**Literacy Loops and Online Groups: Promoting Writing Skills in Large Undergraduate Music Classes**

Twenty-first century undergraduates are often highly digitally literate, showing a propensity to integrate seamlessly the latest communication, information, and management technologies into their daily lives.[[1]](#footnote-1) Of the one hundred and twenty-three students in my 2008 first-year music history course “Turning Points in Western Music,” 99% had a home computer, 75% used a memory stick to transfer data, 35% had completed a computer science course, and 16% could actually write computer code. Seventy-two per cent used online communication via email, wikis, chatting, and blogs at least once daily; 82% had registered with Facebook, Bebo, or another form of social communication; and 72% agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed using online environments. This enjoyment and competency can be turned to effective educational ends. Researchers have shown how interactivity, including group work, is essential to the most effective learning scenarios, and that the online environment is an ideal place in which to foster student interactivity.[[2]](#footnote-2) What remains to be shown, though, is whether students’ digital literacy and energy for online interactions can be used to enhance their literacy in general, and their writing skills in particular.

This article addresses this question, describing a productive learning cycle, which I term a “loop of literacy.” In my 150-student first-year course, “Turning Points in Western Music,” I have measured the digital literacy of my students at the beginning of each semester. I have then sought, in carefully designed online interventions carried out in 2008 and 2010 respectively, to use this often very high-level digital literacy to help the students to improve their writing. This teaching practice, which involved the use of online group work and online writing tools, came full circle: the students’ engagement in music history was enhanced by their newly developed literacy, and their energy for online learning increased correspondingly.

**Implementation**

To date, teachers of music history at the tertiary level have lagged behind those in many other disciplines in exploring how information and communication technology (ICT) can usefully be used to enhance student learning.[[3]](#footnote-3) In designing online writing assignment sequences, I have drawn on recent e-learning scholarship that translates well into the music history course. Gilly Salmon’s work demonstrates how to structure and guide online group interactions in order not only to encourage students into discussion, but also lead them towards high-order tasks involving critique and reflection.[[4]](#footnote-4) Oates and Bellon (2002) have considered the relationship between student personality and learning types and effective online learning, providing hints on how to motivate the kinds of diverse learners that we find in the undergraduate classroom (in music courses, often a mixture of majors, non-majors, performers, composers and so forth).[[5]](#footnote-5) Furthermore, e-learning experts provide valuable guidelines for dealing with the ideological implications of implementing online learning, hints for mitigating the clashes of desires, expectations, and learning styles that can lurk in the online environment.[[6]](#footnote-6)

My online discussion and writing assignment sequences are multifaceted in terms of the types of tools deployed, some tailored more to visual learners, others to conceptual/text-based learners. The assignments allow students choice and room for creativity, in keeping with their desires and expectations. In the 2008 course, students were involved in three collaborative steps, designed as a sequence that would lead to individual essays on the following topic: “Discuss the significance of X in the history of Western music, where X is the landmark recording chosen by your group.” Students first compiled group annotated bibliographies on their chosen recordings, using Google docs; then they took part in small-group online discussion; finally they posted reflections on the groups’ discussions, in larger online groups.

When the course was run in 2010, the group discussion assignment was more specifically directed towards improving the level of writing in the final assignment for the course, a concert review. This time the online discussion in small groups was based around E. T. A. Hoffmann’s 1810 review of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. Now there were four steps, in which the students were asked to think about persuasive language in the context of writing about music. They first analysed the rhetoric of Hoffmann’s text using one of two online text analysis tools: Wordle and Helen Sword’s Wasteline Test.[[7]](#footnote-7) Then they responded to each other’s analyses, tried using their own persuasive language in writing about a composer of their choice, and finally commented on peers’ work. Another new step introduced in the 2010 course was the peer reviewing of the students’ final concert reviews. This step was carried out using the online peer review system Aropä, developed at the University of Auckland.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Benefits: Student Perspective**

Student surveys before and after the online group work showed an improvement in their attitudes to the use of online interactions in helping them to learn during the course. Before the online work, 51.4% of the 2010 cohort either agreed or strongly agreed that interacting online helped them to learn; after the intervention this figure had risen to 66%. The students were starting from a position of greater enthusiasm than those in 2008, of whom 44% agreed or strongly agreed to this statement before the intervention, 61% afterwards. In both years the students were also asked to identify which of the online interactions were most beneficial to their learning, and to give reasons for their selections. In 2008 almost half of the survey respondents found the online discussion (probing question and critical response) in small groups to be the most beneficial. Twenty-four percent of respondents nominated the group annotated bibliography using Google docs, and 21% selected the online reflection in larger groups. The 2010 cohort also identified online discussion in small groups as a highly beneficial step. The reasons that students gave for this choice show several key learner advantages of online asynchronous discussion in small groups:

* Comparative ease and efficiency of idea exchange and knowledge building;
* Diversity and range of resources and viewpoints shared;
* Congeniality: “Small groups make it more intimate. Easier to put a point across” (Student A, 2008);
* Time to give a considered response (as compared to face-to-face interactions);
* Enjoyment of the process of constructing their own knowledge and using their own critical skills to give peer feedback.

