

EM PAUTA - v. 15 - n. 24 - janeiro a junho 2004

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Career development for music teachers through international distance-learning media

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Desenvolvimento
profissional para
professores de música
através da educação a
distância

Resumo

Novas tecnologias têm sido desenvolvidas velozmente durante as duas últimas décadas, criando novas oportunidades e desafios para educadores musicais e seus alunos. Há duas formas pelas quais essas questões são tratadas, exemplificadas aqui por estudos de casos de duas instituições. Na Universidade de Reading, um programa de educação a distância já existente e baseado em linhas tradicionais pode ampliar seu impacto e a constituição geográfica de seus alunos através da incorporação de técnicas de *e-learning*. Em contraste, um novo projeto na Escola do Futuro da Universidade de São Paulo foi iniciado para pesquisar e desenvolver novos meios de aprendizagem a distância para a educação musical. Os processos pelos quais estes dois acontecimentos complementares chegaram ao seus estágios atuais são apresentados, assim como uma análise conjunta das novas oportunidades que são identificadas como consequência de colaborações entre eles no futuro.

Palavras-chave: educação musical a distância; Internet; *e-learning*

Abstract

New technologies have developed quickly during the last two decades, creating new opportunities and challenges for educational providers and their students. The means by which these have been met fall into two categories, exemplified here by case studies from two institutions. In the University of Reading, an existing distance-learning programme developed on traditional lines, was able to broaden its impact and the geographical constituency from which it recruits by incorporating e-Learning techniques into its means of delivery. By contrast, a new project at the University of São Paulo was initiated specifically to research and develop innovative distance-learning media in music education. The processes by which these two complementary developments arrived at their current position are presented in this article, along with a collective response to some of the new opportunities they jointly identify as a consequence of collaborating with one another in the future.

Key words: distance learning education; Internet; e-learning

Recebido em 26/04/2004

Aprovado para publicação em 25/05/2004

Introduction

The new technologies – the Internet, DVD, videoconferencing and electronic storage and transmission of audio and video – have entered the arena of music teaching and continuing professional development at an alarming rate. This paper presents two case studies of how institutions in two widely separated cultures have sought to employ these new resources: how the routes they embarked on to do so started out in quite dissimilar places in the music education landscape; and how they have converged to begin to define a common agenda for the further development of distance-learning media and a music education philosophy ready to benefit from their influence.

Two routes to computer-based distance-learning development

This paper represents collaboration between staff at institutions that are now working in collaboration, but which entered the field of e-Learning from radically different directions. In the first case, electronic distance learning was incorporated as an improvement to effective methods that were originally designed on more traditional lines. In the second, a research laboratory was set up with the specific aim of devising new platforms for the delivery of educational programmes.

1) The evolution towards e-Learning out of an existing model

This represents the experience at the University of Reading, of which details are given below. A philosophical and pedagogical model, devised initially by Prof. Anthony Kemp, was developed to meet the needs of qualified music teachers seeking career development. This was already fully functioning as a distance-learning Diploma/Masters course before use began to be made of electronic support for teaching.

2) Dedicated research and development in e-Learning facilities for Music Education

This is exemplified by the School of the Future (<http://www.futuro.usp.br>), an interdisciplinary laboratory formed in 1989 at the University of Sao Paulo to investigate the use of new communication technologies in educational projects in all areas. Specific research in the music field has been developed in the recently shaped Laboratory of Musical Adventures, as well as in a music education element of the large-scale schools project sponsored by Telemar.

***Mtpp* – The University of Reading model**

The Music Teaching in Professional Practice (*Mtpp*) initiative was set up at the University of Reading in 1994 in response to a partnership proposal from the Incorporated Society of Musicians, the UK's professional body for music teachers, performers and composers. In the decade since, it has evolved through various stages towards its current structure as a postgraduate Diploma/Masters programme available to students from all over the world and supported by online

teaching resources (<http://www.soews.reading.ac.uk/mtp/default.htm>).

The original brief of the I.S.M. proposed a course structure that incorporated the use of teaching materials devised at the University to cover topics such as basic knowledge of music psychology and anatomy, repertoire and pedagogy, combined with a programme of mentorship whereby students would work alongside experienced teachers. A series of Units published at the University was posted to students who worked through them in correspondence with a Tutor. Some incorporated video and audio elements, but the emphasis tended to be on the written word in both teaching and assessment. Occasional seminars held in Scotland, London, Reading, Birmingham and Manchester allowed students to come together to exchange experiences and work more closely with their tutors.

During this initial period of growth, some 100 10,000-word teaching Units were commissioned, edited and published by *Mtp*. These included generic materials taken by all students, and specialist Units for each of: Piano; Voice; Guitar; Strings; Woodwind; Brass and Percussion. In response to the evolving geographical and philosophical influence of *Mtp*, new specialist Units are currently in preparation for introduction in 2005 in: Composition; Early Childhood; and Music of Oral Tradition.

