

Making Music Together: The blending of an on-line learning environment for music artistic practice.

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ABSTRACT

Music curricula have become increasingly systematised in universities. This means that students may be segregated into class groupings that do not naturally support active participation in knowledge sharing, networking, moving between expert groups, socialisation and professional success. This may result in students graduating still unprepared for professional workplaces. This paper examines a project that attempts to address the issue of promoting a program-wide learning community by blending a web-based discussion board with a face-to-face curriculum for music technology students in an Australian conservatoire. It is shown that the inclusion of an online affinity space unfettered by artificial educational boundaries can provide a means by which students can communicate, reflect and collaborate to build and sustain an authentic participatory learning culture at a program level.

BACKGROUND

Musical artistic practice by its very nature is a collaborative endeavour requiring complex and multiple forms of communication and feedback. The professional communities that emerge from these types of collaboration are built on active participation in knowledge sharing and mentoring between novice and expert, so there is value in making these principles explicit. Professional success also draws on the holistic ability to network, social agility to function in and move between professional communities, and the ability to recognise and act upon opportunity. This is what Frederikson and Sedita call “exchange in the market through networks of creativity” (Frederiksen & Sedita, 2005; p. 28).

To proceed this way flies in the face of the more familiar trend toward massification and modularisation in western higher education. Indeed, the learning experience may well be compartmentalised to such an extent that students come to perceive their tertiary experience as little more than an accumulation of Credit Points rather than a holistic experience. This limited engagement with learning can leave music students alienated from the rest of the cohort and related social, intellectual and creative communities (Tinto, 1993), further promoting an environment that fails to replicate professional situations or to prepare students for important aspects of succeeding in the creative workforce.

RESEARCH LOCATION

The project on which this paper is based is set within a music technology undergraduate program of an Australian university-based conservatoire. With just a small cohort of students, the expectation among lecturers was that students would naturally communicate and collaborate as is appropriate to the discipline. However, prior to 2004, staff participation in the setting, direct observations and analysis of documentary evidence including written assessment items, and student course / program evaluations revealed that:

- students remained separated into groupings based on year level; (observations, surveys and evaluations)
- networking was viewed as unimportant; (observations, surveys and evaluations)
- there remained persistent cliques of smaller groups; (observations)
- learning transfer was poor across classes /year levels; (observations, assessment items, evaluations)
- students were averse to taking risks for fear of being wrong, (observations, assessment items, surveys and evaluations) and
- there was little cross-year communication or interaction (observations, assessment items).

Craft development was problematic, with many students appearing to be out of touch with working contexts and key competencies. Almost all music technology theory courses had online components for learning materials and discussion forums, however these were all tied to courses. Students and academics also perceived online and face-to-face as two different and discrete paradigms, the challenge being to optimise the two in order to promote, enculturate and maintain an engaged discipline oriented community. The outcome being sought, then, was the creation of a new third space, not just in having either as separate possibilities or in conceiving the use of a discussion board as in and of itself being a creative solution. This is in keeping with McWilliam's view on the value of generating a third possibility out of two seemingly discrete options:

Another powerful myth about creativity is that it is about making something from nothing. Being creative rarely means this. Creative capability has much more to do with holding disparate things together long enough to generate a new or third space or idea. Or as Norman Jackson puts it, to "move an idea from one state to another. (McWilliam, 2008, in press)

PROJECT AIMS

In order to respond to these challenges, a range of program-wide 'blended learning' (Bersin, 2004) arrangements were devised by the author in 2004, drawing on ICT infrastructure and face-to-face opportunities. The aim was to enhance the development of disciplinary craft, to clarify professional contexts and to establish a participatory culture by shifting "... the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement" (Jenkins, 2007, p4) across the *entire* learning ecology not just at the course level. Further, there was an emphasis on assisting students to move from learning "about" something to learning to "be" something (Seely Brown, 2006. p19) and to include the students in all aspects of this shift.

Rather than explain the process in its entirety, this paper reports on the framework and outcomes related to one particular blended learning instrument: the *Mutech Discussion Board* (MDB) (2008), based on modified open source software (Phpbb2, 2008) and positioned as an essential communication and collaboration 'glue' between the other learning activities. The MDB currently contains over 25,000 posts from 150 participants including students, graduates, industry professionals and academics.

METHOD

The three year long Bachelor of Music Technology comprises around 50 students. Since 2002 all students have been surveyed each semester with a focus on course and program experience. Since 2004, academics also share their observational data at regular intervals. Action research in the area includes; work-integrated learning pathways on campus and in the field (Draper & Hitchcock, 2006); perspectives on

curriculum in changing contexts (Burt, Lancaster, Lebler, Carey & Hitchcock, 2007); and program-wide blended learning strategies (Hitchcock & Draper, 2007).

In addition to the ongoing action research in the area, three further instruments specifically targeting the learning community were run in 2004, 2006 and 2007.

