

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN TEACHING VCE MUSIC AT VIRTUAL SCHOOL VICTORIA

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*This paper seeks to describe the educational setting of Virtual School Victoria (VSV) from an insider's perspective teaching music subjects in an online context. While detailing the challenges and opportunities in providing the online delivery of music education in this context, this paper endeavors to offer a perspective of operations in online learning, how meaningful musical engagement can be available to all students, and how an innovative model could be utilized in secondary education (i.e., high school).*

**KEY WORDS:** high school, virtual, music, online, innovation, learning

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Virtual School Victoria [(VSV, 2020), previously known as Distance Education Centre Victoria, before being known as “Correspondence School”] is a Victorian Government Department of Education and Training (DET) online school that provides education for approximately 4500 students in primary to secondary years and is based in Thornbury, Melbourne. For those unfamiliar with Thornbury, it is an increasingly gentrified inner northern suburb in which the culture is influenced by its Greek and Italian post-WWII migrants. Next door to Thornbury is Northcote, which has the highest proportion of songwriters in any federal seat, and is located south of the “Hipster Proof Fence” of Bell Street. There are approximately 250 staff members who physically attend the virtual school, which is usually without students (except on seminar days and meet-your-teacher events) in an office building that would not be out of place in a 1970s Soviet Eastern bloc country behind the Iron Curtain [except it is behind the “Quinoa Curtain” (“Tofu Curtain,” 2020)]. We have digital equivalents of time cards for staff to clock-on and clock-off. It is a

curious mix of an industrial-era education model that has been asked to innovate to 21st century student-focused educational needs.

While VSV is the largest school in the state of Victoria and is relatively unknown, it has become the default educational provider of the most marginalized students, offering a last chance at education where other systems have often failed them. VSV increasingly caters to students who have been medically diagnosed with anxiety, depression, autism spectrum disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic fatigue syndrome, gender dysphoria, and school refusal, as well as students who experience other social/emotional challenges. Many of these students do not fit into regular bricks and mortar schools.

VSV also caters to performance students who are involved in the creative arts (dancers, etc.), as well as high performing sport students who need to fit in schooling around their training schedules and students who have parents who travel for work. Alongside this, more than 2700 Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) students engage in subjects such as music style and composition (in addition, music investigation in 2020 and music performance in 2022), which enable students across the state to do these subjects when they are not offered at their school due to lack of student numbers (typically, government schools require at least 10–12 students in order for a subject to be viable, and in Catholic/independent schools this number is typically 4–6, although this can be negotiated) or in the absence of a suitably qualified teaching expertise (du Plessis, 2019), which is common in regional and remote areas (Headspace, 2020). Teachers have had to adapt and evolve to teach in the virtual environment, and gain skills and competencies that were not included in teacher training. In this environment, teachers have created bespoke and innovative solutions to complex problems, for which there has been no tried and tested formula.

In the last few years, VSV has grown at a significant rate. This has been due to a number of factors, including increased catering to marginalized students experiencing mental health challenges (Headspace, 2020), which has increased exponentially in recent times. VSV is due to increase additionally in the years to come by implementing *The Expanding the VCE in Rural and Regional Victoria Initiative*.

## 2. CONTEXT

Recently, VSV has been awarded substantial funds through DET by the Labor State Government as part of a VCE Expansion Program (i.e., the combined *Expanding the VCE into Rural and Regional Victoria Initiative* and the *Victorian High Ability Program*) to provide every VCE subject to regional and remote students in Victoria (Merlino, 2018). As a result of these initiatives, VSV is tasked with having to create and commission course development for a number of subjects over several years. One of these has been VCE

music investigation (Arnold, 2020), for which I have been the course developer. Additionally, VSV has been awarded substantial funds and is the key driver of the Student Excellence Program (Andrews, 2019), which aims to support high performing students across the state. It could be said that online delivery of education within Victorian schools is being substantially encouraged. VSV has been chosen to deliver these initiatives because it is the leader in this field, has an enviable track record, and has pioneered online education in Victoria. In addition, there has been substantial development of online education programs across diverse areas, catering to diverse student needs over many years. As an aside, viewing from a purely economic standpoint, an outside observer could conclude that online education is particularly attractive to government education departments (Economist, 2014) as it is cost effective (Palvia et al., 2018) in a time of scrutinized budgets and economic rationalism (Johnson, 2019).

