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### Embracing diversity: The role of asynchronous online learning in building musical communities

**Dr Aleksander Szram, Programme Leader for Foundation Music Certificates and the Certificate in the Practice of Music Making, and Dr Dario van Gammeren, Technology Enhanced Learning Specialist, Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance**

#### Abstract

This article demonstrates how digital technologies have enabled creative practice to be taught at a distance. It discusses how digital tools have facilitated the establishment of an online community of musicians working in diverse genres, who would never normally meet due to barriers of distance and culture. The article draws on the experiences of students undertaking a new distance-learning module, which uses reflective learning to enable musicians to develop a better understanding of their personal culture and practice of making music. At a residential learning week near the end of the module, these musicians met – physically – for the first time and synthesized learning to create original musical interpretations.

#### Keywords

distance learning; asynchronous learning; social constructivism; diversity; Music education; conservatoire

#### Introduction

The Certificate in the Practice of Music Making (CPMM) is a new distance-learning module in practical musicianship offered by Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance (London). It was developed in partnership with the Open University and is a 60-credit, one-year part-time programme at Level 6. It can be taken as a stand-alone certificate, or as part of the final year of an Open University undergraduate degree. This article examines the learning experiences of the first cohort of students, who studied the module in the academic year 2016–17, and evaluates the effectiveness of the programme design in light of established scholarship concerning ‘asynchronous online learning’.

The module uses reflective learning to enable musicians from diverse musical genres to develop a better understanding of their personal culture and practice of music making in relation to others. Learning is facilitated through discussion in the form of asynchronous interactions managed by tutors in the virtual learning environment (VLE). This forum encourages students to observe each other’s differences of approach, leading to a heightened awareness of their own practice and culture. The module therefore represents a departure for the conservatoire sector, which has traditionally focused its provision on campus-based face-to-face tuition for students of a shared genre.

#### Institutional background and context

The development of the CPMM module stemmed from an institutional desire to embrace the notion of ‘education for sustainable development’ as articulated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in their guidance document of the same name (QAA/HEA, 2014). Drawing on the United Nations *Brundtland Report* from 1987 and the United Nations World Summit of 2005, the QAA/HEA defines education for sustainable development as ‘the process of equipping students with the knowledge and understanding, skills and attributes needed to work and live in a way that safeguards environmental, social and economic wellbeing, both in the

present and for future generations' (QAA/HEA, 2014, p.5). The CPMM encourages students to examine their musical identity in relation to the world around them. By reflecting on how their music making contributes to their local community, students are encouraged to embrace issues of ethics and wellbeing and to develop a future-facing, reflective and sustainable outlook on their work.

The programme also acknowledges the aspirations outlined by UNESCO in their 2010 *Seoul Agenda: Goals for the Development of Arts Education*, as interpreted by the European Music Council (EMC) in the *Bonn Declaration* of May 2011. The EMC highlights that arts 'education can make a direct contribution to resolving the social and cultural challenges facing the world today' (cited in EMC, 2011, p.1). The EMC interpretation of the *Seoul Agenda* resulted in the categorisation of three core goals for music education: access; quality; and social and cultural challenges. The curricular design of the CPMM has directly responded to each of these goals.

The programme seeks to resolve social and cultural challenges in two ways: firstly, by bringing new demographics of learner into the conservatoire environment, and secondly, by creating a learning model that allows for musicians working in different genres of music to interact and work together. Embracing new types of student has resulted in meaningful access to music conservatoire education, traditionally denied to musicians working in non-traditional genres, or belonging to certain age groups. A mixed-genre model has created a forum in which students can learn from each other's differences. Through establishing this environment, the CPMM is responding to issues raised by the Arts Council England in its 2011 report, *What is the creative case for diversity?*. The report identifies widening inequalities amongst those seeking to pursue a career in the arts:

[W]ithin a diverse society and diverse arts community, within its history, its practice and critical debate, some are seen as far more equal than others. This presents the paradox of the creative process—diversity rich in inspiration, but the distribution and consumption of the creative product being delivered in the main through a network of exclusive clubs.

