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Blogging in Music Teaching:  
Engaged Learning beyond Classroom and Disciplinary Boundaries

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Abstract

The potential for blogging to engage and hence motivate students in their learning is increasingly being recognized by educators worldwide. At the school level, as a form of online publishing, blogging naturally lends itself well to the teaching of subjects such as languages. In this paper, I shall propose to appropriate it for music teaching.

It is true that in music, performing and composing activities are inherently engaging for the students; the same may be argued for music listening. However, if we wish to move beyond the basic level of listening for pleasure to the more enriched level of informed attentive listening, it is often a challenge to sustain students' interests in the knowledge needed to inform their listening and to engage them in close listening. Capitalizing on the reflective and interactive nature of blogging and based on two previous pilot projects on blogging in music teaching, I shall suggest some ways of using blogging to create an online learning community embarked on various individual and group tasks—at times interdisciplinary in nature—to enhance their music listening experience. Two pedagogical maxims are identified and discussed.

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Educational weblogs (or edublog, in short) are now fast becoming part of the educational landscape of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since the advent of weblogs in the 1990s, there has been an exponential growth of bloggers worldwide. Within the span of less than a decade, from its humble beginning as a personal webpage for logging in other webpages that are of interest to the blogger (Barger, 1997), weblog has transformed into a web journal that has the potential to facilitate personal learning and serious academic research (Mortensen & Walker, 2002; Wrede, 2003). Educators were certainly quick to seize upon its potential (Oravec, 2002; Bartlett-Bragg, 2003; Vaille, 2003a & 2003b; Davies, 2004; Hastings, 2004; Soo, 2004; Williams & Jacobs, 2004; Lewis, 2005). In Singapore, some teachers have already jumped on the bandwagon (see, for example, EduBlog.NET - <http://edublog.net/>). In this paper, backed by two pilot studies, I shall propose to appropriate it for music teaching.

It is true that in music, performing and composing activities are inherently engaging for the students; the same may be argued for music listening. However, if we wish to move beyond the basic level of listening for pleasure to the more enriched level of informed attentive listening, it is often a challenge to sustain students' interests in acquiring the knowledge needed to inform their listening and to engage them in close listening. How then can we engage our students in this higher-order music listening and learning? After distilling two maxims from two pilot studies, I shall suggest some

ways in which we may use blogging as a teaching/learning tool to engage our general music students, ultimately to enhance their music listening experiences—and one that not only takes them beyond the classroom walls but also beyond the disciplinary boundaries of music, so that music is seen not as an isolated subject but as an integral part of human culture.

### **From Blogging to Engaged Learning**

For our “information-age” students—the generation who enjoys Internet connectivity and interactivity and for whom computers are no longer “technology” as they are for the “industrial age” generation (Frاند, 2000)—it is obvious why blogging would appeal to them. Blogging is one of the many cyberspace experiences that are increasingly becoming part of their daily lives: learning through blogging fits in well with the digitally-based culture they are used to. For educators, this opens up new avenues to engage students in their learning. As one advocate sums up more broadly:

Technology affords educators with new ways to present course content that is no longer text only, paper constrained, linearly organized and visually flat. Engaged learning can borrow from the *interactive* and *community-based activities* prevalent on the Internet. The use of gaming, role-playing, **blogging**, instant messaging and chat coupled with multimedia modalities that address multiple learning styles has the capacity to stimulate today’s technology savvy learners. (Metros, 2004; italics and bold print added)

The italicized words highlight the two key elements which enable technology—that of weblog in our case—to engage learners. But these inherent qualities in themselves are insufficient to ensure success. Graham Lewis from the Centre of Academic Practice, University of Warwick, astutely remarks that “Technologies popular for casual uses do not make the transition to being learning tools, without a lot of effort on the part of teachers” (Lewis, 2005). In other words, educators who wish to take advantage of technology must not only understand the nature of the learning tool, but must also know how to realize and maximize its educational potential.

### **Findings from two pilot studies**

Two pilot projects were conducted in 2005 at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University (Singapore), to test the efficacy of using blogging as an instructional strategy in music teaching. The first project (Chong & Soo, 2005a) involved a group of six undergraduate students enrolled in a second-semester music analysis module; the study focused on whether or not higher-order learning can be facilitated by blogging. The students were given a series of six blogging tasks designed to motivate higher-order thinking in music; they were required to post their responses on their individually-owned blogs and to respond to one another’s postings. The second project (Chong & Soo, 2005b), involving a different group of students from a first-semester music analysis class, aimed at fostering a higher level of collaborative work by having the series of blogging tasks culminate in a group-produced information booklet or website. A group-owned blog was used this time and

the learning focus shifted to focusing on application and integration of knowledge and skills in music history, theory and composing.

