

Strategies of Integration: Challenges and Possibilities in the Online Teaching of Music during the Pandemic

Ang-Cheng Kris Ho, Beijing Normal University & Hong Kong Baptist University United International College, China

Victor J. Rodriguez, Zhuhai College of Beijing Institute of Technology, China

The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2021
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The pandemic crisis has ushered a new era in the teaching of music. The suddenness of the crisis and the transfer of teaching to an online setting brusquely undermined the conviction that online pedagogies were to be transient and purely instrumental to the learning environment of the classroom. “Classrooms,” indicated a music teacher, “is where real learning takes place.” In a culture that centralizes the powerful bond between teacher and student and the pedagogical networks within which it is embedded, the physical classroom embodies the principle that learning occurs in the intimacy of student-teacher relations. This is especially true of music teaching, where presence and immediacy are deemed fundamental for the transmission of knowledge. In this research, we explore how the transition to online learning in two colleges in China transformed this conceptualization. We investigate how teachers implemented the transition to online learning, where they succeeded and where they failed, and how this experience transformed their practice and vision of learning. We find that integration and networking surfaced as pivotal techniques for teaching, informing but not displacing, traditional ideas of teaching and learning. The necessity of integrating teaching activities within a web network of actors exposed the social nature of the student-teacher bond (“teachers and students become “objective and effective problem solvers,” indicated a teacher) and amplified the possibilities of learning networks among teachers themselves. Teachers have acquired a new vision of the pedagogical milieu that will inform their new concept of what is real and of what is possible.

Keywords: Online Teaching, Online Learning, Music Performance, Pedagogy, China

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Introduction

The pedagogical crisis brought about by the global pandemic has ushered a new era in the teaching of music. The suddenness of the viral crisis and the move to an online setting brusquely undermined the conviction that online pedagogies were to be transient and purely complementary to the learning environment of the classroom. A sacrosanct belief had been that the “classroom,” as one music teacher argued, “is where real learning takes place.” The physical classroom had come to embody the principle that learning occurs only when student-teacher relations are physically proximate. This had been especially true of music teaching, where presence and immediacy have been deemed fundamental for the transmission of knowledge. In our research, we explore how the transition to online learning in two colleges in China transformed this imaginary through an examination of the strategies employed by teachers to integrate their techniques and personas into the new learning network. We investigated how teachers implemented the transition to online learning, where they succeeded and where they failed, and how this experience transformed their practice and vision of where learning takes place.

To analyze these trends and others that could surface during our investigation, we conducted a two-pronged study and analysis of teachers’ experience in a mainland university study programme, gathering data on classroom practice and interviewing teachers on their recollections and impressions of their online teaching experience. We compiled data from teachers engaged in teaching chamber and orchestral performance as well as history of music at a college in Zhuhai, Guangdong, China for the year of 2020. We performed a mostly qualitative analysis of teachers’ experience through interviews and questionnaires as well as ethnographic immersion in music classes. We believe our study will contribute to scholarship on the teaching of music online, especially since our focus on chamber music and music composition is still a field that has not been much developed and where there are issues to be addressed.

Our guiding questions were: Did online learning change the way you perceive teaching, for example, the relationship between student and teacher? Did your experience in online learning led to new experiences in relating to other faculty? Did online teaching change your self-perception as a teacher? What specific strategies changed in the conversion to online teaching? What strategies, if any, resulted in positive learning outcomes?

We found that the possibilities for innovations in teaching expanded for faculty already engaged in a positive relationship existing technologies, while for other faculty, this was not entirely the case. Teachers deeply embedded in networks of learning prospered as their existing social networks informed but did not entirely displace, traditional notions of music pedagogy. The necessity of integrating teaching activities within an electronic web illuminated the social nature of the student-teacher bond (teachers and students become “objective and effective problem solvers,” indicated a teacher) and amplified the possibilities of learning networks among teachers. Along with these developments, the adoption of new technologies and new schedules for the teaching of music allowed faculty to redefine presence and intimacy in faculty-student interaction, not just in terms of physical proximity, but one resting on the new vistas provided by the ability to visually experience the students’—and teachers’—home. Along with this development, possibilities for self-reflection in teaching—for both faculty and students—prospered. For teachers who acquired a new vision not only of what but where is the real and possible in music teaching, this led to a reaffirmation of pedagogical convictions as to what teaching is and how best to practice it.

While we do not foresee a full acceptance of online teaching as the only method of instruction, the challenges of teaching during the pandemic have already redefined the meaning of what is possible in music pedagogy.

