Chapter 5

Open Inquiry as a Bridge Between Formal and Informal Lifelong Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

Many music educators have noted a gulf between what is taught in music courses and students’ own interests. Technology not only offers various means to help bridge that gulf; it has also created a fast-paced world in which success may depend on the ability to continue learning throughout life. Using online open education resources to support course projects involving open-ended inquiry can help bridge the gulf between curriculum and student goals in ways that prepare students for lifelong learning. The breadth of offerings on the open Internet make personalized course projects feasible, and students may need the guided practice in using them to reach their learning goals. This chapter discusses an action research project which facilitated the inquiries of self-motivated adult online music learners in order to better understand their needs and experiences. Communities of practice, flexible processes, and learner familiarity with inquiry emerged as key issues.

INTRODUCTION

Thegreatmajorityofmusicallearningtakeplaceoutsideschools,insituationswherethereisnотeacher, andinwhichtheintentionoftheactivityisnottolearnaboutmusic,butfplaymusic,listenptomusic, danceptomusic,orbetogetherwithmusic.Today,thisisfurtheraccentuatedasaresultofcomputers andnewtechnologyandallthemusicalactivitiesontheInternet... (Folkestad, 2006, p. 136)

the musical identities, preferences, and interests of the learner (Hargreaves & Marshall, 2003). In contrast, there appears to be a substantial gulf between formal music education and the real-world musical interests of students (Green, 2002; Myers, 2008; Shuler, 2010). This gulf harms students by obscuring the usefulness of formal knowledge for their preferred musical activities. It also harms formal education by reducing its perceived value. The Internet, as it makes its way into formal venues, is providing interesting opportunities to reduce or eliminate this gulf. One such opportunity takes advantage of the profusion of Internet-based resources to offer directed inquiry in music courses. Course projects that encourage students to actively connect the goals and interests of the curriculum with their own goals and interests motivate students to engage more fully with a course. Such projects also demonstrate the real-world value of the knowledge and skills on offer (Dewey, 1938). In fact, students may not make such connections for themselves unless real-world challenges are included in the curriculum (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Practice in using formal knowledge to achieve personal learning goals also facilitates the transition from formal student to independent, self-directed adult learner. In a fast-paced world, lifelong learning has become crucial not only to pursuing personal interests but also to keeping professional skills up-to-date (Pellegrino, Chudowsky, & Glaser, 2001). Nurturing the ability to move seamlessly as needed between formal and informal learning has become a crucial educational goal (Fletcher, Schaffhauser, & Levin, 2012).

Some researchers have posited that modern technologies can be used in a variety of ways to help bridge the gulf between formal and informal music learning (Brook & Upitis, 2015; Folkestad, 2012; Leong, 2011; Waldron, 2009). The open Internet offers many such affordances through easy access to open educational resources (OERs), other informational sites, primary sources, communities of experts and enthusiasts, and a wide variety of tools that can be used to create, manipulate, analyze, and store musical sounds.

For example, learners in the study described below pursued open-ended inquiries. Their projects were deeply influenced by their own goals and interests, and their goals and interests were in turn influenced by their inquiry projects. The resources that were used varied considerably depending on factors such as the learner’s genre preferences and prior knowledge. Examined resources included YouTube videos, downloaded sheet music, text-based music-information sites, and open-source music-notation programs. The findings suggested that such open-ended inquiries can lead to successful music learning in challenging areas such as harmony theory; it also demonstrated the importance of access to a wide range of local and online resources and support mechanisms such as an inquiry guide, subject expert, or knowledgeable peers.

The purpose of this chapter is to propose the use of such projects in music courses, in order to help bridge the gulf between formal and informal music learning. The background section discusses the sources of the gulf, the use of open-ended inquiry to close it, and the open Internet as a support for such inquiry. Issues, controversies and challenges are noted. An exploratory action research study is described in which the researcher acted as an online inquiry facilitator for self-motivated adult online music learners. Primary goals of the study included understanding the barriers encountered by such learners and exploring possible ways around those barriers. Communities of practice and flexible approaches to music learning emerged as key issues, leading to recommendations regarding the use of online, open-ended inquiry in the curriculum.