Both studies affirmed that blogging can help establish a constructivist learning environment, encouraging students to take more responsibility for their own learning and to learn from one another, besides learning from the teacher. It, in effect, extends the learning space as this collaborative form of knowledge construction took place outside of the curricular time and the classroom. An analysis of the students' blog discourse revealed that critical reflection, higher-order thinking, and synthesis of knowledge did take place to varying extent for individual students. The students' survey feedbacks were encouragingly positive despite some initial frustrations with certain technical problems. Particularly revealing of the level of engagement is the often lengthy and detailed entries and a generally enthusiastic tone; one of the blogging tasks even motivated one student to listen to a particular piece of music "over and over again" (which is of course very pleasing for the teacher to note).

### **Two maxims**

In sum, the lessons learnt from the above two studies may be encapsulated into two maxims:

#### **Maxim 1 – Allow students to take ownership**

Experienced educators know that when students take ownership of their learning, half the battle is won. To achieve this, it is important that the blogging assignments be meaningful to the students (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004). Of course, we must also cater to our curricular goals: while it would be good to have assignments that relate to students' daily lives or appeal to them, we don't want to lose sight of the essential learning in our subject area. When striking this crucial balance, we can nonetheless enhance the appeal of the learning task by giving students options within the defined scope. For example, in the second project, the topic was pop music or musicals (which in themselves tend to have a more immediate appeal than western classical music), and each group is allowed to choose any composer from within either of these two music traditions. For one of the assignments in the first project, students were asked to compare the western scale system taught in class with a non-western one—again of their own choice, thereby allowing individual students to explore their own ethnic musical culture if they wish.

The element of ownership extends to the ownership of the blogsites. In the first study, the students were given their individual blogs to manage, including the option to change the "skin" of their blogs. In the second, though we switched to a class-owned community blog, there is still another sense of ownership retained in that the students took responsibility for what they had posted since their fellow students would be reading and querying them. And if a particular issue grabs them (which did happen), the ensuing discussion no longer appears to be a teacher-assigned task but one which concerns them more personally or as a group. This, of course, is the ultimate goal: to have the students see the assigned task as something they would have liked to embark on themselves anyway.

**Maxim 2** –The teacher needs to be involved throughout

Actually, the teacher's role is already implicated in the first maxim; recall also Lewis's remark above. The importance of crafting the right blogging tasks to achieve the intended learning cannot be over-emphasized (in this connection, the teacher needs to be aware of the role played by the weblog [Wrede, 2003]). Left on their own, students may blog on trivia or matters totally unrelated to the subject in question; or, they may go through the motion of blazing "surftrails" (Mortensen, 2002; see anecdote in Frand, 2000: 22) for others to read without digesting the materials themselves. The teacher certainly need to pose specific questions or raise pertinent issues to some extent, and, where necessary, to also provide forms of scaffolding. For example, in one of the assigned blogging tasks aimed at fostering higher-order learning, certain basic concepts were taught first and reading articles selected and prescribed, then guiding questions were given to help students synthesize and apply what they had learnt and read.

But the teacher's role does not end with the designing phase, her involving in the implementation process is equally more important. The level of teacher involvement here will obviously depend on the age and maturity of the students, but in most circumstances, because the teacher is likely to be ahead of the students in their understanding of the subject and know what the learning objectives are, she is in a better position to step in when necessary to ensure that learning takes place and in the direction intended (of course, allowing for sufficient leeways). This can come in various forms:

- clarifying any misconception
- answering queries which are beyond the students
- giving just-in-time input
- asking leading questions when the discussion seems to be heading nowhere or in the wrong direction
- asking probing questions to stimulate further thoughts or higher-order thinking

Finally, it should be noted that for all these to take place successfully, the teacher needs to establish a positive attitude towards the use of ICT in the first place (lest there be students who harbour resistance) as well as foster a collaborative frame of mind in the students. In order not to disrupt the constructivist environment desired, the teacher may need to put down her role as instructor at times and assume the personae of an ordinary member of that learning community to facilitate the collaborative learning process. In other words, any teacher intervention should be as unobtrusive and minimal as possible so that the entire blog-based learning endeavour can be as student-led as possible, which of course takes us back to our first maxim.

**Blogging ideas for the music classroom**

Capitalizing on the reflective and interactive nature of blogging and based on the two maxims distilled from our previous research findings, I shall suggest some ways of designing blogging threads to create an online learning community for our general

music class, be it at the primary or secondary levels. The ultimate goal is to enhance their musical listening; secondarily, it is to situate music within a broader cultural context to help students see music as an integral part of their lives and of the society they live in.

