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Five Challenges and Solutions in Online Music Teacher Education

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Article

"Nearly 600 graduate students?"1 As remarkable as it may sound, that is the projected student population for the online graduate programs in music education at Boston University School of Music by the end of 2007. With the rapid proliferation of online courses among mainstream universities in recent years, it is likely that more online music education programs will continue to emerge in the near future, which begs the question of what effects this new development will have on the profession. Can online education truly be of the same quality as a traditional face-to-face program? How is it possible to effectively manage such large programs, particularly at the doctoral level? For some experienced music educators, it may be quite difficult to set aside firmly entrenched reservations and objectively consider the new possibilities for teaching and research afforded by recent technology. Yet the future is already here, and nearly 600 music educators have seized the opportunity. Through online programs, the internet has become the latest tool for offering professional development to practicing educators who otherwise would not have access, particularly those currently engaged in full-time employment or residing in rural areas.

Recognizing the new opportunities afforded by recent technological developments, Director of the Boston University School of Music, Professor Andre De Quadros and colleagues launched the nation's first online doctoral program in music education in 2005. While online doctoral degrees are an entirely new phenomenon in music, they have developed at a rapid pace in other academic fields. Notable examples include the online doctoral programs in education at Pepperdine University and Seton Hall University, as well as Michigan State University's online PhD program in physics. Like most new ideas, Boston University's online graduate programs in music education faced some initial skepticism, but also experienced phenomenal growth and unexpectedly high retention rates throughout 2006. Clearly, many students are attracted to what the programs offer, and have chosen to remain.

A similar story may be found as one examines various other innovations in music education across the past century, and the music profession may still have much to learn from its own history. Jazz education, for example, was not pioneered at the Juilliard School or Harvard University. Rather, it began at institutions that were relatively unknown in the 1950s, such as Berklee School of Music (now Berklee College of Music) and North Texas State College (now University of North Texas). Both Berklee and North Texas now enjoy strong international profiles for their comprehensive music offerings, and some of their current success must surely be attributed to their willingness to take the risk of pioneering the world's first collegiate jazz programs. A similar pattern may be seen at UCLA, as one considers the phenomenal success of its innovative musicology programs that range from ethnomusicology to systematic musicology, "world arts and cultures" and "new musicology."

Within the United States, Boston has long been regarded as a national center for innovation in the field of music education, so perhaps this new development should not come as a surprise. The nation's first public school music program was founded in Boston in 1837 under Lowell Mason and Horace Mann, and the nation's first music degree program was founded only a few

decades later at Boston University in 1872. Notable music graduates from Boston University programs include Professor Bonnie Wade, chair of the Music Department at University of California-Berkeley, as well as MENC's Executive Director John Mahlmann. Boston University hosted the Tanglewood Symposium of 1967, which is widely credited by historians as a landmark event in the history of American music education, and Boston University's fortieth anniversary symposium Tanglewood II: Charting the Future has continued this tradition in 2007. Viewed from such an historical perspective, this recent online development—the largest music graduate program in the history of higher education—may be seen as another example in a long line of music education innovations originating in Boston.

What lessons have been learned from the young history of online music teacher education programs that may be shared with others in the field? Previous publications have discussed recent technological developments and considered the future promise that online learning offers for music students (Bandopadhyay, 2002; Sherbon & Kish, 1995; Wright, 1997), and music education student attitudes toward online courses have also been examined in previous research (Bauer, 2001). Recent doctoral dissertations have evaluated the use of specific approaches in online music courses (Bandopadhyay, 2002; Keast, 2004; Sinclair, 2004), but there appear to be no previous publications that discuss the broader challenges of implementing an online music teacher education program.

Five key issues have been identified for discussion in this article, each of which represents challenges that are complex yet solvable (see Fig. 1). The first part of this article will identify and describe these challenges, followed by presentation of what I propose as corresponding solutions to each of them.

Fig. 1. Five Key Issues for Online Music Education Programs:

Prejudice regarding the legitimacy of online degrees
Coordination between distance education and music departments
Pressure to maximize profits at the expense of educational quality
Management of adjunct music instructors
Management of student behavior and provision of student services
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Five Challenges

I. Prejudice regarding the legitimacy of online degrees

For good reason, many educators are skeptical toward online learning. Their caution is warranted because until rather recently the majority of online educational programs were associated with unaccredited institutions that hired instructors lacking the credentials necessary to be regarded as experts. However, in recent years mainstream research universities with an established reputation for academic excellence have increasingly embraced the unique opportunities afforded by the online format (Allen & Seaman, 2006; Allen & Seaman, 2004). It

now remains to be seen how doctoral degrees from online programs at leading research universities will be accepted by the profession, and it seems possible that prejudice against online programs may linger for some time.