This model is scalable indefinitely without substantially allocating more funds, and requires minimal capital expenditure for two of the most expensive parts of delivering education: buildings and personnel. Additionally, online educational delivery lends itself toward quantitative data gathering, which makes it easier to measure specific outcomes and rank students such that they can be compared to each other. Arguably, qualitative educational outcomes are more meaningful and as important (if not more important), but are difficult to produce and time consuming to assess. With testing procedures becoming standardized by the state and federal governments (Bahr and Pendergast, 2018) across all stages of a student's educational journey, study design and assessment procedures are increasingly being geared toward producing the data that they need to produce. Anecdotally, this has been a move toward quantitative data gathering at the expense of qualitative assessment styles and practices. While this new educational paradigm of continuous assessment and measurement has a noticeable effect on teachers, it also has implications for students. Students regularly encounter crowded curricula, but arguably a skill that is more valuable to learn is the ability to self-direct one's own learning (Tan and Koh, 2014).

The rise of self-directed learning has created many opportunities for those not normally able to access education (Adams, 2013). Students of all ages today have never been able to access more information and instruction than at any time previously. Everything is a Google search away. If an individual has thought about it, then it exists and somebody online has probably solved it and put up an instructional video on YouTube. However, student research skills are often inadequate in relation to navigating this plethora of data in search of needed information. Students are often impatient and frustrated in this area. Data literacy and critical thinking skills are vital skills that need to be taught (Davies, 2016). In the age of "Everything, Anywhere, Anytime," the ability to ask the right question and find

a reliable source of information/knowledge is a core skill that is required by all digital citizens in today's age, as well as a designated 21st century skill (Stauffer, 2020).

There are more pressures on teachers today than ever before (Tapper, 2018). Teachers are now required to be knowledgeable across more areas of pursuit in their chosen field, as well as having a responsibility to contribute to student literacy and numeracy (Victorian State Government Education and Training, 2019) no matter what subject they teach. Students are becoming increasingly diverse, anxious (Gleeson, 2016), depressed, and distracted (Rosenberg, 2018). They are more fragmented; they arrive in the classroom with different abilities, experiences, motivation levels, opportunities, and literacy levels (Mazur, 2004). It is increasingly difficult to engage disengaged students with music curricula for which they have little commitment, have little knowledge about, and see little relevance and importance to their lives (Crooke, 2019). Anecdotally, I perceive a widening gap between where students are “at,” what skills/knowledge/expertise teachers have, what educational communities perceive as a “proper” music education, and what structures and curricula can facilitate. There is also an ever-widening funding gap between public and private schools (Ting et al. 2019), in which music programs (and other “non-core” subjects) are usually the first to endure funding cuts. What mechanism is going to close these gaps (Thomson, 2019)? What is the catalyst for change in what we currently do, such that students have the opportunity for lifelong learning and the benefits it provides (Australian Academy of the Humanities, 2019)?

In the music industry, the democratization of technology (Leyshon, 2009) has enabled a generation to have access to the technology, information [although, not necessarily knowledge (Shorter, 2017)], and distribution platforms that were previously tightly held by the gatekeepers (such as publishers, record companies, and copyright holders). More people have access to the means of making and sharing music than ever before. The non-digital native educators who grew up in this paradigm are often unfamiliar with these tools and workflow; after all, this was not part of their education. With this in mind, the DET has made additional professional development available (Department of Education and Training, State of Victoria, 2020). Within the secondary education sector, Lynda tutorials [now LinkedIn Learning (LinkedIn, 2020)] have been made available to all students and teachers in government schools. However, knowledge of this availability is extremely limited, and the uptake of this service as a legitimate professional development provider—that can meaningfully upskill educators—has not been integrated to the extent that it could be. In my experience, these learning tools have been far more embraced and integrated into curricula by the tertiary and technical and further education (TAFE) sector. These online lessons provide comprehensive and engaging training over a vast range of topics (currently, 7878 courses and 250,006 video tutorials) including Audio and Music

(LinkedIn, 2020c) (287 courses and 9570 video tutorials). These video-based learning modules are expertly created and academically robust. They provide depth of knowledge on topics with appropriate pedagogy.

Anecdotally, many students turn to these tools in pursuit of furthering their own self-directed learning. Students end up employing these tools because “a quick Google search” did not yield appropriate answers and YouTube was filled with poorly made instructional videos with low production values that did not get to the point quickly enough. Self-motivated students are turning toward these tools as an alternative to traditional educational models and creating their own “flipped classroom” by engaging in these tools, such that they can learn what they want and need to know (and what their teacher cannot provide).

### 3. PROPOSED INNOVATION

One proposal I would like to introduce is making the music curriculum for Year 9 and 10 more student directed, such that it promotes student agency. Teachers act as facilitators in this model, negotiate appropriate outcomes with students, and help students stay on track and focused on navigating a meaningful learning pathway. This model allows students to:

- Choose what they study by selecting an area from an available list (teacher generated, with negotiation from the students; as detailed subsequently);
- Engage in coursework (watching video modules and practicing these tools on their instrument of choice);
- Demonstrate understanding (completing a test/quiz/exam on a topic, often built into these courses); and
- Share with others (performance, playing a composition, and/or delivering a presentation based on the study).