#### Blogging thread 1: My personal top-of-the-charts

This can be a useful first blogging thread—very much in the original spirit of blogging—giving the teacher great insights into the musical preferences of her students. Students would be keen to share with the class their favourite pieces of music which, needless to say, should not be restricted to only certain kinds of music; hyperlinks for sample listening can be provided if available (with due respect to copyrights). Besides having them list their personal top 10s, the teacher can further ask them to say briefly what appeals to them in the case of each song. And to encourage students to read one another's postings, they can be urged to give their comments and perhaps recommend similar pieces to their fellow students; in the process, they can easily look for like-minded listeners to do group projects together later on.

#### Blogging thread 2: Music reviews

This would be a kind of reflective journal type blog, encouraging students to write about their response to music heard either at a live performance (at a public concert venue or simply in school) or on the radio or TV or even on a CD. Again, pointers may be given as to whether the responses should focus on the music itself or the performance or both; this can also very easily tie in with what has been taught in class, asking students specific questions such as:

- How is the mood of the piece established?
- What is the metre of this piece?
- Is there an ostinato element in the piece? Is it rhythmic, melodic and/or harmonic? Which are the instruments involved?
- For songs, are there interesting ways in which the singer(s) uses her voice?
- Is there an improvisatory element? How is this done?
- How would you use letters to represent the structure of the piece?

Of course, the depth of listening here would in part depend on whether the music can be listened to repeatedly. To add more substance to the review, the students can be asked to do a certain amount of research on the piece or the composer or the performer(s), and, again to be true to the nature of blog as a genre characterized by hyperlinks, the students can include relevant links to useful sources of information with their own comments added. Needless to say, mutual response should again be encouraged here.

#### Blogging thread 3: Concert-outing

Increasingly, in Singapore, schools are organizing trips for students to attend performances of various sorts. It would be a shame if the learning opportunity here is not maximized. One useful approach would be to engage the students in some preparatory work so that they can later listen with better understanding after acquiring

some relevant background information. Again, this groundwork can be as specific or as general as the teacher deems fit. For example, if this is going to be the students' first experience of Wayang Kulit, it will be helpful to know something about the history and tradition of this genre, which naturally relates to the South-East Asian history that they may have studied. Or, if the programme involves fusion of various musical traditions, the students can be grouped to explore the individual tradition separately and share their findings and understandings on the class blog so that they can later respond to the musical fusion in a more informed manner. If it is feasible, the teacher may even invite the performers or organizers concerned to participate in the class blog discussion—imagine how exciting it is for the students to interact with performers whom they will be watching or have watched!

#### Blogging thread 4: Topical research

Here the teacher can draw upon the observations in thread 1 to determine suitable topics and select pieces of music. Of course, a balancing act is again called for here as we strive to cater to the students' likes yet seek to broaden their musical horizons. At the same time, the opportunity is certainly there for the teacher to make connections with other subject areas, for example, to explore musical impressionism and its art counterpart, or discuss a literary text (e.g. Romeo and Juliet) and musical works inspired by it. Or, in a different vein, she can assign students to listen closely and comparatively to different cover versions of a pop song and understand this in the context of the performance practice of popular music; this can then be usefully contrasted with, say, the western Baroque tradition of parody and the twentieth-century brand of Neoclassicism—for each of these cases, we situate the phenomenon more broadly within the cultural milieu of the tradition in question. Now, all these may appear daunting at first glance, but we need to bear in mind that the content involved is not meant to be solely delivered by the teacher, rather, these are suggested research areas marked out for the students to explore under guidance. And, to ensure that the learning is not just book knowledge, the teacher can always direct the students to do certain listening or even composing, the results of which may be shared on the class blog. One is often surprised at how far our students are prepared to go once they are motivated; the teacher's role then is to steer that enthusiasm and energy to achieve the learning broadly intended.

#### **“Innovative Educators + Quality Pedagogy + ICTs = Engaged Learners”**

The above tagline from the eTeacher website owned by Helen Hall (<http://www.eteachers.com.au/News/2004/03August/03Aug.html>) perhaps best encapsulates the underlying thrust of this paper. Our two maxims for success relate to “quality pedagogy”—the first calls for using the sense of ownership to motivate learning, the second concerns the role of the teacher. The ICT in this case is weblog technology, the activity a form of online engagement that is fast becoming a way of life for many netizens. The third element is the educator who is willing to take up the challenge of meeting the “information-age” generation at where they are in order to engage them in learning. Dyed-in-the-wool bloggers or purists may object that edublog—assigned blogging in the school—is not authentic practice (discussed in Downes, 2004; see also his online response to Wrede, 2003), but perhaps they might

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be less critical and more sympathetic to our cause if they recognize the educational benefits the modified form affords.

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