

Online Music Education: The Fuel Education Virtual Choir Project

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Abstract. Music theory, vocal pedagogy and composition although important, are not enough for a well-rounded k-12 virtual music education. The virtual choir project provides an outlet for performance and a way for students to apply these concepts in a practical way. This paper shows how a virtual choir can meet the needs of online students who suffer from isolation and need creative outlets and offers a general course design.

Keywords. Incubation theory, k-12 virtual music instruction, virtual choir, online course design

1 Introduction

Distance Education (DE) for k-12 students has expanded greatly over the past decade. Many parents cite bullying as one of the main factors for why they chose an alternative educational route for their children [1]. Students can take almost any subject offered in a traditional school setting online. K12 and Fuel Education a division of K12, offer kindergarten through twelfth grade online music classes through a historical and theory-based approach with some elements of performance included [2]. In the past, virtual schools have offered a Music and Arts Recital to allow students a chance to showcase their artwork and music abilities. For the last five years, Fuel Education has also sponsored similar recitals to support “Music in Our Schools Month (MIOSM)” [3]. Students have shown great excitement to see other students’ musical accomplishments and artwork and expressed a desire to see more of these types of performance opportunities [4]. Students taking an online music course are often isolated and need ways to receive public acknowledgement of their work. This paper will show why the virtual choir course project is a way to fulfill these needs of online k-12 music students and will show a general overview of a course design. In addition, a trial version was launched in the fall of 2016 using live synchronous sessions.

2 Virtual Choir Research

The music professional learning community (PLC) at K12 decided to do research on starting a virtual choir to address online students' performance needs. A similar type of choir was started by Eric Whitacre that Fuel Education hoped to emulate [5]. Claire Long who works with Eric Whitacre, Manager of Music Productions Ltd in England, offered to stand by with any advice as the virtual choir course was developed. These ideas were presented to the content specialist in charge of the live synchronous sessions offered in all subjects at Fuel Education. Thus, live synchronous lessons were initiated as a trial for the school year 16-17 that can serve as a basis to produce a virtual choir for high school students [6].

3 Organizational Content

K12 provides online instructional alternatives for k-12 students. This innovative company delivers "state-of-the-art digital learning platforms and technology" to students and schools across the world. K12 offers over four million courses and services a minimum of 2,000 schools and districts [7, para 1]. Fuel Education is one of K12's business lines that provides schools and districts with personalized educational solutions to support online and blended learning options. Fuel Education's mission is to help schools and districts "tap into the best of today's vast array of digital educational resources, tailor solutions for a variety of learning environments, and personalize learning to drive stronger student and district outcomes" [8, para. 1]. The client base consists of alternative learning high school students (Fuel Ed's Anywhere Learning System (ALS)), blended learning high school students (students who have some face to face but take online music courses), and homebound students, (high school students with medical or legal issues that are unable to go to a normal brick and mortar school) [9].

4 Problem Analysis

Online education can feel lonely at times. Research showed that humanizing the subject or course material could help students overcome this feeling of solitude and seclusion [10]. The virtual choir is a perfect way to 'humanize' music theory and give students skills and creative outlet to perform in a virtual setting. This type of performance opportunity helps to showcase students' talents in a safe, protected environment. Studies have shown that British artists did their best work alone with limited networking with other artists [11]. Online virtual students share these same characteristics as the British artists. High school students who are presently enrolled in a music course of some type will have the option of attending these live synchronous sessions. No prior musical knowledge is required as music basic theory will be reviewed and covered over the course of the class. This added course will provide a performance

element to the online music courses students are presently taking. The performance aspect will not be live but rather a culmination of recorded videos put together into one performance video recording.

Vocal exercises as well as vocal health are taught. This course mainly addresses the following national music standard: “Perform expressively, with appropriate interpretation and technical accuracy, and in a manner appropriate to the audience and context” [12, p. 4].

5 Target Population Analysis

High School students that take these courses are acquainted with online learning as each student is enrolled in at least one virtual music course and most likely many other core subjects. However, the level of music knowledge is varied. The basic design of the course will allow students to learn basic theory in various ways. For students who know nothing, each session is designed to review basic music theory. Furthermore, every lesson offers supplemental exercises through Flat. Flat is a music notation software that is used on the internet and not downloaded. Flat allows for a collaborative work space where students with lesser knowledge can learn from those who have more [13]. Each session is recorded, so students who have difficulties with the concepts can review the sessions and download the PowerPoint lessons for their own personal review.

6 Proposed Solution: Course Overview

One solution to humanizing the online music classroom is “The Virtual Choir: Introduction to Vocal Pedagogy and Basic Music Theory” course that incorporates sessions detailing the history of choirs and Eric Whitacre’s innovative Virtual Choir [5]. Eric Whitacre is a modern-day composer and conductor who has written many award-winning choral works. He gave a TED talk detailing the history and background on the virtual choir idea. “And I had this idea: if I could get 50 people to all do this same thing, sing their parts -- soprano, alto, tenor and bass -- wherever they were in the world, post their videos to YouTube, we could cut it all together and create a virtual choir” [5, para.2].

