
Offline to Online Curriculum: A Case-Study of One Music Course

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Introduction

This case study offers distance administrators insight into some of the questions posed by faculty when attempting to transform a traditional or 'offline' course into an online mode. The article should help administrators understand faculty perceptions and offer a valuable training tool, by comparing the processes of delivering an offline course to its online counterpart.

The information herein provides a snapshot of a course conversion in progress. The task was for present instructors, administrators and instructional designers to work together, to transform an existing music course into an online mode. In the process, one goal of the administrators was to establish a methodology of approach within a micro-macro framework of project-procedure. A valuable by-product included the identification and the addressing of some of the issues faced by academics, in the course of action.

The Groundwork

In August 2000, the International College of Music (ICOM), began a feasibility project with the aim to explore e-learning possibilities at the institution. The following summarizes the various aspects of the feasibility study undertaken within a micro-macro framework of action, namely:

- Establishing the rationale and objectives
- Conducting an online readiness assessment (Marsch 2000) – overall analysis of key drivers and limitations
- Creating an infrastructure check-list – determining existing end-user connectivity, network capabilities, hardware and software availability and compatibility, technology gap assessment
- Conducting intra-departmental survey studies – operations, marketing (database of potential clients and competitors), human resources (management, administration, faculty), student-interest.
- Identifying strengths and weaknesses of available Learning Management Systems (LMS) – overview of their:
 - a. Clients' profile, experience and track record,
 - b. Applications Service Provider (ASP) - hosting and security specifications, technical and support services,
 - c. Marketing and consultancy services,
 - d. Price factor (initial set-up and maintenance costs)
 - e. Architecture System - Scalability and Integration level (development, installation, piloting, testing, deployment and delivery, tracking, change possibilities, success-failure analysis)
- Comparing costs and time factors – projections, justification, hidden and unforeseen costs
- Expansion of faculty and resource centre – engaging an e-learning co-ordinator
- Exploring types of instructional design, web-based training tools (authoring and multimedia) and technical training requirements (Hall, 1997).
- Identifying change methods and assessing the suitability of available course types – conversion, customisation or off-the-shelf courses

- Conducting a needs analysis on course conversion/transformation methodology in the curriculum and course pathways of the existing programmes, namely the Bachelor of Music (Hons) in Professional Music (majoring in Music Production & Technology) and Bachelor of Music (Hons) in Professional Music (majoring in Arranging).
- Selecting and converting an existing course onto an online mode of delivery (Phase 1)

Issues that Emerged

This section summarizes some of the issues that arose in the course of the Phase I exercise. I have attempted to provide plausible reasons for several of the views expressed as well as offered ideas as to the manner in which technological advances have addressed some of the concerns. The following statements highlight some common misconceptions and apprehension among academics at our institution, several of whom are new to online learning-teaching strategies. Other comments of note were expressed by some members of the audience at an e-learning seminar in Kuala Lumpur.

Quote 1: *"I'm not convinced that learning in front of a machine is better than face-to-face interaction."*

Responses: Dispelling Misconceptions

- There appeared to be a lack of understanding in the nature of self-directed learning in a virtual classroom as opposed to instructor-led learning in a physical environment although several academics were 'aware' of such new learning-teaching possibilities.
- Some academics believed that online learning aimed to 'replace' traditional classroom instruction, while in practice this form of self-directed learning has catered primarily to students with different learning needs and who are often dispersed over a large geographical area. Many are working adults who cannot attend classes during conventional teaching hours hence the virtual classroom has 'come to them' at a time and place of their convenience.
- There appeared to be a need to update academics on technological advances and possibilities (the concept of *online learning* is at times confused with the practice of lecturers who sometimes post their weekly lecture notes or assignments 'online'). For example, some academics were unaware that a synchronous 'face-to-face' meeting with students in a virtual classroom was possible. Hence for academics who strongly believed in the importance of visual contact with learners, a first hand experience with technology that enabled such 'face-to-face' visual interaction in a virtual classroom situation would represent an important aspect of faculty training. For others, visual contact may not necessarily be critical to learning as there are additional features to online learning such as chat, discussion boards, shared whiteboards, synchronised web browsing and application sharing as well as audio, visual and multimedia idioms to enhance the learning-teaching milieu.

