Transform
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Facilitating a Digital Community Music Program

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Abstract

This study sought to facilitate a shared musical experience in a convenient and creative online learning environment. Five students participated in a six-week online community music program focused on the use of technology as a composition tool. The program was conducted completely online by two music facilitators, who did not know the participants prior to the study. The students were given guidelines to complete four composition activities digitally and had the option of participating in a weekly discussion using video-conferencing software. Qualitative data was collected from field notes, composition activities, and live video discussions. The data support the use of technology as an effective composition tool and music technology's potential to expand teaching and learning opportunities. The results also support adapting traditional teaching methods to the learning styles and interests of today's youth in order to provide more relevant and engaging experiences for students. Given the positive results from this study, the author suggests further research into the potential of online community music programs to effectively connect music facilitators and community music participants in a supportive and engaging learning environment.

Keywords: *Community music, music technology, distance learning, composing, underserved communities, digital learning community*

Background

Music technology may be an entry point for educators not only to incorporate the interests and lived experiences of their students but also to facilitate instruction and expand opportunities to connect to the world (Greher, 2011). This study explored shared musical experiences through the use of technology as a compositional tool and a means to create and foster community.

In a previous study I had discovered limitations in a face-to-face community music program. I facilitated music classes for homeless children and their caregivers at a family resource center in New York City. Limited space to hold classes, limited time to work

individually with participants, and significant commuting time for the facilitators hindered the continuation and expansion of the program.

A common factor across all the families that had participated in the community music program was universal access to the internet using mobile devices. I conducted the present study to examine the benefits and disadvantages of connecting community music students and music facilitators through the use of technology. The research question explored the broad question: "What impact does an online community music program have on participants?"

Introduction

A call for middle and high school students to participate in a six-week program focused on music composition was sent to educators working with underserved communities in New York City. Five female students from the Bronx, one of the five boroughs of New York City, between the ages of 12 and 15 volunteered to participate. These students received regular musical instruction in school and were familiar with traditional music notation and conventions.

The online classes were asynchronous, with the exception of an optional weekly discussion that used video conferencing software. These discussions offered time to answer questions, review compositions, and share music through a Spotify playlist to which students and facilitators added songs to weekly. After composition activities were submitted, the facilitators provided written individual feedback to the students that addressed their interests and needs as musical learners.

We used MusicFirst, a learning management software that provided an online classroom and digital composition tools including Noteflight, an online music notation software, and Soundation, a web-based music production program featuring loops, effects,

and virtual instruments. The online classroom allowed students to participate in weekly activities, upload assignments, reply to discussion questions, and contact the facilitators.

Related Literature

Technology is constantly being updated to be more efficient and user-friendly (Ruthmann, 2007), facilitating connections through a variety of social and educational platforms (Frankel, 2010). These connections provide diverse ways to experience and respond to music and support social interactions in addition to self-assessment and reflection (Brown, 2014; Ruthmann, 2007).

Technology has created a more relevant and interactive medium for the education of today's students (Brown, 2014; Frankel, 2010). Technology assists in bridging the gap between students' interests and experiences inside and outside of the classroom (Crawford, 2016). Offering this relevant medium to experience music making and access learning materials can motivate students to take charge of their own learning (Mercer, 2007; Crawford, 2016).

Music Technology has become central not only for today's students, but also for music composition (Armstrong, 2011). Notation software allows immediate playback, enabling composers to have varying musical and instrumental skills (Hodges, 1996). Digital composition tools expand the accessibility of composing to individuals without performance and musical literacy skills (Chen, 2012; Mercer, 2007). Technology also engages students in effective composing techniques (Frankel, 2010; Hickey, 1997; Savage and Challis, 2001).

In addition to the compositional and educational benefits music technology provides, it may also facilitate relationships and collaborations, much like social media. Digitally connecting music facilitators and communities may establish mutually beneficial relationships to experience convenient and diverse opportunities. Providing convenient

opportunities to connect and create may be particularly significant for individuals from underserved communities, as studies have shown that building a sense of belonging can be momentous for community music participants (Higgins, 2012; Higgins and Willingham, 2017; Osborne, 2009). However, creating these opportunities may be inhibited by travel, time, and physical space. Technology may provide a solution to musically connect facilitators and community members when travel, time, and physical space are issues.