II. Coordination between distance education and music departments

Interdepartmental collaboration is often a rewarding challenge. It is rewarding in the sense that much may be gained from cooperation and dialogue across disciplinary and vocational boundaries, and challenging in the sense that it often entails communication between groups with rather different priorities and motivations, and even different institutional cultures. Many music professors seem hesitant to forge collaborative relationships with other departments out of concern that their own academic freedom and job security might be undermined as a result of such arrangements. Typically, professors collaborate with a Distance Education department in order to develop any online program. In such a relationship, lines of accountability and responsibility can be unclear. Distance education staff cannot realistically be expected to fully understand and appreciate the unique needs of a particular discipline nor its standards of academic achievement. Nevertheless, in some administrative structures, distance education staff members may appear to be placed in positions of authority over professors who are then viewed as merely serving the role of providing educational "content" in a particular subject area (Gould, 2003, p. 114). There are widespread concerns in academia that this kind of model can lend itself toward viewing the professor as merely a specialized consultant who must be hired once as part of the course development process, but whose expert services are no longer necessary once the course starts to be "delivered" to students.

III. Pressure to maximize profits at the expense of educational quality

The impetus for launching an online degree program is typically associated with the admirable intention of reaching greater numbers of students. However, the prospect of increased student numbers – combined with the promise of low overhead costs – appears to offer great potential to improve the financial health of a university, so online programs are often strongly advocated by individuals with financial motivations. Particularly at the graduate level, it has been much less common for the impetus to "go online" to derive from a perception that students are receiving inadequate live instruction and would benefit more from a program that is entirely online. In other words, although the pursuit of educational quality is often a primary motivating factor for the use of new technology in live instruction, its role – ironically – appears less certain within the development of actual online programs. Washburn (2005) observes, "From the beginning, however, it was clear that the dream of using information technology to enhance teaching and learning risked being subordinated to other, less noble goals, namely, the desire to make money, cut costs, and further reduce the need for full-time professors" (p. 219). This also points to the issue of intellectual property (IP), as some universities take complete ownership of course content developed by professors for their online courses that are then mostly taught by part-time instructors (or even graduate students) hired on temporary contracts. Critics may be correct in noting that in the absence of sufficient safeguards (such as standardized benchmarks from accrediting bodies for online student/faculty ratios, unionization of professors, tenure process, democratic administrative structures, mechanisms to ensure transparency in management, contracts that ensure IP rights are retained by professors, etc.), online education

appears to have the potential to become both highly profitable and exploitative of professors and students.

IV. Management of adjunct music instructors

Prior to working for Boston University, I was employed as Head of Music for the largest tertiary institution in New Zealand. Since this was a multi-campus institution, I managed music lecturers at several different locations, which proved to be quite challenging. Prior to New Zealand, I taught at a university in Russia for a program in which students earned degrees from an American university, which was an innovative distance learning model that also presented new and interesting challenges. Remarkably similar issues are encountered when managing adjunct music instructors in an online program. Communication seems to be the most fundamental issue for distance learning, as instructors in remote sites may be facing technical problems, graders may not be taking a uniform approach in their assessment, or instructors may not be adequately responding to student needs in a timely manner. When such circumstances arise, the lack of face-to-face contact can be a challenge not only for instruction, but for the management of instructors.

V. Management of student behavior and provision of student services

A final challenge for the online environment concerns provision of university services and responses to student behavioral issues. On the more technical/practical side are basic concerns such as how to efficiently process various transactions, how to supply students with any non-digitized materials at remote sites by specific deadlines, how to securely administer tests, etc. Yet another critical issue is how best to monitor and respond to any cases of academic misconduct. It is entirely sensible to assume that academic misconduct such as plagiarism is more likely to occur in an online program where there may appear to be less certainty regarding who is actually doing the work (Jocoy & DiDiase, 2006). A related concern is for students who feel isolated and for whom an online course is their main social outlet, as well as those who have unusual personalities and are attracted to online learning because they struggle to successfully interact with peers and teachers in most live educational settings. It seems plausible that difficult students, though certainly rare, may be somewhat more commonly encountered in online programs than in traditional formats. Such students can be expected to "act out" in various ways, drawing unnecessary attention to themselves by sending inappropriate messages, making unsubstantiated complaints, incessantly playing "devil's advocate," or initiating various other behaviors that can negatively impact the online environment. Highly-competent and diligent students may then find that their studies face brief disruptions from such peers, or even that the reputation of their program appears to be stained as a result of a few problematic individuals.

