

# The hidden music curriculum: Utilising blended learning to enable a participatory culture

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## ABSTRACT

*Music curricula have become increasingly systematised in universities where students may be segregated into class groupings which do not naturally support collaboration and project-based learning. At the same time, the Internet has enabled global social networking which has proven to be a source of engagement for young people and an effective enabler of revised professional practices and artistic collaborations. This paper examines a project which draws upon these contexts to provide a web-based discussion board for music technology students in an Australian conservatoire. It is shown that the blending of online and face-to-face activity effectively provides a 'hidden curriculum' in which students communicate, reflect and collaborate to build and sustain an authentic participatory learning culture.*

## Keywords

Blended learning, music technology, participatory culture.

## BACKGROUND

In recent times, personal computing and global networks have enabled what has become known as 'Web 2.0' (O'Reilly, 2005) – in sites such as MySpace and YouTube, a participatory culture is transforming value systems, undermining notions of authority, and creating new pathways for autonomous creativity and innovation. Young people continue to define the information society, and in turn, re-define the music industry online (Reding, 2006). Professional success includes the ability to network, to function in, and move between professional communities, and knowing how to recognise opportunity and act upon it, where "exchange in the market through networks of creativity" (Frederiksen & Sedita, 2005; p. 28) becomes the new business model.

In contrast, Western university ideology has been consumed by massification and a preoccupation with branding (Fitzgerald, 2007). Institutions have sought to control web sites as marketing tools while e-learning systems format-shift, scale and distribute pedagogical models to compartmentalise students' educational opportunities, that is, degree programs are divided into year level and course codes both on-line and off, by school-like timetables and class groupings. In university music education, students may be separated from the rest of the cohort and the ambiance of social and intellectual communities (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews & Gabelnick,

2004) where complex tensions remain amid the demands of conformity, attitudes about artistic standards, notions of literacy, and the changing professional workspace.

## RESEARCH LOCATION

This project is set within a music technology undergraduate program of an Australian university-based conservatoire. In such a small cohort of N=65 students, the expectation was that students would naturally communicate and collaborate as is appropriate to the discipline. However, increasingly concerned academic discussion and subsequent student program evaluations revealed that:

- students remained separated into yearly groupings;
- networking was viewed as unimportant;
- there remained persistent cliques of smaller groups;
- learning transfer was poor across classes /year levels;
- there was little cross-year communication or interaction.

Craft development was problematic and many appeared out of touch with working contexts and key competencies. Students tended to maintain outmoded ideas of just what music professionals do and how they make a living – inexperience, together with the folklore of the trade magazines and mass media control continues to assert this (Lessig, 2004). Similarly, older or time-poor faculty staff may remain disconnected from contemporary, perhaps puzzling new online viral practices (Jenkins, 2007).

## PROJECT AIMS

Responding to these challenges, a range of 'blended learning' (Bersin, 2004) arrangements were subsequently devised, drawing on ICT infrastructure and face-to-face opportunities aiming to enhance the development of disciplinary craft, to clarify professional contexts and to enable a new 'hidden curriculum' across the entire learning ecology. This student cohort comprises composers and musicians who have chosen the recording studio as their major study 'instrument' and who by nature are relatively comfortable with ICT and so, provide an appropriate platform from which to investigate this blended approach; they also naturally provide a conduit for collaboration across other musical departments and arts faculties.

This paper will report on the framework and outcomes related to one particular blended learning instrument: the *Mutech Discussion Board* (MDB) (2007), based on modified open source software (Phpbb2, 2007) and

positioned as an essential communication and collaboration 'glue' between the other learning activities.

## METHOD

Since 2004, the music technology curriculum has been the subject of research, analysis and publication: in cross-year teams utilised for key production events (Draper, 2005); a cohort-wide face-to-face Mutech Forum provides opportunities to share practice-based strategies (Carey, Draper, Lebler & McWilliam, 2006); work-integrated learning pathways have been enabled both on campus and in the field (Draper & Hitchcock, 2006); and an Internet publication vehicle has been enabled in the RadioIMERSD project (Draper, 2007).

As a core blended learning component, the MDB therefore shares in analyses that have taken place across the area as part of an ongoing action research project. Over four years, data has been collected through student surveys, interviews, course evaluations and faculty workshops, and the relevant summaries are presented below. This paper focuses on revealing the impacts of the MDB on promoting social networking, critique and reflection, professional competencies and overall disciplinary memory.

## RESULTS

Students and faculty staff have come to claim the MDB as their own and argue that it is not the poor imitator of the face-to-face experience when used in a blended environment. They believe that 'online' is a different space where participants display different personalities, students develop a deeper understanding of their cohort, and where 70% of participants said they had misjudged peers on face value, but subsequently made solid relationships helped by online community interactions.

### Changed Perceptions

Interview data and exit surveys reveal that students change their perceptions of others they know in person because of discussion board interactions. For example:

"You start to form ideas about people and you start to form ideas about how you learn, who you want to learn with and who's going to help you best . . . a lot of that was based on discussion board identity as well as through class-work and recording studio projects".