1. (2004) 50% of 2004 first year students (8) were interviewed in semi-structured open-ended 45-minute interviews. Purposive sampling was used with voluntary recruitment to select as broad a cross section of the population as possible.
2. (2006) Once again using purposive sampling. 16 current students from across the program and 8 alumni were contacted. 15 students and 6 alumni completed and returned the survey. Survey responses were commonly 50 – 120 words in length.
3. (2007) 50 students from across the program were contacted with 35 students completing and returning the survey. Survey responses were commonly 30 – 90 words in length.

The MDB is a further form of data with currently over 25,000 posts. Triangulation in this project has occurred in two forms. The first form of triangulation used is the 'between methods' approach and takes the form of participant observation, interview/survey, and discussion board posts. The second form of triangulation is reflected in the 'multiple comparison groups' and comes as a result of the longitudinal nature of the study.

Responses in all surveys/interviews were analysed with themes arising from the student responses. Emergent themes were categorised, sorted and meta-tagged, and then further streamlined and sorted due to thematic overlaps. The stages included data-collection, note-taking, coding, sorting, meta-tagging, categorizing, comparing/merging and then write-up.

Finally, the themes, data summary and subsequent interpretations of the data were circulated back to students as a member check or respondent validation (Creswell, 1998), using the principle of face validity (Anastasi, 1954) to review and clarify the content if necessary, and to establish greater trustworthiness in the research process. This strategy was used to establish trustworthiness by giving authority to the participants' perspectives therefore managing the threat of bias (Padgett, 1998).

RESULTS

Students and faculty staff who have come to claim the MDB as their own do not understand it to be the poor imitator of the face-to-face experience when used in a blended environment. For them, the MDB appears to have become an "affinity space" (Gee, 2004) where the distinction between teachers and learners is blurred and where anyone can offer expertise and perspectives for debate and discussion. There exists an understanding that 'online' is a different space where participants display different personalities, students develop a deeper understanding of their cohort, and where strong patterns of academic effort and knowledge sharing are created.

While a detailed textual analysis remains to be done on all student responses (2004 – 2008), a preliminary reading of their texts suggests that there are a number of common themes across the surveys, discussions, interviews and evaluations. Students appreciate the continual 24/7 access to learning in the MDB, in that they can engage as they choose - continually, spasmodically, and free of the constraints of the timetable. Students further comment on the environment as one that has allowed them to continue to develop skills of autonomous self-enquiry and self-

motivated learning and a sense of contribution where they feel valued for their contributions.

More specifically, the following themes have emerged from the qualitative analyses conducted by this author across all surveys and interviews undertaken since 2004:

- Enculturation
- Sharing academic effort
- Creating patterns of academic effort
- Equalisation
- Sense of self and community
- Reflective practice

ENCULTURATION

There now exists in the program an extensive recorded history of community interactions provided by the discussion board, including interactions between current students, alumni, industry professionals and academics past and present. Further analysis will provide an entrée into their cultural norms, vocabulary, and form and function as a “community of learners” (Short & Burke, 1991).

First year students are exposed to the online environment and socio-cultural interactions in the weeks prior to starting their first semester, so that even before they have met their peers face-to-face they have the opportunity to decipher existing community patterns, to experience a form of situated cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where learning occurs with enculturation into a practice. One first year student’s opinion - that “getting to know the community through observation in this non-threatening environment” was a strong positive and seems to be representative of the cohort in general. Other students augmented this view by saying that “fitting into the MT community” and “gaining confidence in my knowledge and understanding” were important to them. One first year student reflected the views of many in describing the pre-existing online space as revealing “a tight-knit community of people working together and enjoying it”.

This valuing of the online environment does not appear to dissipate as students proceed through the program, as evidenced by final year student comments:

It has broken the barriers between individual class-rooms allowing me to develop educational/professional relationships with students/lecturers from both within and outside of my specific year and subject area.

It has helped me network and bridge between [other faculties and schools] as well as within my own dept.

SHARING ACADEMIC EFFORT

Complex, long-term tasks are often shared among students. Students are encouraged to take responsibility for contributing ideas and information to a repository designed for this purpose (Johnson & Johnson, 1994), or as one student describes it, “a collaboratively developed knowledge bank for all to draw on”. Another student sees it as “the endless stream of useful information that is archived and can easily be retrieved if needed.”

Students also discuss perceived advantages over text books where “on the discussion board, they explain it so you can understand it.” Similarly, “on the discussion board material is already translated into student language”.

There is a growing sense of value placed on networking, collaboratively formed constructions of knowledge and “the wisdom of crowds” (Surowiecki, 2004). A first year student sums up the commonly held view that “the backgrounds of most of the students were very diverse and each individual would often approach a problem from

a different perspective based on his/her experience.” This statement does suggest a sense of autonomy and trust, where the act of sharing presumes that there is a sense of ownership of knowledge and some degree of pride that accompanies the desire to share, to speak up and to participate (McDermott, in Lesser et al., 2000).

Extending on this concept, another student asserts “I have discovered the absolute value of other students across all years. This gave me a huge insight into creativity, into other people’s ideas and into my own.”