Literature Review & Theory

There is no consensus in the literature concerning the impact that new online technologies have on the learning process, especially in the Chinese context. Tu has noted that computer-mediated communication affects the social cues that Chinese students employ to orient themselves in a social learning context (2010). Other scholars focus on LMS (Learning Management Systems) as a negative factor in learning, but argue that online social network technologies correct for LMS deficiencies (Rodriguez, Sabino, Zhou 2011). Veletsianos and Navarrete, in a study conducted in Australia, identified positive outcomes in the use online social networks, supporting “one another in their learning” and “enhancing their own and other students’ experiences” (2012). In general, research on the online teaching of music has stressed the importance of the adoption of new technologies to understand shifts in pedagogical strategy. Carol Johnson has argued that the, “transition from a traditional face-to-face model of music teaching to the fully online environment” has resulted in a “pedagogical shift” (Johnson 2017). These new approaches to teaching explain the possibilities and outcomes of asynchronous and synchronous strategies and its impact on student motivation (Palloff and Pratt, 2011; Garrison, 2011; Picciano, 2002; Bowman 2014).

The focus on social networks as an important digital tool has led to new insights in the self-awareness of teachers of their own pedagogical networks (Coppola, Hiltz and Rotter, 2002). One important aspect of this process is how the connection of teachers to their students’ homes has led to new perceptions of the locus of learning, of notions of intimacy, and the uses of deterritorialized learning spaces (Cremata and Powell, 2015). As teachers’ networks have become critical and more visible in the online context, teachers’ own perceptions of these networks have resulted in new personas and identities. Faculty develops new narratives of identity based on new perceptions of their connections to students, other faculty, and the spaces they occupy—virtual or otherwise (Coppola, Hiltz and Rotter, 2002). As Vazir notes, teachers, as constructors of knowledge, create their own narratives of experience, which, although useful for research purposes, also illuminate the salience of narrative in teacher’s self-perception (2007). Beattie agrees that, “by sharing self-knowledge through narrative, willing instructors can take part in the process of inquiry and reflection on their past teaching” (2001).

Thus the literature argues not just for a material shift in pedagogy, but an identity turn in faculty engagement with new technologies. Given the salience of online social networks applications in the Chinese context, research on the online teaching of music during the pandemic acquires great urgency.

Methodology

We conducted our interviews, questionnaires, and ethnographic work at a Chinese international private university with partners in Hong Kong, the United State and other western nations. This university is located in Southern China, proximate to Hong Kong and Macau. The university, known here as CPV, offers programmes in Music Performance and provides training in world-class facilities, state-of-the-art rehearsal rooms, and highly-engineered performance and rehearsal venues for this purpose. Ethnographic data gathering

took place in the courses “Songwriting,” “Compositional Technique,” “Classical Music,” “Traditional Music,” “Chamber Music,” “Music Theory,” “Orchestral Studies,” “Performance—Choral,” “Tonal Counterpoint,” and “Keyboard Performance.” Over ten teaching staff participated in the study, teaching courses with over 1,000 students in total. All music faculty are members of a wider Division of Culture and Creativity. During the academic year 2019-2021, all faculty taught online during the second semester of the Spring of 2020 and the Fall of 2020 and partly online during the Spring of 2021.

Findings

Most faculty reported that the shift to online teaching yielded more positive than negative outcomes even among those fully desirous of returning to the physical classroom. Firstly, new technologies led to a reconceptualization of individualized teaching. Faculty familiar with Chinese applications such as WeChat and QQ (WQ) fared better than international faculty new to the system. WQ apps permitted private one-to-one conversations which, given the time flexibilities afforded by the technology, allowed faculty and students to engage in extended interaction in a wide array of subjects. One faculty explained how QQ expanded the possibilities of office hours’ consultations facilitating, among others, the real-time installation of Maya 2019 or Final Cut Pro. Zoom also played its part. “Students used Zoom’s screen-sharing functions to stream recordings and video of performances,” explained one faculty, “which they combined with PowerPoint presentations.” After class, students sent the recordings of their parts for more detailed feedback to improve performance. “Comments were communicated,” another faculty wrote, “via WeChat with annotated ForScore scores.”

The need to digitize material and mark scores using music score apps did exact from faculty time and energies, not to mention the perceived need for a constant online presence. Faculty reported sending e-printed material to students before each class, conducting group Q&A discussions through social media apps, having WQ private messaging throughout the day, all in addition to the use of the formal email system and learning platforms communication systems. It seemed as if the proliferation of technologies could overwhelm faculty at any time. Yet, “rather than distancing students from faculty,” one faculty observed, “I felt as if we were closer to each other through online teaching.” Faculty could directly remind students and privately answer their students’ questions directly on time. “We finally exchanged many motivated emoji icons to each other and motivated the students to continue to finish their project to reach all the deadlines,” observed one teacher. Online learning became a way to learn how to build up good relationships with students.

