MUSIC LEARNING IN BLOGOSPHERE

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Abstract

Edublogging—the use of blogging as an educational tool and instructional strategy—has been employed by this presenter in the teaching of music analysis at the undergraduate level for some time now, with encouraging evidence of blogging being effective in fostering reflective thinking, higher-order thinking, peer-learning and collaborative knowledge construction. It is no surprise that blogging in general is fast becoming “a significant learning and social networking tool that can help individuals, groups, and organizations learn in new, interesting ways” (Karrer, 2007). This paper will focus not only on how blogging offered an alternative (and additional) space for students to learn music analysis, individually and collaboratively, but also on how it actually transformed the way they went about analyzing music and presenting their findings, going beyond what was typically the case with traditional modes of teaching and assessment. It emerges that situating this learning in blogosphere—in addition to the face-to-face class sessions—impacted in beneficial ways the students’ learning experiences. The findings here are based on the instructor’s observations as the teacher-researcher as well as on the students’ survey feedback, with qualitative analyses of the students’ blog discourses being used for triangulation. The lessons learnt will be relevant to educators who wish to design hybrid learning spaces that take advantage of some of the educational affordances of blogging.
MUSIC LEARNING IN BLOGOSPHERE

Blogging is no longer new technology (Blood, 2000), nor are its educational uses (Downes, 2004). I have employed Edublogging—the use of blogging as an educational tool and instructional strategy—in the teaching of music theory and analysis at the undergraduate level for some five years now. There has been encouraging evidence that blogging can be effectively used to foster reflective and higher-order thinking as well as peer-learning and collaborative knowledge construction (Chong, 2007; Chong, 2008; Chong & Soo, 2005; Chong & Soo, 2007). It is no surprise that blogging in general has been seen as “a significant learning and social networking tool that can help individuals, groups, and organizations learn in new, interesting ways” (Karrer, 2007). Educators at the tertiary level have certainly sought to take advantage of its educational affordances (Betts, 2004; Farmer, 2008; Shimabukuro, 2008; Tekinarslan, 2008; Wang, 2008; Williams, 2004; Wrede, 2003).

In this paper, I shall relook at the teaching and learning experiences in this alternative (and additional) space for my music analysis classes to examine more closely the nature of the musical learning itself. I am interested in how blogging has transformed the learning process and its end products. To this end, I draw upon my own observations as the teacher-researcher, some qualitative analysis of the students’ blog discourses, as well as the students’ end-of-course survey feedback. The interpretation presented here is very much supported by findings by two ex-students who, in two subsequent semesters, had independently surveyed and interviewed fellow students as part of their assignment for their academic-writing course from a different department (Lee, 2009; Lim, 2006).
Old Spaces, New Spaces

In my pre-edublogging days, my music analysis courses were largely lecture-based. Music theoretical concepts and analytical methods were taught in face-to-face sessions, which included some hands-on analysis, supplemented with homework assignments. The musical examples examined were pre-selected for the students based on the topics to be covered and according to the level of difficulty deemed appropriate at each stage of the learning; the repertoire was essentially that of Western art music. At the end of the course, the students were assessed through a class test as well as a final analysis paper based on a piece of classical music chosen by the students themselves.

When I started to incorporate blogging into the teaching of the course, I explored a variety of approaches. Table 1 gives an overview of the different strategies employed over the years and the nature of blog activities.

Table 1: Edublogging strategies employed in the past

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Blog ownership</th>
<th>Blogging tasks</th>
<th>Blog interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First-year cohort 1</td>
<td>Individual-owned</td>
<td>Music analysis, composition,</td>
<td>Peer response (incl. peer assessment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Jan 05)</td>
<td></td>
<td>critical reading, mini-research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-year cohort 2</td>
<td>Group-owned</td>
<td>Group project that involved research,</td>
<td>Peer discussion within group and between groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Jul 05)</td>
<td></td>
<td>music analysis and composing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-year cohort 3</td>
<td>Individual-owned with teacher’s blog</td>
<td>Analysis of two pieces of music</td>
<td>Peer response earned extra credit (some students added tag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Aug 06, Jan 07)</td>
<td>serving as class ‘portal’</td>
<td>(students’ choice)</td>
<td>boards to their blogs)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
<pre><code>                                                             | Mini analysis project for semester  | Some ad hoc responses from students’ personal friends         |
                                                             | two                                  |                                                                  |
</code></pre>
First-year cohort 4  
(Aug 07, Jan 08)  
Individual-owned  
with teacher’s blog  
serving as class  
‘portal’  
Analysis of two  
pieces of music for semester one  
Analysis of one piece  
of music for semester two  
Peer response  
(including,  
unexpectedly, from ex-students)  
Peer evaluation  
(stipulated)  
For semester two,  
students were grouped  
and took turns to blog  
due to the increased  
class size