When available, technology provides access to music and music education for students in remote and underserved areas of the world (Brändström, Wiklund, & Lundström, 2012; Crawford, 2016; Riley 2016). Riley (2016) used video conferencing software to link pre-service music teachers in the United States with elementary school children from a community in Mexico. The findings support video-conferencing as a feasible means of facilitating distance learning. Brändström et al. (2012) also indicated a positive response from participants and instructors using video-conferencing software to conduct guitar lessons and master classes in Scandinavia. Crawford (2016) designed an interactive online music education project to provide access to musical experiences for students in rural and remote schools in Australia. Crawford's findings support music technology's capability of positively impacting and expanding teaching and learning experiences.

Method

This study was facilitated by a New York City educator and a general music teacher from a public elementary school in Missouri. Each student's caregiver was provided with a detailed description of the study, a consent form, and the facilitators' contact information. An email was sent to the students that introduced the two music facilitators and encouraged the students to fill out a brief survey with the following questions: 1) "What is your grade level in school?"; 2) "What kind of music do you enjoy?"; 3) "What are some songs you like to listen

to?"; 4) "What do you know about composing?"; 5) "Tell me about your musical self.". The students' answers to the survey guided the curriculum and composition activities selected by the music facilitators.

The students in this report are referred to using pseudonyms. met online for the introduction to the program using video conferencing software to discuss further their general musical interests and goals for the program. The students were able to view all seven participants (five students and two facilitators) in one window, and a software-enabled shared screen, which assisted in the introduction of the online classroom and instructions for the initial composition activity.

The goal of each composition activity was to engage each student's interests and needs as a musical learner. The students were emailed guidelines and links to instructional videos to assist in the completion of the weekly activities. The facilitators encouraged the students to complete each compositions at their own pace within the six-week program as there were no deadlines for each individual activity.

Composition Activities. The first composition activity was to create and record a song using Incredibox, a free website that allowed students to compose, record, and share a piece of music without any prior knowledge of compositional techniques by accessorizing a cartoon character. Each accessory in Incredibox provides a different looped beat, sound effect, or melody, which students could layer into a song mix. After this activity, we successfully introduced the term "ostinato" in the online discussion and provided examples of ostinati in popular songs.

The second activity encouraged students to create an original ostinato using O-Generator, a loop-producing software which uses popular and world music styles. This enabled students to compose and record without using traditional notation. The students had a wide range of instruments to choose from as well as a pre-recorded "Loop Library" for

additional examples. This software allowed students to create a four-beat loop with layered rhythms and instruments.

The third compositional activity asked the students to compose an eight-bar melody above a precomposed bass line using Noteflight, a traditional music notation software. This web-based music software assisted students in their composition processes by providing immediate playback and a prerecorded bassline.

The final composition activity was a social justice project in the design of a democratic learning environment as envisioned by Allsup (2007). The students were asked to read the lyrics of and listen to various social justice songs including John Lennon's "Imagine", "Borders" by M.I.A., and Michael Jackson's "Black or White." Students composed their own lyrics and music addressing a social justice issue of their choice. They had the option of using a previously introduced music software or Soundation, a web-based music production program similar to Garage Band, to compose with.

Results

Out of the five students who began the six-week composition program, three continued to the social justice project. There were five optional discussions; all five students were present for the first three discussions, four participated in the fourth, and two joined the final discussion. Discussions were held every Thursday evening.

Each student freely spoke during the discussions to provide opinions, suggestions, and ask questions. Their responses were thoughtful, respectful of their peers, and insightful with respect to their musical ideas and interests. The students and facilitators were in the comfort of their own spaces, which may have encouraged the sharing of ideas and opinions. One of our discussions revolved around the questions, "What is good music? What is bad music?" This initiated a thoughtful conversation between the students and facilitators. The students

played examples of popular pieces and were able to describe the qualities that they liked or disliked in each song.