I see this as an appropriate engagement tool for this age group. In preparation for VCE/Higher School Certificate (HSC) music curricula, students often have a patchy and non-sequential exposure to music education. This could drive greater student numbers into studying music at higher-secondary levels, and further into tertiary engagement.

Drilling further down into the available Lynda modules, courses that could provide a “core curriculum” of foundational music knowledge taught in Year 7 to Year 10 music could constitute a combination of some of the following core subjects, and then go on to include elective subjects that students choose to engage with. This model could look like that presented in Table 1. This “core curriculum” could be an accessible pathway for students

to develop foundational skills and knowledge in music that could be built upon further in tertiary settings, while the “elective curriculum” could sustain student agency and determination of pursuit. Interestingly, LinkedIn Learning also offers “Learning Path: Music” (LinkedIn, 2020i) for 15 music jobs that could form a legitimate pathway for the motivated student. Furthermore, the online self-directed nature of these courses enables students to work at their own pace in a diversity of settings. That these courses do the “heavy lifting” of course delivery, which normally is the responsibility of the classroom teacher, enables a reconsidering of traditional educational models and classroom settings. One proposal is to remove the “Master Your Theory Grade 1” (Holland, 2020) workbooks†, which are the traditional Year 7 and 8 music curriculum in many secondary schools, and make that outcome online through students completing Lynda tutorials at their own pace (and motivation). This would enable valuable class time to be collective music-making creative experiences, facilitated by the classroom music teacher. Arguably, this is the greatest benefit of learning music, as well as the most difficult to facilitate online. I would imagine that students would perceive this educational model as “doing the fun stuff in the classroom” and “doing the boring (but necessary) stuff online.”

**TABLE 1:** Proposed core and elective subjects

<b>Students: 1. Choose; 2. Engage; 3. Demonstrate; 4. Share</b>	
<b>Core Subjects</b>	<b>Elective Subjects</b>
Music Theory for Songwriters: The Fundamentals (LinkedIn, 2020m)	ProTools 12 Essential Training: 101 (LinkedIn, 2020o)
Music Theory for Songwriters: Harmony (LinkedIn, 2020k)	Digital Audio Foundations (LinkedIn, 2020f)
Piano Lessons: Teach Yourself to Play (LinkedIn, 2020n)	Ableton Live 10: Essential Training (LinkedIn, 2020b)
Beginning Blues Keyboard (LinkedIn, 2020e)	Audio Recording Techniques (LinkedIn, 2020d)
Learning Music Notation (LinkedIn, 2020h)	Learning Synth Programming (LinkedIn, 2020j)
Music Theory for Songwriters: Rhythm (LinkedIn, 2020l)	Ableton Live: Producing Electronic Music (LinkedIn, 2020a)
	Sibelius Ultimate 2019 Essential Training (LinkedIn, 2020p)
	EDM Production Techniques: Extreme Sound Mangling (LinkedIn, 2020g)

However, this would require a curriculum focus shift, and willingness from educational communities to embrace this change. I suspect this would only come about with willing educators, possible generational change, and a substantial move away from standardized testing procedures and more toward enquiry-based learning. In addition, if educational communities valued to a greater extent the contribution that student involvement in the arts makes [Major Performing Arts Group (AMPAG), 2018] this could facilitate more beneficial experiences for students. Furthermore, if the arts (Meyrick, 2019), and their contribution to the health and well-being of people (Croggon, 2019) were more widely valued by society, we would be in a better place.

There are many opportunities for students [and teachers through professional development (PD)] to engage in these tutorials and learn new skills. Anecdotally, however, these resources are underutilized in the government education sector. Possible reasons for this are lack of awareness of existence, impediments to logging in, courses/tutorials not being written into coursework through curriculum design, general low motivation for PD, lack of available time, lack of teacher expertise, and lack of appetite to engage in musical materials and concepts of which teachers are not familiar.

Looking further afield, music education innovation is coming from a new music and technology-based approach, which is designed more to encompass where students are “at” and what they want to learn. Dennis DeSantis, from Ableton (DeSantis, 2015), has created a number of innovative educational materials that imply a completely different model for music education. The web site [learningmusic.ableton.com](http://learningmusic.ableton.com) (Ableton, 2020) and its sister site [learningsynths.ableton.com](http://learningsynths.ableton.com) provide innovative models that reimagine 21st century music education and what creators need. These web sites propose a different way of learning music, with language, concepts, and visual communication quite different from what traditional music education looks like.