Music is meant to be experienced not just studied. Without students being able to experience the knowledge they’ve gleaned through studying music history and theory in a performance setting, their knowledge is incomplete. Monologic music is set in advance, which is the case with the virtual choir, and represents a single virtual musical statement [14]. Virtual schools such as the iAcademy, put on an annual “Celebration of the Arts” to showcase their students’ creative talents [2, para. 1].

A key component of social constructivism is the role of “collaboration” [15]. In the online course, basic music theory concepts are studied to allow students collaboration through Flat for specific online choral compositions. In addition, vocal health and

exercises provide a healthy background in best vocal practices. Students can access online tutorials and music that can be learned and in return record their own soundtracks to send in as part of the virtual choir presentation. In the initial trial semester, one instructor was involved and a few other music teachers helped to add to vocals and instrumentals. Ultimately, students will collaborate with their singing parts as they are all put together into one whole performance.

The virtual synchronous sessions provide tutorials on vocal exercises and vocal health. These lessons on vocal pedagogy give students information on how to protect their voices and practice properly. Students with more advanced knowledge have opportunities to excel through advanced part writing and singing solos. In addition, advanced students can write their own choral music and submit for use in the virtual choir.

7 Course Goals and Objectives

Goals include a review of basic music concepts and learning a virtual choir piece. Through the run of the course, students learn skills to successfully create a soundtrack through audacity or other software of their choice. In addition, students can write their own choral piece. Basic music theory lessons are included and woven into the collaborative learning space in Flat, where students can add, advise and build on each other's choral compositions [13]. This gives opportunities for students at all levels to participate and create a unique composition that can be used in the virtual choir performance.

8 Delivery Media Analysis

Synchronous and asynchronous media lessons are offered for students to attend and watch. Elluminate software delivers these sessions where students can attend and actively participate in live lessons. To accommodate students in all time zones across the US, asynchronous learning is available using recordings and the collaborative Flat workspace. A private library of videos showing students how to sing the various parts for a virtual song was available for students to access and listen to in their free time. These recordings showcase all voicings (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) needed for each virtual song. Once students felt a recording of their voice is complete they can email the instructor with the video. A drop box was created during the fall trial to house all demo tutorials, music, and student samples. This web 2.0 tool enabled both instructor and students to submit and download materials for the project.

9 Learning Design: Theoretical Background

To properly design a course, instructional designers must know learning theories and how they affect instruction. Karagiorgi and Symeou, advocate that constructivism has

been the leading theory of the last decade and support construction of knowledge by the individual [16]. As well, constructivist learning theories state that learners build their own knowledge in interactions with a community or environment. Instructional learning also grows through social interaction. Scaffolded learning is an explanation for when a more knowledgeable peer or mentor/teacher helps a learner to gain more knowledge until this support is not needed. The virtual choir course design utilizes constructivist learning theory in that students' prior knowledge of music and choirs is tapped and built on. Through the various live synchronous activities and before mentioned Flat exercises scaffolded learning can occur. Online Collaborative Learning Theory (OCL) is a framework that helps to define learning in the knowledge age. OCL emphasizes group online learning [15]. Group learning will occur not only during the live synchronous sessions, but in the discussion threads embedded in the Flat exercises.

10 Subject Matter Content

The virtual choir course contains materials that will teach students the fundamentals of vocal pedagogy, composition and music theory and culminate in a recorded vocal performance, as stated previously. Two weekly 'live' synchronous Elluminate Live! sessions will be offered and recorded for those students who are unable to attend the live lessons. The course content will be delivered through these live lessons as an activity rather than a course for the trial period.

11 Interaction and Motivation

Multiple activities will be incorporated into the virtual choir course to encourage student-student and student-teacher interaction. In a study done by Marcia Dixson it was determined that various ways of communication along with interaction between students and teachers were the defining points of high achievement [17].

During each live synchronous lesson, students have the opportunity to interact with the instructor and other students through chat and using the microphone. Students can write comments to one another in the Flat collaborative assignments as well as in the discussion threads.

12 Results After One Semester

Students were quite excited about the virtual choir activities in the fall months. Attendance was high at the beginning of the semester. There were many impromptu performances after each lesson was presented. One student played guitar and sang self-composed songs and another sang popular songs from various artists. Both students were recorded during the live synchronous sessions, which proved a challenge as far as mixing an end soundtrack for the first song. A madrigal was chosen as one of the first song choices. However, to help students see the possibilities for the spring semester, a modern original song written in a pop style was composed and used to create the first recorded performance. This song was created to showcase the few students interested in created a demo for future semesters. The fall semester's work was a trial that will be expanded to 6-12 children for the following semester. This first trial experiment will hopefully inspire more students to submit soundtracks for future recorded performances.

13 Conclusion

Music Theory, vocal pedagogy and composition although important, are not enough for a well-rounded k-12 virtual music education. Online students can suffer from isolation and have expressed the need for more group creative projects. The virtual choir project provides an outlet for performance and a way for students to apply these concepts in a practical, constructivist approach. Eric Whitacre's virtual choirs have shown how successful this model can be. As our world becomes more digitalized, it is important to include music performance aspects into the educational virtual realm. Fuel Education has shown how successful alternative forms of education can be. The virtual high school choir class is a fulfillment of an alternative musical digital education.

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