Solutions

The five issues described above may initially appear to represent formidable challenges for online programs. Realistically, like face-to-face instruction, it is possible that some of the problems of online education can never be entirely eliminated, but educators who lack direct experience in this area may also grossly overestimate the severity of some challenges, failing to

recognize effective solutions to what they presume to be inevitable weaknesses in distance education. From my experience, it is clear that effective systems can be devised and implemented to lessen the frequency and severity of problems, potentially leading to enormous improvements, and there are strong indications that the "solutions" offered below can foster educational excellence in the online environment.

I. Prejudice regarding the legitimacy of online degrees

There currently appears to be no rational foundation for the assumption that a doctoral degree from an effective online program is necessarily inferior to one obtained from a program entailing live instruction. Systematic efforts must be made to counter lingering misunderstandings with factual information so outstanding online students do not face prejudice upon graduation. But the key question here seems to be whether universities will come to be perceived as truly committed to doing what is necessary to maintain academic excellence in their online programs, or contrarily, if they will be viewed as too willing to "cut corners" in order to achieve greater profits. Prejudice regarding online degrees will surely lessen as the public starts to witness an undeniable body of mounting evidence that academic quality is to be found within online graduate programs. To that end, I sense that what is needed is greater recognition of five developments: (1) the long-term appointment of professors to online degree programs who are widely recognized as expert mentors and productive scholars, (2) the maintenance of consistently high academic standards in online programs, including systemic measures that minimize grade inflation, (3) the completion and public dissemination of original and outstanding research theses completed online, (4) a strong record of graduate job placement from online programs, and (5) increased public discussions at scholarly symposia and conferences regarding the successful outcomes of online degree programs. I am confident that the profession will increasingly see each of these developments in the coming years, and will come to recognize that world-class academic excellence can come in the form of an online degree.

II. Coordination between distance education and music departments

As university presidents have often observed, the development and maintenance of effective interdepartmental collaboration is typically among the greatest of institutional challenges (Flawn, 1990). At first glance, it might seem that the very people who enter a field such as distance education do so with utterly different interests and motivations than those who enter arts professions such as music. Interestingly, from my experience at various institutions, Distance Education specialists often tend to be quite "music-friendly," professional and organized, empathetic, and display strong interpersonal and analytical skills that are more often lacking among performing artists in academic settings. Ideally, there seem to be advantages to having a music specialist in the Distance Education division, or a distance education specialist within the Music Department, effectively bridging the fields.

As I see it, the main challenge for interdepartmental collaboration is to coordinate the timely dissemination of accurate information regarding the status of courses and course development. On the part of executive administrators, thorough planning, clear decision making and delegation of responsibilities are essential for the success of an online program. While frequent interdepartmental meetings are needed, it is also critical that effective processes and systems are

developed for any program experiencing rapid growth, including precise reporting mechanisms, flowcharts of relationships and responsibilities, etc. There can be no substitute for detailed planning based on careful and thorough consultation with all program stakeholders as well as development of a uniform vision of the program's overall mission and strategic plan. Such tasks are best implemented through democratically empowering and transparent decision-making processes. When problems arise, it is essential that the real source of each problem is identified and new measures swiftly devised and implemented to successfully prevent reoccurrence. Clarity of roles is an especially important objective to constantly rethink in any dynamic working environment. Effective leaders will keep these concerns in mind and respond appropriately to issues raised by the challenge of nurturing strong interdepartmental collaboration.

III. Pressure to maximize profits at the expense of educational quality

In recent years, many online programs have emerged as collaborative ventures with educational corporations (Bok, 2003; Gould, 2003). While some online programs may be dependent upon such corporations for their services, it is best for the sake of educational quality that negotiations with such entities be approached with caution. Many educational corporations are increasingly seeking direct input into university admissions and curricular decisions (Washburn, 2005), but the maintenance of academic freedom and integrity require that professors, as the experts in a particular discipline, maintain genuine academic oversight over educational programs, including the admissions process and standards for both coursework and theses. The situation may be exacerbated by the fact that some universities have gone so far as to squelch the development of unions and even abolish the precious tradition of academic tenure, and it is in such settings that professors have sometimes felt obligated to collectively mount a vigilant – even heroic – defense of educational freedom and academic standards against the intrusion of corporate interests, for the sake of their students' futures (Bok, 2003). It may sound melodramatic, but I would also argue that students have a critical role to play here as well, and should collectively insist on quality from their institutions whenever concerns arise. Still, it seems clear that professional musicians are already used to the obsessive pursuit of quality and that professional educators also tend to be savvy consumers when it comes to their own education. Thus, one must surely be confident that conscientious music education professors and students who are wary of the unique challenges of online education will succeed in collectively ensuring high levels of educational quality are maintained. In this way, online programs may consistently provide an outstanding education that successfully meets the long-term goals and aspirations of students.