What would music engagement in students look like if [learningmusic.ableton.com](http://learningmusic.ableton.com) formulated the basis of a Year 7 curriculum? Would it be robust enough? What if students performed gigs/concerts utilizing this and associated technology? Would students be more/less empowered to self-direct their own learning opportunities if this formed the foundation of their formal music education? Does it provide enough foundation? Would engagement in these activities open doors to other learning opportunities or is it a missed opportunity to engage in a “proper” music education?

#### 4. REFLECTIONS

Anecdotally, student agency and voice are sadly lacking in many curriculum designs. I have encountered a common attitude among music directors in Victorian secondary schools that establishing a band program (specifically, teaching brass and woodwind

within a symphonic band context), while specifically discouraging any teaching of contemporary instruments (guitar, drums, and voice; basically, anything that you can plug in), is more beneficial since they have more “control” over what happens. The perspective of music directors “opening the floodgates” in teaching contemporary music and instruments is in contrast to the European traditional repertoire model, as well as being at odds with their own beliefs of what is “proper” or important about music. Their own teaching and perspectives are greatly informed by the way in which they were taught and in how the perspectives and prejudices of their teachers are maintained. This pervasive attitude also does not serve student-centered learning or student learning objectives. Arguably, generational change needs to occur in many places—or substantial innovation in music teacher training and/or curriculum development—for this situation to improve.

There are significant challenges with building music literacy and foundation in a short amount of time. Presently, VSV only teaches VCE music style and composition, and music investigation (in 2020). DET policy states that all students must be able to participate. Nobody can be refused, even if they have poor music literacy skills or lack foundational music understanding. Arguably, it is very difficult to “pick up” music as a VCE subject since it is unlike other subjects that start at the VCE level. The study design for music implies that student music engagement and exposure to music education should occur in the 5 years (at the minimum) prior to VCE through involvement in classroom music, ensemble and instrumental programs, and additional exams such as Australian Music Examinations Board (AMEB) and Australian and New Zealand Cultural Arts Music Examinations (ANZCA) or the equivalent. These experiences prepare students for Year 12 and beyond by scaffolding understanding on firm foundations, as well as by “ramping up” performance, experience, and expectations for students. Sadly, these experiences and educational opportunities are not available to many students, who are disadvantaged across the state due to lack of access and distance (Stokes, et al. 2000). An additional challenge is that students are able to complete Year 12 (units 3 and 4) without having done Year 11 (units 1 and 2). VSV is not permitted to “pre-test” to assess understanding before students enroll in the course. Thus, we are at the mercy of the individual student's musical education experience in his/her bricks and mortar school before reaching VSV. As teachers, we often find ourselves in a situation where we are trying to engage disengaged students who are lacking in the foundational understanding needed to successfully complete VCE music. It is worth mentioning that there is not the time or place to teach students how to read music, what a major scale is, or how basic harmony works. The pace of VCE does not allow for plugging substantial gaps in student understanding.

There is no consistency in, or mandated amount of, music education that students experience in secondary schools in Victoria. In most government schools, students



experience compulsory classroom music for a semester in Year 7 and a semester in Year 8, and it becomes a one semester elective in Year 9 and 10, often with a particular focus on a subject, such as song writing, digital music, ensemble/band, etc.; this places significant pressure on teachers to appropriately build musical foundation in Year 7 and 8 since student continuity of music education often becomes patchy thereafter. With the increasing diversity and disparity of students, access to online music foundation building skills that students can complete at their own time/pace/choosing would be of great benefit. However, this would require students to be guided into this process and to develop self-motivation to learn, as well as personal responsibility to engage appropriately with study materials. Teachers would also need to develop skills to teach in a more “facilitating” style and guide students to help them engage, present, and share their work. I suspect many teachers will also need to upskill in particular areas in which students are more engaged. However, I see this as an advantage, which can facilitate more meaningful exchanges between teachers and students.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

To summarize, there is an immense opportunity that exists in redesigning music education such that it is more inclusive of the other 98% of students. We have the tools at our disposal. We need to rectify the funding inequality (Thomson, 2019). We need to shift our focus to value the arts in education [Major Performing Arts Group (AMPAG), 2018], to value creativity in society (Narev, 2016), to turn science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) into science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM) (Bolton, 2018), and to promote the value that lifelong involvement in music is good for you (Wilson, 2013) and good for society (George, 2018).

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†As an aside, I should mention that this model is one that I have participated in, which has contributed toward my music literacy and foundational understanding. These models (and others such as interpretations of Kodaly) fulfill a function and purpose at particular times of a child's musical development. They are not all bad; however, they could be increasingly inappropriate to the vast majority of students who do not want to engage in European traditional music. ↪