Connecting learners, employers and practitioners through emergent digital technology

Thorley, M.

Author post-print (accepted) deposited in CURVE May 2016

Original citation & hyperlink:
Thorley, M. (2014) 'Connecting learners, employers and practitioners through emergent digital technology' in Evangelos Himonides and Andrew King (Eds). Proceedings of the Sempre MET2014: Researching Music, Education, Technology: Critical Insights. (pp: 171). London: International Music Education Research Centre (iMerc)

http://research.ioe.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/proceedings-of-the-sempre-met2014(8a48a26c-738f-4455-8e50-1175eeab5a2f).html

CURVE is the Institutional Repository for Coventry University
http://curve.coventry.ac.uk/open

Connecting learners, employers and practitioners through emergent digital technology

Researching Music, Technology and Education: Critical Insights
Mark Thorley, Coventry University, UK.

Abstract

The major impact of technology upon music composition, production and consumption has shifted from production tools (the project studio, DAWs etc.), to the digital technologies which facilitate the digital distribution and streaming of music. This has altered the commercial landscape (and therefore, the skills needed) for music practitioners, recording studios and record companies amongst many others. The traditional barrier between music composer or producer and the audience has been bridged by emergent digital technologies, and there are now many ways in which music can be showcased, demonstrated, shared or collaborated upon. These same facilitating technologies offer a significant opportunity for learners (and therefore, educators) particularly where the aim is to develop capability in composing or producing music in the expectation of working in the 'real world'. Despite this, (and possibly for cultural and structural reasons), the potential associated with adopting such technology is largely unrealised in educational contexts. This is particularly surprising given the push towards Employer/Higher Education Partnership by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, a general increased emphasis upon the skills required for employment (Dawes and Jewell, 2005), and the documented difficulty which students have in articulating their skills to the outside world (Brown, 2007). This paper describes the realisation and outcomes of a project funded by the UK's Higher Education Academy (HEA) designed to embed employer and practitioner involvement in the development and assessment of final year Music Technology portfolios. The rationale and methodology (project realisation and research examination) are described before turning to an examination of the key outcomes which have found application nationally and internationally in a variety of disciplinary contexts.

Aims

The project (funded by the HEA) aimed to establish the feasibility and impact of embedding employer/practitioner involvement in the development and assessment of Music Technology final year portfolios. This took place using emergent digital tools which facilitate the showcasing, demonstration of, and collaboration around music as well as video and e-portfolio technology. Inevitably, it also included the full gamut of technological tools commonly used in composition, recording and production.

This paper aims to show the rationale, the potential and realisation of such an approach. It also aims to outline the key outcomes which have found cross-discipline

application nationally and internationally, and the risk factors associated with this approach.

Methods

The project realisation took place in a Personal Development Planning (PDP) module within the Music and Creative Technologies Programme at Coventry University. The input of employers/practitioners took place at two key stages – before development of the portfolio, and afterwards. The concept was therefore that of the employers/practitioners 'informing' portfolio development and assessing the work from a 'real world' perspective. The interactions were enabled using digital tools typified by e-portfolios, audio sharing and showcasing technologies, video sharing sites and social media. Content was also produced using the typical tools of music composition and production (analogue and digital).

Dissemination of the project was a requirement of the funding, so an appropriate research methodology was agreed by the HEA. This took a participant observation approach outlined by Manis and Meltzer (1967). Additionally, such an approach was appropriate as the researcher needed to act as a 'research instrument', interpreting the very different worlds of undergraduate students and the high profile industry professionals. The impact upon the student work was examined together with the impact upon the student experience before investigating the impact upon the employers/practitioners involved.

Outcomes

Several changes were observed and measured from the academic's point of view. Firstly, participation and engagement in the module improved compared with the same module in previous years and other concurrent modules. Secondly, level of understanding of the professional environment was improved as seen in the quality of the submitted work. A deeper appreciation of the breadth of skills and knowledge was observed ranging from a better coverage of job functions through to improved quality of targeted evidence of capability (sound files, compositions, assignments etc.).

Impact upon the student experience was also significant. Students commented positively before the experience via social media and afterwards through module evaluation and focus groups. Specifically, they gained perspectives which would not be learnt by any other method as it was done in partnership with the employers/practitioners. Additionally, their aspiration was raised by the work being assessed by outside parties.

Lastly, there were significant effects on the employers/practitioners involved. Through the experience, they became better able to understand how new entrants into the music industry develop technical and creative skills, interface with technology and face the challenge of transition into professional life. This placed them in a better

position to recruit (or contract) new entrants to the industry. They did, however, have significant initial difficulty getting to grips with the assessment of student work.

Implications

The innovative approach taken to embed employers/practitioners in the development and assessment of final year Music Technology portfolios resulted in better engagement and a level of appreciation of skills and knowledge which was deeper and more significantly applied. The involvement of the employers/practitioners facilitated a 'partnership' learning approach with the learners. These concepts have seen the model being adopted internationally in US institutions, other Music Technology (and related discipline) courses in the UK, and in other disciplines in the host institution.

As a model then, it can be applied in Music Technology Education (and other disciplines) where developing (and articulating) creative, technical and transferable skills to employers is crucial but challenging. The most significant challenge is in finding appropriate employers/practitioners who ideally, as well as being leaders in their field are able and willing to take the time to articulate their roles, to understand and undertake assessment and be appreciative of the needs of learners. There is, however, risk in allowing employers/practitioners to form judgements on an institution from student work. Utilising new technology in assessment also involves some risk.

Acknowledgements

References

Dawes, F and Jewell, M (2005). Creating Enterprise: Developing partnerships between Universities and Creative Industries. Paper presented to the Creative Enterprise in Higher Education Conference, PALENTINE, Lancaster University.
Brown, R (2007). Enhancing Student Employability?: Current practice and student experiences in HE Performing Arts in Arts and Humanities in Higher Education, 6(1); 28-49.
Manis, J G and Meltzer B N (1967). Symbolic Interactionism: A Reader in Social Psychology. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Keywords

Music Composition and Creation, Music Production, Assessment.