Quote 2. *"My class is a two-hour weekly session over a period of fourteen weeks with a Mid-Term Exam and Final Exam at Week 7 and Week 14 respectively. Other weeks are interspersed with homework assignments. I can't see how self-paced learning can fit-in especially when it comes to scheduled exams. How will I be assured that the student didn't cheat in the test?"*

Responses part 1: Adapting Thought Processes - Redefining Time and Transferring Responsibility

- This issue is addressed at the micro and macro levels. Further reference is made to the Course Description (Table 2) to demonstrate the change-features of a course under the process of online conversion.
- At the micro level, some elements of the course description will necessarily need amendments with time-referenced terms such as 'weekly' topical outlines being changed to 'lesson' or 'modular' outlines. Learners progress (or are given access to the next lesson) after the outstanding assignments have been met and again this depends on the nature, scope and demands of the particular course.
- The time it takes to deliver a conventional lecture may not be necessarily equated with the time it takes for an 'average' learner to follow the navigational system with an aim to meet stated learning goals in an online environment. On understanding behaviour patterns of online students, John Hartnett of *Inside Technology Training* reveals that the retention rates of learners under computer based training modules 'plummet after about 45 minutes'. Bearing this observation in mind the virtual class will need to be highly structured with discrete units

of instruction to accommodate student feedback, queries, reinforcement and remediation in order to fulfil lesson objectives.

- At the macro-level an important feature of the transformation process is to review the role of time. In the design and execution of a conventional curriculum, time has been a powerful element in determining content. For example, credits accorded to courses have often been time-based and indeed entire conventional undergraduate programmes have been modelled on the number of credit units (or contact hours) students have to accumulate in order to graduate. In online delivery time is on the side of the learner. Taking this into consideration, the migration or transformation of existing courses may not be a suitable option for some types of courses. For this reason, some instructional designers and content writers recommend the customisation of particular online curricular to meet the needs of the new online learner.

Responses part 2: Assessment Dilemmas and a Shift to Competency-Based Evaluations

- At the micro-level, the assessment of the online learner has increasingly shifted to a competency-based form of evaluation. In line with the changing nature of the teaching-learning milieu, student achievement is measured by continual assessment through assignments rather than the traditional form of tests.
- As competency-based assessments become increasingly more effective and reflective of students' progress the physical culture of the examination hall 'testing' has become less significant in online academic evaluation. (Here it is to be noted that the online programmes referred to are not to be confused with some institutions that offer a combination of courses in both offline and online modes. Strictly speaking, online programmes refer to courses that are conducted entirely electronically without the student ever having to attend a physical plant in a campus environment, with the entire curriculum designed to meet the needs of the 'virtual student' from the time of enrolment to graduation).
- Online assessment demands a different approach to gauging knowledge acquired. Creditability and accountability have shifted to the learner. More and more, online 'testing' includes self-evaluative means of measuring knowledge acquired. Quizzes, puzzles and objective-style questions are increasingly found 'in-built' into a lesson as part of the curriculum designer's creative approach to stimulate learning. This is coupled with increasing use of advance multimedia (audio and visual) stimuli to enhance the communication process. As digital subscriber lines (DSL) or broadband becomes more widely available in South East Asia (Barret, 2001), the speed of connectivity becomes much faster than the dial-up speed of the 56K modem. Downloads of complex Web sites and large audio-visual files are instant once the browser is launched at the boot up of the computer. Technology has widened the form, type, speed, style and nature of communication. It is possible for the learner to submit assignments using just as creative means as the course was delivered.

