Chapter 9
Playing Together:
Designing Online Music Courses Using a Social Constructivist Framework

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ABSTRACT

Music education, like many disciplines, is transitioning to the online environment, which impacts the learning landscape. This transition, along with a mindshift by instructors, requires careful consideration of the theoretical underpinnings needed to inform the design, facilitation and assessment to create conditions where students are actively engaged in learning and meaning making. The affordance of digital technologies (e.g., synchronous and asynchronous, multimedia) provides a means for creating and articulating knowledge. This chapter discusses online learning and explores the nature of constructivist and social-constructivist theories and how they can be applied in the design, facilitation, and assessment of online music education. Examples of constructivist learning in online music courses are shared for the purpose of examining how technology can be used to support the learning outcomes grounded on social constructivism. The chapter concludes with directions for future research and implications for practice.

INTRODUCTION

The field of music education, like many disciplines, has ventured into the implementation of online learning. With demonstrated exponential growth of online learning in music courses at National Association of Schools of Music in the United States beginning in 2012 (Johnson, 2017b), online music courses should be ready with rich experiences that engage students in learning. The main challenge surrounding the implementation of online music courses is generally one of understanding effective teaching approach and design. That is, research has found that online music courses are often designed
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according to instructor contexts of familiarity and background experience (Johnson, 2017a). Such contexts include: particular ways of teaching, technical abilities and aptitudes, availability of digital tools, as well as individual philosophical approaches to teaching music (Johnson, 2017a).

Given the diversity of options when approaching the design of online music courses for higher education, it would seem necessary to identify a teaching approach that is grounded both in the tradition of music teaching, and in online learning pedagogy. The availability of current digital technologies provides a means for actively creating and articulating knowledge using an array of tools. These digital tools can support synchronous and asynchronous two-way communication, as well as the use of multimedia for knowledge building. Such options for digital tools suggests the implementation of necessary supportive and participatory frameworks to uphold learning music in the online learning environment. Therefore, it is posited that when students are learning music online, the learning design should be grounded in a social constructivist theoretical framework to effectively support how and what technology is used in support of learning music and active participation in learning.

From this pedagogical viewpoint, this chapter will explore the nature of constructivist and social-constructivist theories and how they can be applied in the design of online music courses. Examples of constructivist learning in online music courses are shared for the purpose of examining how technology can be used to support the learning outcomes grounded in a social constructivist theory, as well as the impact in relation to the student learning experience. The chapter concludes with implications for practice to support the design of online music using a social constructivist framework.

Online Learning

According to Zhang and Bonk (2010), today’s millennial and neo-millennial students expect to be using multiple media as part of the interactions with learning when enrolled in online offerings, as well as “to simultaneously and dynamically feed resources back to the Internet” (p. 87). Given this expectation, education cannot be focused on a transmission model where “pieces of information that once memorized, constitute a stable storehouse of knowledge. Education must help students learn how to learn in powerful ways, so that they can manage the demands of changing information, technologies, jobs and social conditions” (Darling-Hammond, 2008, p. 2). That is, instruction should focus on enabling students’ learning through a model that highlights ideas and practical contexts to support a transformational learning model. Such a model supports students through identifying ways for them to practically engage in 21st century learning and tools, trans-disciplinary learning (Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 2001) and strong discipline-based content knowledge (Mishra, Koehler, & Henriksen, 2011). Positioned within the online learning environment, transformational learning requires purposefully designed and facilitated learning that engages students in ways that utilize the affordances of the online technology in alignment with appropriate theoretical and pedagogical practice.

As higher educational institutions continue to support and expand their offerings through online learning, two issues needs to be addressed. First, the quality of the student learning experiences needs to be carefully considered in the design, the development, and the facilitation. Second, “well-researched promising practices” (Alberta Education, 2006, p. 30) need to guide the design and facilitation. As noted by Rice (2009), there must be the development of “processes that allow for formal documentation of these factors” (p. 174). To provide students with rich online learning experiences, researched-informed practices along with evidence-based decisions are required.
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