(Mahamdallie, 2011, p.9)

This notion of exclusivity has been levelled at conservatoires many times, for instance by Matthews, who has referred to the omission of certain genres from curricula as a form of structural violence: 'in music, privilege determines whose music gets heard, who gets to create and participate in it, and whose music is excluded' (2015, p.239). Matthews posits that this process of filtering has created a narrow sense of shared heritage, in that 'it also determines which traditions count as musical' (ibid). The typical conservatoire student in the United Kingdom studies Western classical music (although jazz and musical theatre students have been formally adopted, their numbers are in the minority). More importantly, however, conservatoire musicians are still separated according to genre and instrumental discipline during the daily curriculum, as this is perceived to be the most appropriate way to prepare them for particular forms of employment (for instance, playing in an orchestra, or singing in an opera chorus). From this separation, distinct musical communities emerge with their own traditions, conventions and terminologies, and more importantly for this discussion, their own assumptions about 'other musicians'.

To challenge the assumptions of these distinct communities, the CPMM has sought to bring together disparate groups of musicians and provide them with an opportunity to share experiences, building a greater understanding of 'the other'. The first cohort of CPMM students represented a wide range of musical genres and cultures, including punk, folk, brass band, pop, classical (orchestral and chamber), jazz, Christian rock, music theatre, choral music, function band, marching band, recorder group, and busking. There was also a marked diversity of age; the typical conservatoire student is aged between 18 and 25, whereas the first cohort of CPMM students were aged between 18 and 70, with most students in their forties or fifties.

### **Learning through asynchronous online discussion**

In distance learning modules such as the CPMM and those offered by the Open University, online academic support is a prominent feature of tuition. With the exception of one residential learning week in Greenwich, tuition and academic support on the CPMM is conducted almost entirely online. Such support can take one of two forms: synchronous (where participants communicate in real time through text-, audio- or video-based tools) or asynchronous (where participants use the system – often text-based – at different times). Andrews and Haythornthwaite argue that asynchronous discussion allows ‘more opportunities for discussion management’ (2007, p.188). This approach to support has proven a valuable tool in plenary forums on a range of Open University modules, as well as in managing discussions on ‘Massive Open Online Courses’ (MOOCs), where student numbers frequently reach into the hundreds and sometimes, thousands. However, asynchronous tutorial support is also widely used across a large number of distance-learning modules for the tuition of smaller tutor groups.

Bach, Haynes and Lewis Smith argue that asynchronous online tuition has ‘advantages over face-to-face meetings’ (2007, p.132). Although their study primarily compares asynchronous online seminars with traditional face-to-face tuition, their findings hold true also when comparing asynchronous and synchronous online tuition methods. Their comparative study highlights that a ‘flexible time of entry and departure [in the discussion] usually gives students more time to prepare and to plan their own intervention’ (Bach, Haynes and Lewis Smith, 2007, p.132). This has been corroborated by wider research into student-tutor interaction.

Laurillard notes that in real-time interaction ‘the need for quick reactions [...] works against careful thought and reflection’ (2012, p.148). On the other hand, she stresses that in asynchronous discussions ‘students can take their time to reflect on what has been said, and consider carefully how to adapt and phrase their contribution as a result’ (Laurillard, 2012, p.147). Furthermore, in her research she has long argued that asynchronous tuition allows for greater student engagement than synchronous methods (Laurillard, 2002, p.149). Greater engagement, combined with the flexibility afforded by asynchronous discussion, facilitates a reflective approach to learning.