First-year cohorts 5  
(Aug 08)  
Individual-owned  
with teacher’s blog  
serving as class  
‘portal’  
Analysis of one piece  
of music  
Students paired to do  
peer response  
(evaluation) but are  
encouraged to respond  
to others as well

Third-year cohorts  
1 & 2 (Aug 07, Aug 08)  
Individual-owned  
(from year one for  
cohort 2; new for  
cohort 1 as they had  
used a group blog in  
their year 1)  
Music analysis  
project  
Peer response

In general, students were asked to upload their assignments onto either a class-group blog or their individual-owned blogs. Besides their music analyses and the accompanying analytical commentaries, the posted items at times also included short musical compositions to demonstrate their music-theoretical understandings. In addition, students were either encouraged or required to comment on one another’s blogs and, depending on the cohort and the nature of the blogging task, to engage in peer assessment. In all cases, the teacher participated in the blog discussion where appropriate or necessary. With the third-year cohorts, the students were required to log in their slightly more extensive music research projects on their individual blogs; the project assignment here was circumscribed to augment what was taught in class. Interim findings, thoughts in progress, and eventually the
consolidated findings were all posted on the students’ blogs for peer sharing and teacher facilitation. Again, peer response was part of the “game”.

Learning in Edu-blogosphere: Some General Benefits

Blogs offer students a convenient platform to share, and many of the students appeared keen to do so (a common psychological trait of many bloggers), the mandatory nature of the blog assignment notwithstanding. This is particularly evident when they blogged about the music they liked. One sees them keenly telling their fellow students about their favourite song (“my all-time favourite”) or band (“one of my fav [sic] bands ever”, “[ ] is the reason that got me started on the guitar”). In other cases, it was a recently-watched movie theme song, a friend’s recommendation or even the father’s often-played oldie. Occasionally, there were one or two students whose choice was more musically motivated (interest in the “close harmonies” or the “surprises’ happening in the music”, for example). Whatever the reason, the sense of personal connection with or interest in the music chosen and hence a certain motivation to analyze it and to share was quite palpable. I suspect this must have, to varying extent, aided the completion of, if not also added a pleasure element to, what was normally not the most popular of music assignments.

Admittedly, the “public” space of blogs brought on a certain degree of self-consciousness, as evidenced in the students’ feedback. But far from inhibiting the students (in fact, a number of students expressed that they felt more comfortable “speaking” in cyberspace than in real space), it “forced” at least some to think of how to properly articulate their thoughts or understanding. One third-year student revealed in her survey how blogging made a difference to the way she did her term paper: “I had to consciously make sure my posts are more well written, compared to me just jotting down notes or doing drafts on my
own.” Blogging, then, became a form of exercise in clarity of thought and articulation—
“thinking by writing” (Nardi et al., 2004)—and it built in this aspect of learning more subtly
than would a traditional paper assignment: students perhaps felt more “obliged” to express
themselves clearly to their peers than to their teacher, not least because there were times
when fellow students sought for clarification after reading the initial post. The benefit of this
exercise is obvious, as one student testified: “having to explain to my friends what I make of
it [the music] is helpful, as it in turn makes me understand things at a deeper level”.

There was an interesting underlying factor that motivated peer learning. The students’
desire to share on one side of the dialogue was matched by an equal “nosy” interest on the
responding end. Beyond the satisfying of general curiosities, there were actually music-
learning benefits gained. From blog comments, students “learn[ed] how the rest of my peers
perceive[d] the same song in a way which I have never thought of;” through reading other
blogs, they cherished amongst other things the exposure to the broad range of music
discussed—English Pop, Mandarin-Pop, Canto-Pop, J-Pop, K-Pop, Christian Contemporary,
Garage Band music on the one hand, and the film music and musicals on the other—all these
through the “free and easy” way (as one student put it) of reading and commenting on one
another’s blogs. The students’ survey feedback strongly reflected their appreciation of this
enriching “ear”-opening opportunity.