Overview of Course Changes, Based on Comments

- In reviewing the assessment requirements of the curriculum in question (GM101), the following changes were made:
 - a. a. The Weekly Homework was changed to six listening and written Assignments (with questions designed in a manner that required critical writing upon listening through the audio file links provided). Weighting: 60%
 - b. b. The Mid-Term Examination was replaced by a Mid-Course Project Paper. Weighting: 20%
 - c. c. The Final Paper and Final Examination were combined to form the Final Project Paper, again with specific project guidelines. Weighting: 20%
- With reference to the course duration and timeline, the fourteen-lesson (previously referred to as 14 'weeks') schedule was maintained. The Mid-Course Project Paper was scheduled at Lesson 7 and the Final Project Paper was scheduled for Lesson 14. 3 homework assignments were to be submitted within the first half of the course and the remaining 3 assignments by the end of the course. All work were to be submitted online and marked according to set grading criteria and moderated by supervisors, if necessary.
- In addition, the subject matter of the 'weekly' topics remained largely intact but the text is enriched with additional information. For example, the topical outline for Week 5 or Lesson 5 as it is now called, includes research into the development of early jazz

forms. Websites links such as www.jazzonline.com, www.allaboutjazz.com and www.jazzreport.com provide additional information. Synchronous and asynchronous chat room communication and threaded discussions are encouraged between registered students but do not carry assessment marks. This is part of the process of encouraging interaction and self-regulation among the envisaged majority of adult learners without overburdening academic workload, the time being allocated to course development and review as discussed in the following point.

- To encourage greater participation by academics in curriculum development and to bridge the gap between the role of instructional designers and subject matter experts each module would require a faculty member to spend an allocated time towards course enhancement. Course instructors receive ongoing technology training and upgrading. Furthermore, each module is preceded by the ‘technology training toolkit’ which enables a registered learner to download required software, access relevant audio-visual aids and receive training in the use of web-based music notation software such as *Finale* (www.codamusic.com) and *Protools* (www.digidesign.com), which may be used to enhance course understanding. This technical requirement, designed at increasing levels of technical ability is regarded as a course ‘pre-requisite’ in order to fulfill related assignment and project requirements.
- Segments that were found needing little structural change were the course objectives and course description. Minor changes are envisaged as the conversion process assumes the next phase of development.

Further Concerns

Based on further comments noted in Table 2, concerns included the perceived marginalisation of academia in the transfer of technology, ethical issues involving the invasion of privacy and intellectual property ownership. Some commentators saw a need to establish trans-national copyright laws on the creation, production and dissemination of copyrighted-music on the internet. Others wanted increased research into peculiar linguistic problems and learning habits of Asian students, in order to decide if online learning is a good or bad for ICOM students in particular. In the end, many thought that encouraging a greater and more holistic participation in the integration of online instructional design, delivery and evaluation, could instill ‘new’ creativity in academics.

Table 1. Additional Concerns

Further quotes from participating ICOM faculty and seminar attendees.
<i>"What do you mean by 'content provider?' Who owns my notes thereafter and can anyone else simply teach the course?"</i>
<i>"Synchronous or asynchronous, I don't fancy being available 24-hours a day to answer my students' e-mail queries".</i>
<i>"What about music copyright issues especially in view of the recent judgement in the Napster's case?"</i>
<i>"I don't know enough about online learning, thus I don't know the problems until I know what technologies I am dealing with. There seems to be a whole new cyber language and pedagogical methodology evolving although I am uncertain if enough of us are involved".</i>
<i>"I see limitations in English Language proficiency as a major hindrance to Asian students interested in online learning. The machine cannot break into another language spontaneously when a learning difficulty is sensed".</i>
<i>"Anyway, how exciting is my class suppose to be online?"</i>