IV. Management of adjunct music instructors

The discrete characteristics of effective university teaching have been identified in previous research (Baiocco & DeWaters, 1998; McKeachie, 1999), but I think the most fundamental point from a managerial perspective is that online instructors must be provided with clear expectations and ample models of instructional excellence, as well as timely and meaningful feedback on their performance. Too often this is exactly what is missing when live instruction becomes problematic, and it seems that proportionately greater efforts in this direction must be made in the online environment in order to attain success.

It appears that most characteristics of effective university teaching in live classrooms tend to transfer well into online programs with the need for minimal modification (Draves, 2002; Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka & Coneicao-Runlee, 2000). Mentoring is one area in which it seems necessary for greater efforts to be sustained in the online environment, relative to traditional settings, in order for strong relationships to form that will enable success (Hamilton & Scandura, 2003). Beyond problems with using the technology, there do not yet seem to be any indications that particular teachers are effective at online teaching yet ineffective in live instruction, or vice versa. Rather, most characteristics of effective teaching appear to be fairly consistent across both live and virtual settings, but this question certainly calls for empirical research.

As mentioned earlier, online programs continue to face an image problem due to the reputations of the particular colleges and universities that first embraced online learning (Cronin & Bachorz, 2005). One of the most common criticisms against early forms of online programs is that they were "diploma mills" in which it was easy to earn high grades and graduate quickly while learning very little. Interestingly, grade inflation is one of the areas in which Boston University has recently developed a very strong reputation relative to peer institutions (Freedman, 2006; Halfond, 2004). It seems best that online programs at other institutions also take efforts to ensure a stringent approach to evaluation, as such policies may help to lessen any lingering prejudice regarding the academic rigor of online courses. Probably the most effective way of ensuring evaluation is appropriately rigorous is to implement an assessment moderation system (including rubrics and exemplars) that enables lead professors to examine, systematically compare and comment upon the strengths and weaknesses of various instructors' assessments of student work. Such systems have been used successfully for many decades in nations influenced by the British educational system and enable high standards to be maintained without sacrificing academic freedom or autonomy on the part of students and instructors.

V. Management of student behavior and provision of student services
Faced only with the cold glow of a computer screen, online students in isolated settings can easily grow frustrated as questions of all kinds arise regarding their educational program. As much as possible, it is best to predict all conceivable questions that are likely to arise, and have everything conveniently documented for students, well in advance, obtainable with just a few clicks of the mouse. It is also important that students be clearly informed of exactly who to go to with each particular kind of question or issue, so efficient solutions are expedited.

Academic misconduct is a serious problem that has tended to be more widespread in higher education than most university professors would care to imagine (Noah & Eckstein, 2001), and the online format offers some new and unique challenges in this area as well (Jocoy & DiDiase, 2006). Online plagiarism can be effectively prevented through many strategies, ranging from the development and frequent public dissemination of policies that explicitly outline severe penalties, to the systemic use of search engines and professional plagiarism detection devices (such as "turnitin.com"), as well as examination proctors at remote sites, creative assignments that require original writing through stages of drafts, and synchronous evaluations that entail interactive participation via audiovisual projection.

The notion of "netiquette" has recently emerged in online environments, indicating basic standards of online etiquette, but in academic settings it is useful for many of these standards to also be formalized into an actual Code of Conduct. Guidelines for student behavior in the online environment may require greater specificity than in classroom-based programs, particularly regarding the use of sarcasm (which is easily misconstrued), the sharing of class-related information in private discussion groups, improper use of emails (e.g. "bcc-ing" and "spamming" as well as the need to keep class discourse focused and relevant).2 Each of these challenges is quite manageable through the development of effective structures and systems.

Conclusions

Collaboration from four directions

In my view, the success of an online music program in terms of quality assurance requires both recognition of the unique challenges of online education and a sincere commitment to cooperatively meeting basic obligations on the part of four relevant parties: the university administration, professors, students, and professional leaders. Ideally, I view this collaborative system of obligations as follows:

I. The university administration is obligated to identify and recruit outstanding professors and provide them with adequate support, including competitive salaries, job security, a realistic workload, clear job descriptions, and standard opportunities for research and professional advancement. It is only possible to attract and retain outstanding professors if the conditions of employment are comparable between online and traditional programs. Successful online programs will also benefit from a culture of transparency in which administrators frequently engage in candid discussion with professors regarding long-term goals and strategic planning.