Against the backdrop of educators’ current emphasis on developing students’ critical
thinking and their ability to negotiate ambiguities or differences, we note another educational
potential of blogging as implicated by one survey response: “Reading my friends’ comments
helps me see that different people view things differently.” As far as responding is concerned,
it is worth bearing in mind that students may be more likely to respond to or even challenge
peer opinion than if the ideas come from the teacher, whom they typically regard to be
knowledgeable and authoritative: statements like “I’m kind of wondering why Dr. Chong
hears the 2nd phrase differently” are as yet few and far between (and even in this case, one notes the cautious tone). Nonetheless, one student have said that “I have learnt to think critically in response to comments from other people, apart from my own lecturer.” For another student, the differing views “make me re-examine my assumptions and suppositions, and reveal misconceptions I otherwise may not have discovered.” With peer assessment, one student reported that it “forces me to constantly reassess my understanding of fundamental concepts and provides reinforcement for my learning.”

In sum, the sharing and interactive affordances of blogging can be seen to have augmented both the motivating factor and the personal learning for the students. Many of them, in their survey responses, indicated their recognition and enjoyment of this interaction. It was, as one student expressed, “a great joy to have responses to your blog.” One can well imagine the assuring effects each time a phrase like “I agree with you that …” appeared in the comments. Other peer remarks are even more complimentary:

i like the way u talk about the ‘chords seesaw[ing]’ around V, vi and IV, implying hesitation. Never thought about it that way. cool!

Such affirmation and encouragement can easily engender enthusiasm to do the music-analytical assignment. In one instance, a somewhat tangential question asked out of curiosity prompted the student asked to do some additional research and eventually to respond at some length in a separate blog entry (as opposed to giving a brief reply under “Comments”).

Given the attractive gains of such interactivity and of peer sharing, not surprisingly many students remained generally positive towards the blogging exercise despite some complaints that it had been time-consuming in some respects (e.g. scanning and uploading musical excerpts, dealing with technical glitches, reading other blogs, and so forth). It may be
noted that such complaints surfaced much less with later student cohorts—a reflection perhaps of the increasing level of IT-competence of the net-generation, not to mention too the increasing user-friendliness of technology and software.

Musical learning Transformed

Having noted some general benefits concerning motivation, self-reflective and peer learning (on how to take advantage of and enhance the motivational potential of blogging, please see Chong, 2006b), let us now examine more closely the nature of the musical learning itself to see the additional impact of blogging. In a conventional paper assignment or test for music analysis, the analytical interpretation is typically illustrated succinctly using music-analytical symbols. As can be seen in Example 1, such answers are better at revealing any mistakes than what the student actually understands or does not understand.

Example 1: An example of student work in a typical music analysis assignment

![Example of student work in a typical music analysis assignment](image)

Just as with a subject like mathematics for example, a correct answer alone does not necessarily mean that the student fully understands the mathematical workings and the underlying principles that lead to the answer. With music analysis (and this is of course equally true of mathematics), when there is an accompanying analytical commentary or
explanation, it is generally more revealing of the students’ actual depth of understanding. But there is still a noticeable difference between what and how students write such answers, so to speak, on their blogs compared to in a conventional written submission. This is where blogging can potentially make a difference to the musical learning (apart from the fact that it also serves the teacher’s assessment purposes).

In a more formal assessment context, students understandably express themselves in a more matter-of-fact impersonal manner, stating what they know as the answer; and if they don’t know, they may put in a guess answer or leave it blank. Contrast this with this blog entry:

This is also where I have problems doing the Roman numeral analysis for this particular bar. For example at bar 12, I would expect a sort of sequence similar to the previous bar. However there is a surprise created when the D half-dim 7th chord occurred, when I’m expecting just a D-dim chord for example. Also when the C-major chord occurred – I would expect an Eb chord instead. This will be a good case whereby the composer surprises the listener by playing around with the expectation of the listener.

On the uploaded musical excerpt, the student left three of the chords in the bar in question unanalyzed, but in his textual commentary quoted above, one hears him thinking aloud. We see him actively applying his current knowledge to make sense of the music at hand and it is evident that for him, musical knowledge does translate into musical expectation. Having “wrestled” with this musical problem to such an extent and actually articulated his mental argument, one can well imagine how his learning was augmented and made more meaningful.
when the teacher in this case (since no peer suggestion was forthcoming) gave him pointers to deal with the analytical difficulty.

Clearly, the informal atmosphere of blogging can encourage students to, perhaps naturally or unconsciously, articulate their musical thinking more casually—far more than they would in a conventional paper submission (or in class discussion, for that matter). Of course, this “natural” space for students to think aloud more freely and perhaps more extensively is aided by the 24/7 access of the internet, which needless to say does not restrict when they may blog and for how long. Students have testified that blogging offered them “more time to think and formulate ideas” and they certainly appreciated the less-constrained time and opportunity for “in-depth analytical discussion” (in comparison with class discussion). Ultimately, one significant impact of blogging here lies in its fostering of more sustained and hopefully deeper engagement with the subject—a gain for which it is well worth bearing with the occasional verbosity on the part of certain students.