Phase I. Towards a Feasibility Prototype

In the end, the initial phase of this conversion exercise resulted in a comparative course description sheet that served as a working model for similar course types in the programme pathway. Other course types would require greater degrees of modification (example, instrumental instruction studies) while remaining courses may have to be replaced by music courses specifically developed for online delivery. Further procedures within this phase

includes the preparation of a blueprint document that will be used as a guide to effective course development for further verification and validation of the design and technology development. Formative evaluations in the form of alpha and beta tests (Conrad 2000) will commence in Phase II of this segment of the feasibility study. The following table illustrates the ‘transformed’ course description of General Music (GM) 101. It indicates the main differences between the offline and online modes of course delivery and suggests types of technological tools to enable change. In this manner major and minor change-requirements are noted between the two modes of course design and delivery patterns with an aim to establish a methodological pattern of change and ‘non-change’ across comparable course types.

Table 2. Comparison of off-line and on-line course features in GM101: Survey of Popular Music 1

Course Title: Survey of Popular Music 1 (GM101)		
Programme: Bachelor of Music (Hons) in Professional Music majoring in Music Production and Technology validated by the University of Westminster, London, UK.		
	Off-Line Mode	On-Line Mode
	Existing Features	Major/Minor Change Features
Course Level:	Foundation (Yr 1)	Foundation
Subject Type:	General Music	General Music
Subject Area:	Core	Core
Credits:	2	2
Duration:	14 weeks	Self-Paced Module (recommended time-range completion)
Contact Time:	28hrs @ 2hrs per wk	Varies; Self-Paced (facilitator support, chat, bulletin board, performance support, help desk etc)
Pre-requisites:	None	IT (Level 1)
Term Offered:	1	Upon request enrollment
Assessment Type & Weighting:	(a) <i>Homework</i> Weekly written and listening assignments (20%)	(a) <i>Assignments</i> Written Papers from choice of topics. Includes critical listening video evaluations [via installed plug-ins such as <i>Shockwave</i> and <i>RealAudio</i> , and animation & video files like <i>Quick Time</i> {Apple} created via studio software applications such as <i>Flash</i> . {Macromedia}. Submissions may include music notation examples created using software such <i>Finale</i> (60%)

	(b) <i>Mid Term</i> Written examination on the early development of popular music from the turn of the century until world War I (includes aural recognition) (20%)	(b) <i>Mid-Course Project Paper</i> (20%)
	(c) <i>Final Paper</i> Written Term Paper on an approved topic (30%) (d) <i>Final Exam</i> Comprehensive written examination of course contents (30%)	(c) <i>Final Project Paper</i> (20%)
	Physical Work Submission and Common Sit-Down Examinations	All work submitted and assessed online (may include Musical Instrument Digital Interface or MP3 files according to Paper and Project requirements and marking criteria)
Non-Change Features (Major)		
Objectives:	1.Recognition of styles of popular music discussed in this course through instrumentation, scales, chord progressions and rhythmic styles. 2.Define correct musical interpretation of different genres of popular music. 3.Critically evaluate performances of popular music in relation to the styles of major contributors of music from the era. 4.Define the effects of sociological and cultural changes in the development of popular music in this era.	
Course Description:	This course surveys the evolution of jazz and popular music; its history, styles, artists and composers from the late nineteenth century to World War II. The styles of music surveyed include ragtime, blues, country and western, early jazz, and the swing era. Students discuss the work of musicians, composers producers as well as examine sociological and cultural influences that contributed to the development of this genre.	

Conclusion

This paper offers insight into some problems faced by academics when attempting to transform a traditional or 'offline' undergraduate music course outline into an online mode and in doing so, share valuable experiences. The outcomes analyze emergent issues and provide views as to how technological advances may be used creatively in redesigning a tried and tested curriculum. The issues that emerged, as a result of the course conversion exercise, were not peculiar to one particular group of academics. I believe the faculty comments echoed as a result of a lack of information and training more so than a distrust of innovations made in the creation and delivery of knowledge. While several academics were interested in the globalisation of learning, some academics preferred to err on the side of caution, as many issues remain unresolved.

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About the Writer:

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