Bach, Haynes and Lewis Smith note that it is ‘less likely that a student can hide in the [asynchronous] discussion and rely on student peers to solve problems and answer questions’ (2007, p.132). However, this may be contested as highlighted by Laurillard, who notes that such forms of online tuition ‘allow an eavesdropping audience of other students participating vicariously in observing the discussion’ (2002, p.146). Despite this, she does acknowledge the value of eavesdropping in online discussions in which interactions take place with students who are representative of a larger cohort (Laurillard, 2002, p.150). Thus, there is consensus that asynchronous online discussion can encourage more meaningful engagement with the subject matter than might be facilitated in real-time interactions. In arts and humanities subjects there are often no ‘calculated’ answers, and students benefit from discussing and debating the subject matter. Asynchronous online discussion facilitates this form of peer learning when supported and moderated by a tutor, who plays an active role in shaping the discussion to create an effective social constructivist learning environment. A substantial body of research into social constructivism has identified learning through discussion as a useful pedagogical framework, if certain criteria are met. Laurillard is amongst those who have suggested criteria that were of particular relevance to the design of the CPMM. She noted that in order for students to learn through discussion, they must provide evidence and explanations for the arguments they put forward, and engage with (either through consideration, response or challenge) counter-arguments that are presented by their peers. Furthermore, learners must reflect on their own perspective in relation to those of others, and apply what they have learned (Laurillard, 2012, p.143).

For learners to effectively engage with such forms of tuition, the module has to generate a culture and comfort level in using the discussion forums as a medium for learning. Asking students to post results from activities to a forum for discussion has proven an effective method of achieving this. However,

the aforementioned 'eavesdropping' – often a result of students lacking confidence in their knowledge to actively participate in the online discussions – could potentially lead to some participants not enjoying the full benefits that this form of tuition affords. One method of encouraging participation, inspired by the flipped classroom approach and its positive impact on learning as described by Bergmann and Sams (2012), provides students with the materials and initial study guidance at the start of an online tutorial before opening the asynchronous discussion a few days later. This allows students time to reflect on the work and engage in discussion in a more meaningful way. Alternatively, the formative assessment of select modules at the Open University requires engagement in forum discussions, whereby students work collaboratively on an assessed project. Similarly, on the CPMM, participation in asynchronous forum discussions forms an assessable component of the module.

A range of activities encourage the students on the CPMM module to discuss and debate topics in the online forums, often asking them to draw on their perceptions of music making in their own and other cultures. Students must then synthesize their learning in reflective formative assessments in which they must locate their practice of music making within wider performing arts ecologies. Finally, students apply the learning captured throughout the module to a final project of their own design. In the first iteration of the CPMM, these projects included a set of arrangements for a busking group, a recording of an album with new musical collaborators, the creation of a teaching resource expressing a new philosophical approach, the organisation of a large community performance, and the organisation of a charity fundraiser.

On the first presentation of the CPMM, learning through discussion posed few challenges. Of the 28 students registered on the module, 26 had studied with the Open University. These students, the majority of whom were studying the CPMM as part of an Open University degree, were familiar with asynchronous forum discussion as a medium for learning. Furthermore, activities that the CPMM students engaged in, the output of which was posted to the discussion forums, were primarily designed to encourage reflective learning as opposed to knowledge acquisition. This choice of focus further reduced the potential of students being discouraged from participating through any perceived lack of knowledge.

### **Learning through discussion: Experiences from the first cohort**

A number of learning experiences that took place during the first presentation of the CPMM illustrate the impact of curricular strategies on individual students. The curated online discussion forums resulted in some productive exchanges, demonstrating that students were learning from each other's embodied knowledge and adapting their social and cultural assumptions as a result. An example came early in the course, after students were asked to read the opening chapters of Ruth Finnegan's *The hidden musicians: Music-making in an English town* (2007). In this book, Finnegan examines different music communities in Milton Keynes, and the motivations behind each form of music making. In response to this reading, the students were asked to consider why they themselves made music, and to share their reflections through a forum post. The first students to respond posted reflections on the important social role that music played in their lives:

I rehearse because I love playing music with other people [...] I perform as an excuse to have rehearsals!

(Student A, CPMM online discussion forum, 8 October 2016).