"A lot of people were different on the discussion board than they are in person . . . it helped me to gain a broader perception of some people . . . some people might be really shy but on the discussion board they actually talk and you get to see a different side of them".

Many students comment on the cohesion they feel between the face-to-face and online elements where topics are discussed in both arenas:

"As much as we talked about things on the discussion board, we talked about it face to face too. You're trying to get it on the discussion board, but when you actually

come to uni and you talk about it, it created a subject to talk about and I think that's something we all valued".

"That's the weird thing for the first years [freshers], although we see each other in classes . . . it's almost equal [time spent] between class, seeing each other personally and talking on the discussion board".

In attempting to explain differences between face-to-face and online, one student said that,

"There is replication, but while there are little groups within the class that tend to physically study together, on the discussion board, you can ask anyone . . . I think it's a bit more homogenous outside the class".

### The Value of the Individual

Web 2.0 literature posits that in the new workplace, hierarchies are being flattened and value is now created less within vertical silos and more through horizontal collaboration (Friedman, 2005). This has also been the experience of students who were reporting that the predominant source of cross-year interactions were in the online environment and while they recognised their own year group as the strongest unit, they also now felt part of a larger community: "It helps stop you feeling like you are working in a vacuum", others saying that it provided "a sense of self-standing in the community".

Data reveals there is a strong equalisation between learning community participants. Online, participants stand on their displayed merits rather than somewhat artificial boundaries imposed by the segregation of year rankings. For example, one first year student came to the degree with a good level of prior experience and through the MBD quickly became a valued member of cross-year teams. Students refer to these interactions as "working with a group of friends" in an apprenticeship-like environment where mature students now recognise that each year's new intake brings fresh perspectives, while also providing eager and grateful recipients of older students' more developed experience and knowledge. A final year student commented:

"[it] introduced me to students that I may have never otherwise worked with . . . I collaborated with them in projects based on the opinions and information they had given on the discussion board".

First year students comment on the same phenomena:

"It revealed that [later] years are doing the same thing but more advanced. You know, I'm building on their blocks of what they've learnt in first year".

"The quieter people and the loud people have equal place in the discussion board. Some people hardly talk at all [in class] but on the discussion board they'll write impressive posts about what they think . . . it was really good in that sense . . . because then you'd actually hear what their ideas were, so, I think I certainly got to know the quieter people that way".

## Collective Intelligence

There is a growing sense of value placed on networking, collaboratively-formed constructions of knowledge and the idea of ‘the wisdom of crowds’ (Surowiecki, 2004). In an educational context, this can be equated to a sense of freedom, where the act of sharing presumes that there is a sense of ownership of knowledge and some degree of pride that accompanies the desire to share, to speak up and to participate. Student feedback includes,

“You learn better as a group. It was more a discussion of how and why and what and where instead of just learning the answer”.

“What you’re thinking is just one train of thought, another ten people could have ten different trains of thought. You don’t get that in class”.

## Student Evaluation Summary

45 students responded to the last survey in 2007, the majority believing that MDB now provides:

- immediate access to the music technology community affording a feeling of meeting a lot of new people in a short amount of time (90%);
- an essential off-campus access point to university – students perceive such access as distinct from materials such as online texts or lectures, where peer networking and engagement is important to them (95%);
- a tool for reference, learning, research and discussion to support face-to-face projects and practices (70%);
- enhanced opportunities for self-reflection (and were often surprised at these outcomes) (75%);
- raised confidence due to community interactions (80%);
- promotion of collaboration and critical thought (70%);
- academic support, but freedom vs. instruction (75%).

The MBD possesses integrated metrics tools which show that over the four years of operation, the most highly ranked and engaged discussion themes included:

- social networking and bonding;
- technical hints, tips and information;
- creativity and perspectives of the creative process;
- business, marketing and publication;
- qualitative judgements where there may be no ‘right’ answer, simply differing approaches and contexts.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In conventional communities, history and working knowledge tends to remain dispersed across the memories of community members. Accessing this knowledge requires interacting with and integrating information from multiple, sometimes conflicting sources – in the case of university teaching, increasingly delivered from the ‘sage on the stage’ (or distance education system) to student receptors of instruction and targets for grading.

In a community with a significant online presence however, evolutionary history and socially-constructed knowledge can be stored and processed to facilitate purposeful

browsing and searching. This history is recorded as the practice takes place and so maintains a holistic picture of the community in real time. As a result, engaging in this living historical record makes it easier for newcomers to blend into the community and participate in its practice.

In this music technology project, such enculturation has proven to be an asset for students and staff alike – the MDB not only provides for institutional and disciplinary memory, it supports the development of authentic learning together with significant personal and professional competencies. Thus, this participatory culture functions as a powerful ‘hidden curriculum’ (Jenkins, 2007) which the authors believe will shape just which graduates will succeed and be able to integrate within new knowledge economies.

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