II. Professors in the online environment must actively monitor their students, design effective lessons and fair evaluation systems, keep informed of relevant technological innovations, insist on maintaining high standards of academic achievement, and strive to forge positive mentoring relationships with students especially at the final thesis stage. Professors also have an obligation to remain productive as scholars who contribute new knowledge to the field, and to constantly seek improvements in their courses and programs while informing their administration of any needs or concerns. Faculty must embrace their responsibility to uphold educational standards at all costs, despite any pressures to the contrary. Even in institutions where tenure has been abolished, a united faculty may successfully lobby to retain what remains of academic freedom, protecting the needs and concerns of students.

III. Students must fully devote themselves to their studies but should also take a proactive role in ensuring that their questions or concerns are heard and any problems are quickly solved. Students should recognize that online programs may have an intrinsic propensity to become impersonal and even exploitative, and efforts must be made from the side of all parties, including students, to ensure their needs are understood. Ultimately, students are the customers in any educational relationship (as much as one might prefer not to think of it this way), and like

any wise consumers should always insist on receiving quality from their investment, including sufficient levels of individual contact with experts in their field.

IV. Professional leaders also have a responsibility to monitor the work of their colleagues at peer institutions, offering either praise or rebuke according to their performance. Outstanding innovations should be recognized and honored. Alternatively, the power of accrediting bodies may be used to encourage any wayward institutions to comply with standard professional protocols. In other words, it is considered the collaborative responsibility of all (four) parties to ensure proper "checks and balances" are in place so high levels of educational quality are maintained.

In this article, five challenges were identified – and corresponding solutions proposed – for online music education programs. Next, the concept of "collaboration from four directions" was introduced to illustrate how optimum levels of educational quality may be maintained so these "solutions" to the challenges I have identified are successfully implemented in the online environment. It seems best to conclude by discussing some of the unique opportunities and strengths of online education, with consideration for the future promise this new form of learning offers to revolutionize how music teacher education is conceived.

Strengths and future opportunities

Online music teacher education is no longer merely a revolutionary idea. It has rapidly become a reality. Properly managed, this new development has enormous potential to positively revolutionize the field of music teacher education. Via online programs, learning can be tailored to fit the working schedules of busy professionals, obtained in the comfort of their own homes or wherever they may happen to be in the world. Online courses typically are rich in audiovisual content, with music recordings, video images, and animated graphics3, all of which can be displayed as many times as necessary, according to the needs and interests of individual students. Online discussions often tend to be more inclusive than discussions in live classrooms (where a few students will typically dominate the conversation), since in the online format all students are required to "post" a comment on a discussion board and may take some time to think about what to write before posting it. The online format tends to minimize any prejudice that some students might experience in live educational settings based on physical appearance or verbal communication styles, and seems ideally suited to busy parents or any students with disabilities or other health challenges. Online students are instantly connected to a network of colleagues who reside in many different locations across the nation or even around the world, and since the field of music education is so specialized, relationships formed online eventually materialize into live meetings at national conferences, workshops, clinics, and other events. The online format offers new opportunities to connect students with the leading experts in their field, through streaming video content of guest lectureships, recital performances, and ongoing research projects. Online programs also provide an ideal platform for collaborative and comparative research projects and promise to profoundly change the way music education research is conceived in the coming decades. It would be difficult to overstate the potential of

online programs to radically alter the future shape of music teacher education, and it seems safe to say that the field is already rapidly changing as a result of this new development.

Notes

1) Much of the information presented in this article is based on the author's experience working in 2006-2007 as an Assistant Professor and coordinator for the online graduate programs in music education at Boston University School of Music.

2) The term "bcc-ing" refers to the covert copying of an email to another individual without the knowledge of its main recipient, while "spamming" is the sending of unwanted emails to a large group of recipients. Both procedures can be problematic, as bcc-ing of selected emails enables eavesdropping on private communications and may manipulate third party perceptions by decontextualizing an ongoing exchange, while spamming can cause widespread annoyance as well as wasted time and intrusion of commercialism in the educational domain.

3) Each of these features enable the learning process to be entertaining as well as intellectually and aesthetically stimulating, and are included in all courses within Boston University's online music education programs.

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