I discovered that the weekly rehearsals and periodic engagements were an excellent way of allowing me to forget the stresses of employed work, if only for a few hours – and to 'take me out of myself' to concentrate on the music. [...] [Making music is] not only an educational experience, a de-stressing one, but also a social and developmental one. My life experiences would have been so much narrower without it!

(Student B, CPMM online discussion forum, 8 October 2016).

It is really difficult to say why I play music. I couldn't imagine not playing music. I may not always be playing the same style of music or the same instrument, but throughout my life there has always been something. I think maybe it's a fundamental part of being human – maybe part of the drive to create.

(Student C, CPMM online discussion forum, 10 October 2016).

Later in the discussion, one of the younger students posted a comment. This student had taken violin lessons from the age of 3 and was preparing for a professional career studying with a conservatoire professor:

Music as a social activity is [a] pretty new idea to me. This course is challenging my perceptions and practices – in a good way. There was a point in the past when music felt far from social and involved a great deal of pressure, punishing regimes, and negative judgments. Expectations related to perfection and I was taught that music was not a place for the technically weak or fallible. Ensembles were not about socialisation but 'professionalism' and perfect performance. Interaction with the audience was limited to conveying the composer's ideas.

(Student D, CPMM online discussion forum, 11 October 2016).

Observations of difference such as this, are not uncommon among conservatoire students, but they usually occur a few years after graduation when students realise that they have been learning in a somewhat artificial environment, and that the function of music in the lives of many other musicians is quite different to their own. Amongst this first CPMM cohort, some students were preparing for a professional career in music, some were treating themselves to the course as a retirement gift, and others were balancing their study with full-time work or caring responsibilities. The wide range of life experiences inherent in this mixed-age cohort allowed for a wider range of observations than would typically be found in a cohort aged between 18 and 25 years. It is also worth noting that this conversation took place between musicians from England, Scotland, Switzerland and Jersey – musicians who would normally have been unlikely to meet and share experiences.

Another exchange between students in the online asynchronous discussion illustrates the positive impact of challenging learner assumption about other music cultures. This exchange emerged from of a discussion on performance anxiety. In this thread students were asked to post about their experiences of feeling nervous in public performance. Two classically trained musicians made assumptions about pop musicians:

I try to make the best of any adverse circumstances and once on stage I feel OK. Sadly, I have at times witnessed severe anxiety in other classical musicians – the shakes, nausea, even physical sickness. I cannot help contrasting this with the pumped-up joy with which rock bands seem to enter the stage – are they as relaxed as they seem?

(Student D, CPMM online discussion forum, 5 January 2017).

I too wonder whether the apparently exuberant performance by, say, a 'hard rock' pop group is as spontaneous as it seems or, sometimes, perhaps camouflaged by 'substances'.

(Student B, CPMM online discussion forum, 5 January 2017).

They were then gently corrected by a pop musician:

I suspect some rock bands are as relaxed as they seem. Personally I cannot have any alcohol before or during a performance to calm me down as I think it might affect it.

(Student E, CPMM online discussion forum, 7 January 2017).

This exchange is a reminder that, as noted by Matthews, 'every music education environment offers genuine opportunities for important social transformation' (2015, p.248). Musicians often make assumptions about the cultures of other genres, and this type of dialogue can demystify and nurture understanding between different groups. Again, the students in this conversation operated in completely different cultures and would not normally have met through their usual social networks. These assumptions would therefore have remained unchallenged. Learning about each other's different approaches from each other, transformed their perceptions of the world and their places within it.

A further example illustrates how a student underwent a significant change of perception regarding the ownership of artistic work. Prior to the CPMM, this student had received an education that led to a conviction that one's own musical personality could act as a hindrance to authentic musical interpretation, a belief that subsequently evolved because of studying the CPMM:

I have completed something of a personal journey, having had a long-held view prior to the start of the CPMM course that the composer had sole ownership of the creative and artistic input to a musical experience. A consideration of the role of the performer and the requirements of the listener during the course, however, has altered my opinion on this and I now recognise that creativity by the performer and listener are an essential requirement in order to complete the artistic enterprise initiated by the composer.