Several factors contributed towards the perception of a need to develop the original *Mtp* model:

- The difficulties even in a small country like Britain of arranging seminars in locations which prospective students could conveniently reach;
- The number of applications from overseas students whom we were originally unable to accept, while a few committed individuals flew from Eire and Greece to take seminars;
- The realisation that students were increasingly using websites in their research and email in communicating with their tutors;
- The development of the research-based MA phase that follows the initial Diploma, which led students into being more demanding in their requirement of information and resources.

In 2001, *Mtp* moved to a new structure in which all students were required to begin each phase of the programme at an annual Summer School; and study was supported by the electronic virtual classroom *Blackboard*. This immediately allowed us to accept students from Hong Kong, as well as to encourage online communication between students as an aspect of response to the course

materials, which could now be supplemented with additional online resources.

Following a visit made by the *Mtpp* Course Director to Brazil in April 2003, a link was developed with the School of the Future in Sao Paulo in order to research means of combining the pedagogical expertise of *Mtpp* with the new resources for the delivery of music education represented by the Telemar Project.

The Telemar Project approach at the University of São Paulo

Throughout its history the School of the Future has developed research in many different areas, always in close communication with other departments of the University of Sao Paulo, but financially independent from the University budget. In order to make these projects possible, partnerships with industries and government agencies have been set, building bridges between the university and problems of communities from many different parts of Brazil. An example is the Telemar Project (<http://pte.futuro.usp.br>), carried out by the School of the Future and the Telemar communications network, the biggest phone company in the country.

The goal of the Telemar Project is to contribute to an improvement of Brazilian education through the implementation of computer labs in public schools from very poor areas. Sixteen Brazilian states have been linked electronically as each participating school is given 10 computers with broadband access to the Internet, a printer and a scanner, and teachers come to Sao Paulo for a 10-day course. During this period, not only do they learn about the technology that is going to be used, but also about cognitive concepts involved and different teaching methods. Much importance is attached to the time spent face-to-face with the teachers, when hopefully a strong personal connection is established between them and the School of the Future team.

Once teachers go back to their places of origin, they start working online with continuing assistance from the School of the Future, and have to come up with their own projects, in which, as much as possible, they should involve their students, fellow teachers and the rest of the community. Every project should have a website, with a link to the Telemar main site, where its details and results should be posted.

Schools are encouraged to work in joint efforts and more than 70,000 people have so far benefited in what we have called the *Telemar Virtual Community*. A preliminary music program for the Telemar Project is currently being developed in two schools and it will gradually be extended to the other participants during 2004. The main focus is to help teachers to work with music, especially those responsible for arts education.

Since 1971 music has not been a separate compulsory subject in Brazilian schools, but has been considered part of a general discipline entitled "Artistic Education", that also embodies dance, theatre and the visual arts. Although the teaching of music in a combined arts curriculum, as observed by Plummeridge (2001), deserves deep investigation, and can be an effective context for music education, the consequences in Brazil have been disastrous. Most teachers – the "artistic educators" – never had any formal music training themselves, and do not know what to do with their pupils, so they forget about music and only deal with the areas they are familiar with. Maybe in a lesson or two students will be asked to sing, but no attention whatsoever will be given to *how* they are singing, or to the kind of repertoire that could be sung, or to anything other than rehearsing material to please parents and the school's director in a public presentation.

The music program at the Telemar Project therefore aims to give teachers the tools they need to develop the musicality of their students. The challenge is to work with teachers who have never previously studied music. To our advantage, we have the richness and diversity of musical styles in Brazil and the possibility of exchanging experiences between people in different parts of the country. The distance separating participants turns out to be very useful, as they can communicate and learn from each other.

Meeting the needs of students – the dangers of inflexibility of delivery

Nowadays there is a large and growing number of technological products dedicated to the support of music education, especially in the field of instrumental performance, in forms such as CD-Roms, DVDs and Internet websites. However, as Bray (1997) points out, very often the producers of these materials are concerned

only with commercial profits and not with creating a suitable context for effective music education. In many cases these products are used in self-learning processes: what happens is mere a technical training, with the acquisition of skills that enable the students to perform certain tasks on a musical instrument (Gohn, 2003). There is no conceptual development in music appreciation, or any attempt to understand why an instrument is being played in a specific way. Although these kinds of media make possible the combination of texts, images and sounds, without proper guidance and orientation they can be very inflexible and present narrow views of any given subject. Technology should not be seen as an end in itself, but as Hodges put it, "as a means to achieve a musical outcome engaging aesthetic responsiveness" (2001:179).