CREATING PATTERNS OF ACADEMIC EFFORT

By means of displaying their unfolding learning journey online, students provide insights to their ways and means of learning, asking questions, investigating and researching. These become patterns that others can follow and adapt to their individual learning styles (Smith et al., 2004). Small steps taken by many individuals coalesce into learning of consequence in the community (Vaughn and Garrison, 2005). These models of peer to peer, academic to academic and peer to academic interactions may also serve to lessen students’ fears about contributing. An example of this comes from a first year student who states, “I started to always look for the perfect way to say something. I have since discovered the more you post, the more you get corrected, the more you learn.”

One second year student sums up succinctly when saying:

The Discussion board provided breadth as opposed to depth to my learning in MusTech. During class my understanding of music technology was deepened as I learned the process and theories behind the tasks I was carrying out, but on the discussion board I got a sense of different approaches to studio work and the diversity in individuals studio practices. I could then incorporate these practices into my own studio work.

EQUALISATION

The textual data reveal the existence of a strong sense of parity of esteem (Richardson et al., 1979) between learning community participants. Online, participants stand on their displayed merits rather than somewhat artificial boundaries imposed by the segregation of year rankings. This creates a shared ability to shape a new social and community structure that more closely resembles the sorts of passion based and intrinsically motivated interactions found in professional communities (Seely Brown, 2006). In writing about learning communities built around practice, John Seely Brown goes on to say:

Often the learning that transpires is informal rather than formally conducted in a structured setting. Learning occurs in part through a form of reflective practicum, but in this case the reflection comes from being embedded in a social milieu supported by both a physical and virtual presence, and by both the amateur and the professional practitioner. (Seely Brown, 2006. p23)

Students refer to these interactions as “working with a group of friends” in an apprenticeship-like environment where mature students now recognise that each year’s new intake brings fresh perspectives, while also providing eager and grateful recipients of older students’ more developed experience and knowledge. A final year student commented:

This [MDB] has allowed me to identify many fellow students to learn from, perhaps teach, and work with in a project or professional environment.

First year students comment on the same phenomenon of breaking down the cross-year barriers:

My impressions are that within the cohort we have people who are interested in taking their degree different ways and can all contribute / teach me

something.

Another student expanded on this idea by saying that “it has given a sense of belonging and equal standing amongst us as students, creating an interdependency on each other that is key to my feeling of community.”

SENSE OF SELF AND COMMUNITY

Students have a growing sense of relevance and the ability to relate to others from across the program. Some students are observed to gain confidence in making networks outside their comfort zone as the program-wide MDB exposes the fact that diversity is welcomed and valued across the program.

One student summed up a commonly held view that the discussion board fast tracked the process of fitting in to the program, saying that the MDB was “definitely really good for figuring out what people were into, what they were interested in, if they wanted to work with you, what they liked and, it didn’t take very long.” This statement, taken in context, is endorsing the expedited move through the introduction phase of enculturation, affording deeper levels of engagement between participants to occur sooner. Typically before the introduction of the discussion board many months would have gone by before first year students would mingle with 2nd and 3rd years, if at all. Now, many students are collaborating across the program within the first two weeks of starting at University.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Students can gain insight into the power of reflective practice (Schön, 1987, 1995), and ways and means of creating the circumstances whereby reflective practice is enabled through the recorded community interactions. The insights created by reflection on the discussion board can foster a sense of courage and inner strength about their progression and new-found knowledge and skills.

... it also shows the growth and development of everyone. You go back to posts at the start of the year and what we talked about then to what we talk about now and it's changed so much.

Other students echoed this response:

It [reflection] is very important because it helps me to see a learning curve. We get all these marks on paper but sometimes it's a lot easier to look at the sort of questions you were asking at the start of the year compared to the sort of questions I'm asking now.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The experience of this author, as a leader in multiple creative professions, is that the ability for newcomers to: understand appropriate communications within established communities; and to move quickly toward value-adding to professional community interactions; are invaluable skills to initiating and developing strong creative careers.

While there is a wealth of research available that encompasses the use of discussion forums in classroom and distance contexts at a course level (Applebee; Azevedo; Bersin; Bonk, Kim & Zeng; Brook and Oliver; Daley, Watkins & Williams; Garrison & Anderson) the above data and discussion emphasises program level communications, showing that a global approach may significantly enhance students' approaches to learning, involvement and professional maturation. Specifically, the holistic discussion board culture provides: a relatively low barrier to expression and engagement across class groupings and year levels; support for creating and sharing ideas with the entire program; a place where members believe that their contributions matter; informal mentorship where the more experienced pass along advice to novices and where status is not determined by program progression; a communal space where students feel social connection with one another and care about what

each other think; and a recorded history that helps to promote reflective practice over the entire length of their study rather than for the modularised length of a course or semester.

Over and above course based discussion forums, engaging in a program-wide community makes it easier for newcomers and the more experienced alike to blend into and comprehend a broad and varied community and to participate in multi-various and complex practices where the complexity more closely represents professional creative work places. This living historical record of program activity further supports the face-to-face community activities, contributing to enhance active participation in knowledge sharing, networking, movement between expert groups and socialisation.

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