(Student F, CPMM online discussion forum, 4 April 2017).

This observation demonstrates how issues surrounding the 'ownership' of musical works can be entrenched in cultural practices and direct musicians into received interpretive approaches that remain unexamined. This was also evident in the forum post quoted earlier that referred to interaction with the audience as being 'limited to conveying the composer's ideas' (Student D, 11 October 2016). Such practices can lead to a shared perception of 'correctness' that – when left unchallenged – can quickly develop into the dominating culture described by Matthews (2015), a culture that is reinforced by the 'exclusive clubs' identified by the Arts Council England report (Mahamdallie, 2011, p.9). Careful scaffolding of asynchronous online discussions in accordance with the criteria identified by Laurillard (2012), led students to examine and reflect on their own practices and perceptions in relation to a wide range of alternate views (a wider range than that typically experienced in traditional conservatoire curricula). As a result, a more detailed acknowledgment of multiplicity emerged in several student accounts, evidencing an increased awareness of cultural diversity.

The increased awareness and subsequent embracing of diversity cultivated emotional and social peer support in the asynchronous forums, which positively impacted on some students whose confidence in practical music making was low. One student, who had previously been described as a 'bad improviser', was able to re-assess their perception of self and validate their music making; since completing the module, this student has successfully formed and participated in an improvising group. Another student had enrolled on the course to return to music making, after a psychologically damaging musical education during childhood had left them feeling 'worthless' and 'untalented'; after successfully completing the CPMM this student is performing publicly and enjoying the experience. A third student had only ever sung in choirs, assuming that they were 'not good enough' to sing in smaller groups; the student has since formed a duo and is performing in residential homes for adults with learning disabilities, a personal ambition that was identified during the trajectory of the module. Within an inclusive atmosphere these students flourished and developed the confidence to take on new opportunities.

## Conclusion

Towards the end of the module, the students physically met for the first time at a residential school hosted at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in Greenwich, London. The effectiveness

of the asynchronous online discussions in creating a cohesive community of musicians from diverse cultures was evidenced by a level of trust that had been generated and enabled them to collaborate, thus creating original musical interpretations born of their own agency. The pedagogical framework that underpins the curriculum has positively impacted the personal practices and perceptions of musicians around the United Kingdom and abroad. The asynchronous nature of the tuition model has enabled a deep level of reflection from the students, which may not have occurred in real-time interactions. However, conclusions that are extrapolated from the experiences of a single cohort are informative but limited. With each successive cohort of CPMM students, a more nuanced understanding of their learning journeys will emerge. The CPMM programme team are currently engaged in further research to assess the effectiveness of various technologies in facilitating reflective learning. The team is also investigating options to provide supplementary synchronous online tuition, to address additional learning outcomes that may not be met as effectively in asynchronous discussion forums. The findings from this research will not only inform how distance learning is facilitated most effectively in performing arts education, but it may also shed further light on how digital technologies and virtual spaces can support and extend the face-to-face teaching of campus-based students in a conservatoire context.

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### **Biographies**

*Dr Aleksander Szram* is Programme Leader for the Foundation Music Certificates and the Certificate in the Practice of Music Making at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, where he is also a Principal Lecturer and a member of the Piano Professorial Staff. His research activities are focused on two areas: the performance and recording of contemporary piano repertoire, and the application of Freirean pedagogical approaches in conservatoire settings. He has released many CDs for Prima Facie and Nimbus, and is published by Palgrave Macmillan.

*Dr Dario van Gammeren* works as Technology Enhanced Learning Specialist at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, where he leads on the development and implementation of digital technologies that support a blended approach to curriculum delivery. He is also Lecturer in Academic Studies at the Royal Northern College of Music and Associate Lecturer for the Open University. His research focuses on the creative use of educational technologies to widen access and participation in Higher Education music programmes.