This kind of engagement in turn leads to another equally important learning benefit—metacomprehension, or awareness of one’s own understanding. As language educators have long recognized, students’ comprehension should not be confused with their metacomprehension; it is metacomprehension that is the important prerequisite for effective learning (Standiford, 1984). In our blogging context, the necessity to share in a way “forces” the students to be more self-reflective and to “confront” their own understanding, thereby leading them to metacomprehension. The survey remark that in the process of blogging, “I realize there are certain concepts that I still haven’t quite grasped fully yet” is probably quite representative of many of the students’ learning experience even if many had not explicitly indicated this in their feedback.

Now, the “inviting” informality of blog makes it a great ally to metacomprehension. When difficulties were encountered or when they are unsure of their own understanding,
students could (and seemed more ready to) voice it out and “publicly” seek help from their peers:

I am not sure how correct this is.

Not even definite my chordal analysis is correct.

But based on my analysis, this song doesn’t seem to follow the standard chord function of T – PD – D – T. Instead its introduction has more of T – D – PD – T.

I have a feeling my analysis has some mistakes. HELP!!

In such situations, there would normally be students ready to extend their helping hand—and this would be deemed as “legitimate help” that is in fact being encouraged. Of course, there will be occasions for the teacher to step in when it is apparent that the problem proves too challenging for the students to handle. But on the whole, such “public” appeals and their responses signify that the learning of music analysis can be a more collaborative and interactive affair, as opposed to a solitary one. Even more, this can be a step towards transforming the traditional class into a community of learners ready to embark on a collaborative learning journey (Chong, 2008).

Blogging, or more specifically, working in cyberspace, added yet another exciting dimension to the students’ experience of music analysis. Previously, their analytical purview was very much limited to the hardcopy score at hand, any available CD recordings, and perhaps their own performance of the piece. Now, given the rich and easily-accessible resources on the internet, blogging opens the gateway for them to conveniently harness the additional materials both for their own analytical purposes as well as to in turn share with their friends. YouTube videoclips (www.youtube.com) and the like have now become almost a standard feature of the students’ blog presentation of their analyses; one student even found a ringtone version of the music she needed. All these meant that the music listening
dimension can be more conveniently integrated into the process of analyzing music. Not only that, with the multiple versions of the same piece being available—whether of different performances, arrangements, or cover versions—there is much that may be learnt in the process of comparing them.

To illustrate (first on the less significant end of the continuum): one student had chosen a popular Christian chorus and found two Youtube recordings. However, it was not until he found a third one, which included the verse, that he discovered the score he was using for his analysis had omitted the verse. More significantly, for another student, the availability of an online video-recording of a particular Chinese-minority dance informed her interpretation of her choice piece, which was in part inspired by this folk genre. In the pre-Internet age, such materials would have been hard to come by. Now, especially in an age where composers are increasingly crossing boundaries to draw upon an ever-expanding range of musical cultures and traditions, music analysis has never been so challenging, yet equally enabled, at least in this one respect of access to relevant primary materials. As it turned out, this student was also able to obtain useful information from the composer’s website; she only stopped short of e-mailing the composer himself.

There is perhaps a less obvious but no less significant benefit of bringing music analysis into blogosphere. On many of the students’ personal blogs, their music analysis postings were juxtaposed with their other more personal postings, music-related and otherwise. On the musical front, they have for example, blogged on their concert experiences or uploaded their own musical performances. On the non-musical front, they blogged about personal events from the mundane to the more significant. Such juxtaposition, to my mind, constitutes a subtle but significant step towards getting music analysis integrated into their musical lives, if not their lives in general. Vis-à-vis the objectives of the course, it is certainly pleasing to note instances of students connecting music analysis with their other musical
activities. Initially, this was not common practice, so that one student from an earlier cohort felt the need to justify: “Haha.. I know I’m digressing from what I’m supposed to post in this blog, but this is related to music right?” She then proceeded, saying “I’ll try to keep this as short as possible =D”:

As you might have guessed, I attended this concert yesterday …during the encore. I noticed he basically make use of non-harmonic tones such as chromatic passing notes & neighbour notes to play with our expectation - i.e. the tendency to resolve was heightened by the usage of this chromatic p.n., but he keeps delaying the arrival of such resolution, thus creating the feel of musical suspense as well as musical joke in a sense.