In order to reach that goal, a distance-learning course for music teachers should consider who is on 'the other side' – where they live, and with what cultural differences, previous musical experiences, etc. Just as any teacher has a duty of care for his or her students, that same bond has somehow to be established so that the use of technology can serve a purpose. The best path to accomplish that is to start with some sort of live interaction, and this is exemplified in the different cases we have represented at the University of Reading and The School of the Future in Sao Paulo. There is no better way to get to know whom you are talking to. But one question remains: how to make sure that subsequent delivery of material will meet the needs of students?

Probably the answer lies in utilising the many communication channels made possible by computer technology. With means such as live videoconferencing and exchange of videos and MP3 files, a two-way connection supports the learning process and helps tutors with more accurate feedback from the students. Some simple ideas may serve as an encouragement to use these technologies, for instance:

Using the Internet to make materials available. Even in our present times of modern technologies, many students might not be familiar with computers at all. To make sure no one is left behind, the first requirement for every student should be to have an e-mail address and to access new materials via the Internet. Besides texts and Power Point files, there is the possibility of making available sound clips or videos recorded during regular classes or special seminars. Being able to hear the voice of a tutor can be very different from reading a text he or she has written.

Development of mini-courses on the Internet. Simple courses like “downloading MP3 players” or “sending sound files as attachments in e-mails” can assist students to send contributions to the group.

Submission of videos with lessons taught by the participants. This represents a chance that would not be possible without distance learning: to watch the routine practices of teachers with their students.

Posting of materials provided by students. Either with systems like *Blackboard*, as in the *Mtpp* program, or in a website, as in the Telemar Project, the Internet serves as a window in which students display their research and their students’ achievements. Postings remain as permanent electronic references, stimulating students to contribute with texts, summaries of interesting books, sound files and videos. With their pictures and biographies online, a sense of identity is reached and participation tends to increase.

Opportunities and challenges for the future

International distance learning offers great opportunities for music teachers seeking career development. Among these, foremost is the opportunity of getting different perspectives of music education, working with specialists in different fields, at an individualised, appropriate pace, and still maintaining a regular routine in one’s home town, as well as a continuing influence on one’s pupils. It is a considerable advantage to apply to one’s teaching immediately the concepts and principals encountered in a course, and then be able to report the outcome and receive comments from your peers. This represents the development of a research-active community, able collectively to reflect on and incorporate into practice ideas it generates within its membership.

There are no geographical boundaries for these communities, and the variety of backgrounds from worldwide participants make discussions about differences among all the countries they come from very rich and meaningful. International perspectives will certainly always shed new light on music education, as a representative of the School of the Future could realise during a visit to the *Mtpp* Summer Course at the University of Reading in July 2003. Although a Brazilian – or a music teacher from any part of the world outside the immediate educational

influence of the UK – might know very little about the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music exams, or the UK National Curriculum, consideration of which was apparent in many seminars during the summer school, they are familiar with other matters, such as the search for alternative materials to be used as musical instruments (and other methods to cope with the lack of proper equipment); access to new repertoire; or fresh pedagogical approaches to aural development and the maintenance of physical health in musical performance. This exchange of realities proved to be extremely beneficial.

If, on the one hand, the distance factor is an advantage, it brings, on the other, difficulties not only to facilitate learning but also to measure or assess results. Evaluation is a key question common to distance learning in all fields and improvements in that aspect is a theme currently attracting research interest. One of the biggest challenges to music educators is to assess whether students are making progress at a consistent rate, with the same level of access to support materials. To make matters worse, Internet connections are not always fast enough to guarantee good communication, which can make the use of video prohibitive. The Internet2 initiative (<http://www.internet2.edu>) is a big move towards the solution of this problem.

Some concluding speculations

In terms of the political agenda which drives funding, we should add that distance learning represents a realistic way to get information and resources to poor communities, forming a chain of teachers that can help each other in order to build a better educational system. Very often – specially in third world countries – teachers working in these communities lack basic knowledge in their field and do not have access to local forms of continuing education. There are many examples in Brazil in which music education has been used to fight crime and violence, and that is a strong argument used by those who defend the view that music should be considered a separate subject in every Brazilian school. That is a battle that has been fought for quite some time, and it brings to mind a question that is hard to answer: if teachers in Brazil win this battle, how are they to deal with the enormous demand for trained and certified music teachers all over the

country? They are not currently able or prepared to handle that need. The specialists that would be capable of helping are gathered in a few cities, while teachers looking for guidance are dispersed throughout Brazil's 8,511,965 square kilometres. Distance learning is one of the tools that must be investigated to cope with the problem, and the program being developed in the Telemar Project gives us the opportunity to experiment in order to improve our methods.

It would not be difficult to imagine bigger programs involving many countries in which educators had the chance to share ideas on music education practices and learn from systems and cultures different from their own. The collaboration between the University of Reading and the School of the Future represents a starting point for such a program, a search for new paths to make most of what is available technologically, able to link with similar projects across the world. In each country, music education faces different questions, and local economic and social conditions require different approaches and goals. But there is one common thread for all educators alike: the wish to learn from one another.

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