All five students completed the Incredibox compositions and expressed their enjoyment of the activity. Incredibox allowed students to compose using an aesthetically appealing and interactive program, which was engaging as a distance learner. They described the web-based software as "game-like" and enjoyed sharing their created songs with each other and friends. This activity provided an accessible entry point to compose and introduce the musical term *ostinato*. The students also expressed their enjoyment of creating ostinati using O-Generator, as it was also interactive and visually engaging.

The Noteflight activity required the students to compose using traditional notation, which seemed less engaging to complete as an isolated distance learner. A student expressed her understanding of the educational value of the Noteflight activity, however, she did not enjoy composing the melody because it was not as "fun" as the other projects.

Only two of the students completed the social justice activity: Caleigh, age 12, and Courtney, 15; the students who ended the study early expressed their need for additional time to study for exams. Caleigh and Courtney noted that this composition activity "made them think" and provided them with a sense of accomplishment when finished. They researched social justice topics and worked together in the creation of their compositions.

Courtney's social justice composition focused on the prevalence of racial discrimination throughout the history of the United States. Below are the lyrics she wrote:

> How can I look further ahead when people are judging me instead
>
> How I look and how I talk it's a problem to continue
>
> Although, it is my heritage and my culture it shouldn't have to be an issue
>
> My ancestors fought for my rights

> Till this day I still have to fight for what I believe is right and find light in order for our people to shine bright.
> Put yourself into our shoes
> Being accused of things that are not true
> Violence, inequality, it's not what I want
> I want to be equal just like you and your pops.

The youngest participant, Caleigh, composed a social justice piece titled, "Why?" She researched Title VII of the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964 and was inspired to write lyrics from her experience with verbal harassment:

> We have to be a certain race to be an ace but why?
> Why can't I just be cheered?
> But to do that I have to be cleared
> Why do I have to be perfect?
> Why do I have to have certain things ejected and injected in my body for people to accept me? Why do I have to be beautiful? And have to be care free?
> Well the truth is all I want is a master's degree.

Discussion

Composing provided an accessible medium for the students to explore and express not only musical interests and skills, but also issues of considerable importance. The social justice activity, in particular, suggested that the digitally shared musical setting provided an engaging experience for the students to critically think, reflect, and express themselves. The lyrics provided meaningful insight into the students' reflections, for example, "We have to be

a certain race to be an ace, but why?" and "How can I look further ahead when people are judging me instead." The desires and aspirations of the students were also expressed through their compositions, "Why do I have to be beautiful? And have to be care free? Well the truth is all I want is a master's degree." In addition, the reflections provided by the students in regard to their compositional process indicated thoughtful and critical reflection of themselves and their connection to the world around them.

The findings suggest that an online community music program has the potential to impact the participants as musical learners and enrich their identities. At the beginning of the course the students listed Western European Classical composers, Mozart, Beethoven, and Bach, in response to the question "Who is a composer?" When asked the same questions at the end of the six-week program, the students listed modern artists such as Logic and Kendrick Lamar. The students' perceptions of composers broadened as is evident in Courtney's following comment, "My view changed because not all composers are in the classical department, they can be in different departments like Hip Hop." In addition, the students widened their definition of a composer to include themselves. When asked if she was a composer, after a brief pause and visible reflection, Caleigh said, "I composed a piece, so, yes, I am a composer."

An obvious concern for the completely digital community music experience was the absence of in-person connections. A quote from one of the students during a discussion addressed this issue, "I like the weekly online meet-up because we get to talk to you face-to-face, not message. We're actually talking to you, through a computer, but we're talking to you. It seems like you're in front of us talking to us. I think that is easier to tell something when you're in the room rather than email." Video conferencing seemed to lessen the distance between the participants and facilitators. Our digital format permitted an instructor over 1,000 miles away from New York City to be involved and engaged in the facilitation of

the program and feel connected to the participants similar to the findings from Riley (2009), Brändström et al. (2012), and Crawford (2016). Video conferencing also provided a space to share ideas and connect 'face-to-face' that was essential to the students' experiences in the program. This outcome suggests that online community music programs have the potential to foster a sense of community through music technology and are a convenient and viable opportunity when technology is accessible.