In spite of the demands of the new situation, faculty expressed elation at unexpected improvements. “Because students could not play together side by side, they developed more acute listening skills and paid more attention to the scores, and expressed more care in their own practice and group preparation,” commented one faculty. “In general,” she concluded, “students’ progress has been surprisingly good (in a way even better than on campus) despite the limitations of the current situation.” Most faculty surveyed would have agreed with this statement. The lack of stable internet connection led many faculty to record classes and students to do the same for their performances. Again, a potentially disruptive situation led to unpredictable accomplishments. Some faculty described how the new-found ability to record performance from different angles (and to edit faculty performance on editing software) allowed students to observe a teacher’s playing from different angles. Students became better learners observing their teachers’ and peer’s performances. Faculty involved in chamber work had each student’s part recorded separately with each student providing their track to

their peers. For the technical assessment, students could be assessed by the instructor one by one.

Online communications, facilitated by social media apps, resulted in an increased use of methods of self-learning and self-reflection, which further strengthened student-faculty bonds. In music history courses, for example, methods were adjusted given the necessary shift from closed-book to open book evaluation. Students would write web-based reports and self-reflecting learning essays with faculty leveraging that information to assess a student's overall learning results. Consequently, learning relied on self-study more. Coupled with the intense student-faculty interaction using social media apps, self-learning and self-reflection flourished. Faculty did observe that online learning worked mostly for pupils with good time management, discipline and motivation. Given the high degree of motivation among students in these Chinese schools, online tools worked to their advantage in the transition to online learning. "Online teaching highlighted some of the things I took for granted in a face to face lesson," one faculty indicated. I found new (and clearer) ways to explain things to students. Because I am not beside the student physically, I allow more time for conversation and feedback." Self-study was rediscovered not just to compensate for new conditions, but deployed as an avenue to build discipline and trust.

Although students and faculty could not share the same physical space, intimacy did not fade, but was reconceptualized in new material conditions. The fact that faculty and students literally entered each other's home in live learning sessions produced new insights. "I became more aware of recording equipment and angles," indicated one faculty. "I became more aware of the instruments students used at home to rehearse and sometimes [this] would lead to more insights on why students play the way they do." Faculty observed that entering the students' home felt at times intrusive, yet it allowed them to establish a new kind of intimacy tempered by the mediation of technology.

Not all faculty felt comfortable, though. Some responded negatively to a perceived erosion of the "boundary between the instructor and [the] student." They felt that students employed instant messaging technology to obtain ready-made answers to their problems rather than engage in critical thinking. "They want to have an immediate response or answer from the instructor," observed one faculty. Some pined for old-fashioned face-to-face communication. "I put a lot of effort to build the relationship with the students but it cannot compare with the face-to-face communication. Students would treat exchanges on social media as just a way to receive knowledge and not as a way to share interests nor topics." Yet, in general, most faculty embraced the new possibilities offered by online teaching even when enthusiastic on a return to the physical classroom.

Finally, faculty felt more aware of the networks that connected them to other faculty. They embraced the possibilities offered by technology to amplify the boundaries of the classroom. Many organized webinars where other faculty joined them to team-taught especially difficult interdisciplinary subjects. This was especially true in the humanities-oriented courses. Faculty invited their peers to their classrooms, which many found invigorating. One faculty recalled inviting a guest from Hong Kong to guest-teach. It was "very convenient for guests from other countries to do online interviews during the pandemic period for my online students," recalled one faculty.

In fact, most faculty indicated they planned to integrate guest-teaching and guest-interviews into their teaching when they returned to the classroom. Although the possibilities for these

forms of integration were already present prior to the pandemic, they will now become a staple of the classroom. “It has opened up a new set of doors for us,” indicated one faculty. Thus faculty networks have strengthened and promise to lead to very productive futures.

Conclusion

The shift to online learning during the pandemic will leave an indelible impression on teaching. Even faculty with negative views of online pedagogy affirm the positive contributions the move to online teaching have brought. Faculty have reconceptualized the meaning of the classroom, faculty-student interaction, and faculty-to-faculty collaboration. New forms of interaction will be preserved and integrated within traditional pedagogy. Although it is clear that most teachers longed to return to the physical classroom and “see their faces again,” online pedagogy has gained a foothold in teaching and promises to make qualitative changes to how we learn and perceive ourselves as learners and teachers.

Acknowledgements

This research is sponsored by the Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College. Our debt of gratitude to all the faculty from the Music Performance Programme.

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