In another post a year later, amidst her various regular music and non-music related postings, her sharing of her music-listening experience suggests that the music analysis course has rubbed off on her to some extent:

was quite moved by a piece titled "Snow.Wolf.Lake" or otherwise known as "love is forever" sang by Dick today at rehearsal . . . the music and harmonies are basically quite repetitive . . . but it does feel good with the words . . . (italics added)

Another ex-student made similar observations that, though were not of the same degree of analytical detail or depth as she would for an analysis assignment, likewise suggest that she has at least adopted a somewhat analytical mode of music listening and that she was keen to share:

Take a listen to Abba's "Gimme, Gimme, Gimme (A man after midnight)" (1979) and Madonna's "Hung Up" (2005), and what do you notice? Almost immediately, you
notice this distinct *flute riff that frames both songs*. This riff was originally associated with Abba's music. (italics added)

Watching the documentary on the making of Psycho that accompanied the DVD, it showed the shower murder scene with and without the music, and really, it makes a difference to the whole atmosphere created. *The music is so simple, just screeching high strings, yet it's so effective.* (italics added)

More recently, she vented on her blog her frustration of hitting a mental block for her composition assignment for another course, but at one point she realized amongst other things that “It is in moments like these that I am grateful for the classes in theory and analysis.” And it so happened that one of her fellow students read her post and put in an encouraging comment for her.

Given such manifestations, especially those occurring after the course, one wonders if it is perhaps not over-zealous to think that it was the juxtaposition of music amidst general blogging that, at some level, subtly fostered the nascent kind of ‘becoming’ (Wenger, 1998) seen above, where analyzing music is no longer just an academic exercise, but an act assimilated into their daily musical activities. True, the music course here is not primarily aimed at turning every student into a professional music theorist or analyst, but if analytical listening becomes a natural part of their general musical behaviour (which is one of the ultimate aims of the music analysis course), then it represents a invaluable change in their musical identity. When that happens, it can then be “passed on” through peer influence in the course of blog interactions so that interest in music analysis is “caught”, not “taught”—and from peers instead of from the teacher.
Implications for Teachers

We have noted that in the blog environment, students appeared to find it more natural or conducive to open up—to elaborate on their musical thinking as they presented their music analyses, voice their uncertainties, and seek help more readily. That blogging caters well to their desire to share and to “peep” into their peers’ musical minds so to speak further helped promote active learning in music analysis—both self-reflectively and through peer learning. The internet on which blogging took place has also augmented in beneficial ways the resources students had at their fingertips: beyond print materials and commercial recordings, they now have at their disposal a much larger corpus of information, sound and video materials to inform their music analytical interpretation, not forgetting too the resource persons reachable via the internet. But perhaps most invaluably, this teacher-initiated injection of musical inquiry into the otherwise personal sphere of blogging has the potential of helping students achieve the state of “becoming” a thinking musician whereby they eventually engage in music analytical thinking as a natural part of their general musical activities rather than engage in music analysis only for academic purposes.

Without doubt, the success of such blogging for a specific educational purpose does hinge on the role of the teacher. Let us be mindful that “digital comfort” does not equate with “technology proficiency” (Oblinger, 2008): students uploading or hyperlinking on their blogs a wide range of internet materials and sources does not mean they know how to take full advantage of the knowledge content. As one net-generation learner himself warns, “Today’s students may believe they can learn solely on the Internet, but they cannot” (Windham, 2005). In my experience, the students, at their stage of the learning, were often not able to fully understand or, in some cases, see the potential relevance of the materials they have found (which is, of course, just as true with the handling of print materials in the “old” world
of learning). Nor were they always capable of raising the level of academic discussion on their blogs. Teacher’s facilitation is necessary.

In short, as teachers, we not only need to design the edublogging space and journey, we also need to step into that edu-blogosphere ourselves to participate (Chong, 2006a). Along the way, we seek to sensitively and subtly transform their net behaviour as much as their experience in music analysis. And if at the end of the day, we can have students say that “It’s been fun doing these blogging assignments” (which was exactly what one student said), or better yet, that “I feel that I have benefitted quite a lot from blogging” (said by a weaker member of one class), then I believe we have taken a right direction with our edublogging approach for a relatively unattractive subject like music theory and analysis. And if there are signs of “becoming,” then it would be more than what any music analysis teacher can wish for with one semester of teaching!

References