Caleigh shared her thoughts about the balance of video conferencing and asynchronous instruction, 'The activity instructions I think are good through email because it is more efficient that way. I like how you check-in because sometimes I forget'. The written activity guidelines and links to video tutorials provided the students with effective instructions that were efficient for both the facilitators and students. However, the digital aspect of the program likely increased the need to remind students of their assignments. Regular contact with the students assisted in overcoming this disadvantage, as is evident from Caleigh's above quote.

The students had a positive response the composition activities with the exception of creating a melody over a bass line in Noteflight. The guidelines for composing a traditionally Classical melody may have felt more restricting and therefore less engaging than composing popular music. This finding suggests that the students enjoyed composing music that sounds like the music they listen to outside of school more than traditional classical music.. Similar to in-person instruction, students are more engaged and invested in a musical learning setting when the material is relevant to their interests as conveyed in Frankel (2010) and Mercer (2007).

An additional reason the Noteflight composition activity may not have been as successful could be attributed to the learning curve that the software requires in order to master the shortcuts, although it is relevant to note that each web-based software used in this

study needed some degree of instruction to navigate. The necessity of learning the software shortcuts for ease of use may have been discouraging to the students. In order to make this online activity more engaging, I would suggest introducing it in an online forum. The instructor could demonstrate keyboard shortcuts using screen-sharing technology and provide time for the students to experiment with the shortcuts. This activity might also be more successful using the web-based music production software, Soundtrap, which allows students to work collaboratively, similar to Google Docs.

Moving forward, the structure of the study as an asynchronous program with an optional discussion likely discouraged students from completing the program. Given the positive response from the students who participated in the discussions, an expansion of this study should require video conference participation. This may provide more structure and accountability for the students in addition to feeling more *connected*, ideally resulting in an investment of time and interest in the program.

While this study was limited in scope, it undoubtedly provided possibilities that could be developed in future programs of a larger magnitude. Suggestions for further research include the exploration of advantages and disadvantages that distance learning using music technology has for community music students and facilitators. Additional suggestions with investigative possibilities include exploring differences in involvement in such a digital learning environment across gender, age, and prior musical knowledge. The video conferencing discussions from this study may also have facilitated self-assessment as well as social interactions through the sharing of musical ideas and peer feedback. Future research is encouraged to include the impact of peers in a digital community music setting.

Conclusion

Music has the power to inspire and educate (Willingham and Higgins, 2017), and even in a non-traditional online context, I saw this unfold within the study. Given the limited timeframe and scope of the study, the participants created expressive and inspiring compositions. The students' musical skills expanded as they incorporated popular styles and newfound ideas to compose original music. Their initially limited perceptions of composers broadened as the participants identified modern artists and themselves as composers by the end of the program. The social justice activity encouraged self-reflection, critical thinking, and provided insight into the experiences and aspirations of the students. These findings suggest that the students musical identities were enriched through their experience in the digital learning environment.

An essential element of the study was the online discussion conducted with video conferencing software. This live interaction between the students and facilitators motivated the participants' interest in the program and assisted in creating a community. The students felt more connected to the facilitators during the online discussions. This finding supports the importance of face-to-face connections in a community music setting and the potential that music technology has to facilitate those connections with special regard to video conferencing software, which is constantly being updated and improved.

Adapting traditional teaching methods to meet the learning styles of younger generations, who are immersed in technology renews motivation and stimulates new avenues for growth. Technology is part of an ever-evolving world that continues to advance education and provide resources for teachers and students to experience new possibilities. Establishing connections and growing relationships in a digital educational environment can be an essential step in creating an effective and engaging learning space. It is inevitable that technology will continue to increase its influence on societal and social paradigms. This study supports the potential that music technology has to bring together the interests and lived

experiences of students from varied backgrounds and facilitate a sense of community. Online community music programs may provide engaging, convenient, and meaningful opportunities for students, who have access to technology.

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