

COLLEGE MUSIC TEACHING IN THE TIME OF PANDEMICS: CHALLENGES, SUCCESSES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

Judith Bowman

Duquesne University, 2127 Wharton Street, Pittsburgh, PA, 15203-1917, USA, E-mail: bowmanj@duq.edu

This article is a short, reflective opinion piece focused on the challenges, successes, and opportunities in online music teaching as impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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The coronavirus pandemic effectively upended college music instruction. Although professors in the United States who were already teaching online experienced somewhat less disruption, those teaching in a traditional classroom needed to move quickly to online instruction. The pandemic pivot of spring 2020 involved moving face-to-face materials and strategies online in a matter of days, in contrast to the more extended time typically devoted to planning and designing learning materials, pedagogical techniques, and learning experiences specifically for the online environment. Considering these differences, many professors recognized that emergency remote teaching is not online learning; a point corroborated in a national report on the 2020 pivot to online learning (Garrett et al., 2020).

There were numerous challenges and some successes. Many professors abruptly left the comfort zone of their face-to-face teaching techniques and sought ways to engage students in active learning experiences online, structure and present lectures for online delivery, and find and learn technologies that would support their instructional approaches. Given the rapid shift to remote teaching, there was little opportunity for training in techniques or technologies, and because of the compressed time frame, professors experienced substantially increased workloads. However, they found ways to adapt their courses that would also ease the adjustment for students, such as reducing the number of assignments, increasing flexibility regarding assignments and due dates, and slowing the pace of the course. Skills- and performance-based courses, such as aural skills courses, provided particularly difficult challenges. Some professors found that asynchronous courses featuring 10–20 minute video lectures or tutorials worked well. Many relied on the Zoom videoconferencing platform to hold synchronous online meetings that typically involved discussion, interaction, and active learning experiences. Together with video lectures and other print materials, Zoom meetings provided a venue that could replicate the flipped classroom model, with students preparing materials in advance and then discussing them with the full class or working with them in small groups in breakout rooms during synchronous online meetings.

The pandemic caused considerable disruption. It also required rethinking what we do, how we do it, and why we do it—ideas conveyed to me in personal communications by a sampling of college professors teaching music theory, music history, music appreciation, music education, and applied music at undergraduate and graduate levels in universities across the United States. Some professors found that because of the pandemic pivot, their teaching in general became more organized, reflective, and intentional. Reflecting on the changes they made and noting how online pedagogies align with the scholarship of teaching, they realized that the challenges and successes they experienced provide opportunities for innovation and improvement moving forward. Consequently, many professors planned to implement online practices they found particularly effective in their face-to-face classes. Specific techniques some music professors intend to retain include the following: making class materials available in a learning management system to provide easy access, regardless of time or place; recording short video lectures to be viewed in preparation for class to promote student engagement and interactivity, as in the flipped classroom model; using online discussion forums as a component of in-person classes to ease and increase student participation, since some students hesitate to speak in front of others; using video discussion applications such as Flipgrid to enliven asynchronous discussions; providing online tutoring in aural skills courses; using projects rather than quizzes and tests to assess student understanding; creating flexible assignments and due dates; using Zoom to bring in guest speakers; and holding virtual office hours. Similar findings regarding non-music disciplines in United States universities have been reported by various authors (Basford, 2021; Smith, 2021) and documented in several research reports (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020; Garrett et al., 2020; McMurtrie & Supiano, 2021, Pelletier et al., 2021).

Moving forward, research in the following areas would be productive: qualitative studies of how people learn specific music subjects in online environments; a study of online teaching strategies that are successful in specific music courses; study of optimal blended learning configurations for specific music subjects; a compilation of what works in online learning in music; and development of a pedagogy of online learning in various music sub-disciplines.

The pandemic situation is likely to persist for some time (McMurtrie & Supiano, 2021); however, other events and situations also have the potential to disrupt typical educational activities, and professors need to be prepared with their own contingency plans in order to adapt as needed (Garrett et al., 2020; Gordon, 2021). The immediate and longer-term pandemic-related adjustments professors recently implemented can provide a roadmap for navigating future challenges.

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