether IMing old friends, teaming up in an Internet game, posting Web diaries (blogging), or forwarding joke e-mails.” Their online behaviour tellingly sets them apart from previous generations:

The Net Gen displays a striking openness to diversity, differences, and sharing; they are at ease meeting strangers on the Net. Many of their exchanges on the Internet are emotionally open, sharing very personal information about themselves.

Now, to be effective in our responses as educators, we also need to be mindful of our own profile vis-à-vis the digital native/immigrant divide. These two profiles have been usefully contrasted by researchers Ian Jukes and Anita Dosaj of The InfoSavvy Group (2003):

Table 1. Comparison of digital native learners and digital immigrant teachers (cited at <http://www.apple.com/au/education/digitalkids/disconnect/landscape.html>)

| Digital Native Learners | Digital Immigrant Teachers |
|--|---|
| Prefer receiving information quickly from multiple multimedia sources. | Prefer slow and controlled release of information from limited sources. |
| Prefer parallel processing and multitasking. | Prefer singular processing and single or limited tasking. |
| Prefer processing pictures, sounds and video before text. | Prefer to provide text before pictures, sounds and video. |
| Prefer random access to hyperlinked multimedia information. | Prefer to provide information linearly, logically and sequentially. |
| Prefer to interact/network simultaneously with many others. | Prefer students to work independently rather than network and interact. |
| Prefer to learn “just-in-time.” | Prefer to teach “just-in-case” (it’s on the exam). |
| Prefer instant gratification and instant rewards. | Prefer deferred gratification and deferred rewards. |
| Prefer learning that is relevant, instantly useful and fun. | Prefer to teach to the curriculum guide and standardized tests. |

Regardless of the extent to which the above applies to us, the basic potential mismatch between teacher and student here cannot be ignored lest we risk becoming ineffective as teachers—music theory teachers being no less in danger.

TEACHING MUSIC THEORY IN THE WORLD OF WEB 2.0

To meet the N-Gen musicians on their terms, the teaching of music theory needs to be more radically revamped in one respect—instead of looking again at the curriculum content. The N-Gen profile suggests that connectivity is one important appeal element for this young generation of learners, and it is this element which lies at the heart of Siemens's new learning theory mentioned above. When Siemens highlights the importance of “meaning-making and forming connections between specialized communities”, he in effect points to two kinds of connectivity for educators:

- I. connectivity between people
- II. connectivity between subject areas

For the modern musician, this means both people connection within and amongst different music communities, and connection in terms of subject understanding. Where music-theory teaching is concerned, the latter entails equipping students to understand other musical traditions—potentially anything in the whole gamut of western classical music, popular musics, and world musics—as and when the need arises, whether they be performers, composers/arrangers, or some kind of music consumer/user.

To these ends, I identify two necessary key changes. First, the music theory class needs to shift from fostering passive knowledge consumption to offering active and collaborative knowledge construction opportunities. Second, for this to succeed—especially given the impossibility of teaching or learning every musical tradition “out there”—the class needs to focus on key concepts and skills. Furthermore, these need to be taught/learned in such a way as to facilitate lateral application across musical traditions as well as the creation of new knowledge. In other words, to borrow Wiggins and McTighe's terms, we need to help students “uncover” “enduring understandings” or “big ideas” that will see them through their individual lifelong (self-) learning (Wiggins, 2005).

I submit that, to facilitate the first change, our new pedagogy can take advantage of blogging—one of the Web 2.0 tools which has proven to be a great empowering tool for collaborative content creation (Downes, 2005). And to achieve the second element of change, our pedagogy (together with our mindset as teachers) needs to be reshaped to effectively embrace the use of blogging.

BLOGGING IN THE MUSIC THEORY CLASS

The ensuing presentation draws upon my personal experiences in the last three years exploring blogging as an instructional strategy in teaching music theory and analysis to year-one undergraduates. Previous presentations elsewhere have focused on its potential to motivate learning, foster higher-order thinking and take advantage of distributed expertise (Chong, 2006; Chong, 2007; Chong & Soo, 2007); the present paper will focus on using blogging to transform the teaching of music theory for the world of N-Gen.

Prior to my adoption of blogging, my teaching approach had centred around the delivery of pre-determined theory topics—and western ones at that—by way of explanation and illustrations; students in turn were given assignments to demonstrate their level of understanding and hone their music-analytical skills. With the introduction of blogging as a mode of assignment, the nature of teaching and learning in my theory/analysis class has gradually changed in some significant ways.

Taking advantage of the online connectivity afforded by blogging, I require students to not only upload their analysis assignments as blog entries, but also engage in peer discussion and even peer evaluation of the “submitted” work. Given the 24/7 access of the internet, class interaction both between teacher and students and amongst students immediately extended beyond curriculum time and space. (It may be added here that certain quieter members of the class also found a more comfortable platform to “speak up”.) Indeed, the class community later expanded beyond the official class when I invited ex-students to participate in the blog discussion and the students themselves invited their own friends to “drop in” as guests. The online discussions have certainly been enriched by these external inputs.

More recently, I have explicitly encouraged my class to see themselves as members of a community of learners, in which individuals have differing and differing levels of expertise, but are collectively engaged in learning. I highlight their diverse musical backgrounds—and here I was fortunate to have students whose music expertise have ranged from popular music and band music to Chinese traditional music—and encourage them to share and develop their special knowledge when choosing music for their analytical discussion. For this purpose, I stipulate that the music they choose must not be from the western classical repertoire, which is the main focus in the taught component of the course. And to help students move beyond the level of mere sharing of

expertise, I participate in the blog discussion as a fellow member, prompting them to make connections with the western musical concepts taught where appropriate and when necessary. On two occasions so far, I have even invited fellow colleagues who were more specialized in certain musical tradition under discussion to contribute to the blog discussion. The students, on their own, have of course turned readily to the rich repository of information on the internet in their search for knowledge.

Needless to say, such a manner of learning necessarily introduces a certain non-linear randomness: whilst I might have systematically sequenced the topics in the taught component of the course, allowing students to choose music for their assignments did mean that the musical concepts and analytical approaches called for might not have been covered yet or even be intended to be formally taught. As a pragmatic measure, I try to design assignments suitably with appropriate guidelines to minimize situations whereby students choose music that may over-challenge them; at the same time, I offer just-in-time input where necessary in the course of the blog discussion. As far as the taught component is concerned, I now make an effort to emphasize the underlying “big ideas” when teaching specific topics and relate the western musical concepts to other musical traditions where possible to not only help students appreciate the “big ideas” involved, but also sensitise them to differences across traditions.

The resultant learning has, inevitably, become more enriching for both the students and, I hasten to add, myself too! For example, our understanding of musical structure was broadened when students introduced such terms as “turnaround”, “pre-chorus” and “outro” in the context of pop songs, and one student drew structural parallels between a modern Yangqin Concerto and traditional Peking opera. In my pre-blogging teaching days, the students would have only learnt the standard structural elements in western classical music. Similarly, having learnt how to analyze western classical harmonies, the students’ encounter with non-classical repertoire, whether western or otherwise, alerted them to the style contingency of the analytical concepts and tools they have learnt.

Such was the impact of allowing my students to open up the curriculum as it were that I now see myself more as a fellow member of the learning community, learning as much from my students as I may be teaching them. This is certainly going beyond the traditional idea of student-centred learning. Of course, I have not gone to the

extreme of allowing students to entirely dictate the scope of learning: they were merely given sufficient freedom to apply what has been taught to domains of music that is of interest to them (which may be less familiar or even totally unfamiliar to me). Therein lies the challenge but also excitement for me as the teacher learning with my students. This has perhaps been the most fundamental change in my teaching mindset in aligning with the Web 2.0 “attitude”!

Finally, it should be pointed out that the nature of the students’ submissions has also changed. Instead of the previous essay submissions with analytical illustrations, students now typically supplement their uploaded analytical commentaries and illustrations with hyperlinks to audio and/or video recordings of the music discussed. They frequently also upload other relevant picture files and provide hyperlinks to sources of additional information for those interested. Judging by the few batches of students who have embarked on blogging with me, I can see that they increasingly come with an ease and readiness to create such media-rich environments on their blogs, not to mention their increasing level of comfort when learning online.

CLOSING REMARKS

Evidently, the blog, far from being a mere online journal, has become a personal learning space. The whole learning endeavour, because it is conducted in the environment of a blog, appeals to students on numerous counts—namely, the 24/7 access, the interactivity, the multimedia richness, and the individual ownership of the blog. And when students are allowed to choose the music for discussion, the personal interest and relevance add another level of motivation for them.

In adopting blogging as a mode of teaching and learning, a traditional class is transformed into a community of learners, one which can potentially be syndicated with various communities of expertise at large. Not only is the nature of the class changed, the teaching/learning process is also necessarily transformed. The teacher’s role is certainly changed in some radical ways. Beyond delivery of predetermined content knowledge and facilitation of discussion, it actually calls for a willingness on the part of the teacher to be a fellow-learner in the community, to the extent of acknowledging ignorance and learning from students instead. And as far as the teaching (in the more traditional sense) is concerned, the content delivery needs to be focused on “big ideas” and “enduring understandings/skills” as opposed to mere facts and skills to help students deal with the

kinds of music that they may encounter in their later professional lives.

Less obviously but no less importantly, the teacher's focus also needs to include helping students develop learning skills and engage in collaborative learning effectively. In our 21st century networked world, such a mode of teaching/learning prepares our students to continue their life-long learning. The teacher-guided experience of negotiating between different musical traditions should put them in good stead when they enter the globalized music marketplace. At the same time, the communal element in their blog-based learning experience will predispose them towards further collaborative learning, particularly in a Web 2.0 environment, in their working life. All these, in short, represent a change in teaching approach that has been called for most recently at the ACER-sponsored National Education Seminar for education leaders in Indonesia:

Unless we give attention to Web 2.0 development, we will encounter students who have expectations that are incompatible with our own thinking and the ways we integrate technology. It is also a danger that unless we accommodate Web 2.0 developments in our teaching, we might find ourselves producing students unable to function in the Web 2.0-literate world outside. (Churchill, 2007)

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