It became clear to me that the students’ digital literacy skills and enthusiasm for online environments readily translated into the educational context. Regarding their enthusiasm, a vocabulary of engagement emerged in their survey comments about online discussion. The 2008 students made notable use of gerunds in describing the online group work: they were “hearing,” “answering,” “grouping,” “sharing,” and “uncovering.” The 2010 students found the online discussion of Hoffmann’s writing to be (in their words) enjoyable, engaging, and motivating. Regarding literacy skills, the 2010 students were asked to respond to the statement “I rate online interactions highly for improving my written communication skills.” Before the intervention, 36.8% of students agreed or strongly agreed with this statement; after the intervention this number rose to 54%.

Both cohorts clearly identified additional and vital educational benefits of online group work and the online peer review tasks: they experienced meta-learning, that is, learning about learning itself, as a product of the interactive process. One student observed, “[online discussion] helped to understand how others think about the topic and through this it helps open new ideas for yourself” (Student B, 2008). In focus groups held in 2010, the students noted that the role of “semi-marker” (i.e., taking on a teacher/instructor role) afforded them a new critical perspective on their own work:

Feedback from others in small groups [was] very helpful as they picked up on what I missed, giving insight to me for future reference and also being a semi-marker (writing posts on others’ reviews) also stimulates my own brain, gets me thinking and becoming very particular in review writing (Student C, 2010).

The most beneficial was the peer review interactions online as it helped me self-evaluate my work better, and see the improvements I needed to make in certain areas of my work more clearly (Student D, 2010).

**Benefits and Developments: Teacher Perspective**

How did those marking the online and offline written assignments rate the quality of the student writing? In 2008, the e-moderators noted that it was the critical reflections phase, in large groups, which engendered some of the highest quality work. Perhaps the students felt that the stakes were higher, and thus the quality of response had to be higher, in that more public forum. In a number of cases students showed understanding of how the less formal online discussion and reflection could feed into their more formal reflective discursive essays. In the best essays, students wove together the voices of their peers and scholars in service of their own arguments. In the following excerpt, for example, the student adeptly supports a point raised in group discussion by quoting from another group member and then from an established scholar:

In examining the Furtwängler recording, my research team found that an “unparalleled emotional and expressive depth” characterises the performance, due to the fact that he was “not afraid of deviating slightly from the score to enhance the emotion” and musicality of the work [Student E, 2008]. As Cairns (2001) observes, this subjective approach resulted in “an imprecise beat,” a free approach to tempo, and a greater natural sonority rising from the cello and bass section (Student F, 2008).

In the 2010 iteration of the course I made a greater effort to emphasise connections between the online discussion-based writing and the “offline” writing. The students took this to heart: this was one factor in the improvement of the average grade for the final written assignment, from B (74%) to A- (81%). The e-moderators (online discussion facilitators) in 2010, several of whom had also been involved in the 2008 iteration of the course in the same capacity, noted that the quality of comments and reflections was higher due to the more tightly-focused sequence of online tasks. They observed more critical insight and the development of students’ personal voices. The following e-moderator comment contains relevant student examples:

E-moderator A: I was impressed by some of the critical and insightful comments on Hoffmann’s writing in particular. For example: “Despite his subjective view, the writing is very persuasive as he offers not only a description of the music, but also evidence as to how this emotion is evoked. References to specific spots in the music and musical techniques are employed in an effort to justify his reasoning” (Student G).

E-Moderator B: the quality of written responses was high (see Student H’s response to part 3 - group 4) [a task involving taking on the persuasive voice of an early nineteenth-century reviewer of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony]: “Could we say, if we were to glance back at the music of the past as one swirl of colour and glory and fire, that Beethoven is to his time as Handel was to yesterday? That the poignant echoes of his majestic oratorios set free the same romantic voice that pervades Beethoven’s greatest symphonies and concertos? Certainly, Handel was not the rebel that Beethoven is; his music does not ignite the same frenzy of discussion. But in spirit, in energy, in tragic sweetness, and in might, there is something comparable, something too explosive to be contained [etc.]” (Student H, 2010).

Despite improvements in students’ abilities to write persuasively about music, they were still encountering some quite significant problems. In interviews with the staff that marked the final essays, and in student focus groups, the following areas of concern were identified:

* Difficulties using the appropriate musical term or concept in context;
* Difficulties crafting higher-level arguments that go beyond simple comparisons towards more critical responses;
* The need for students to further develop their personal voices in writing.

E-learning strategies for dealing with these issues within and beyond first-year music history courses include the following:

* Student creation of a course glossary (such as that in the learning management system Moodle) that is specifically geared to the development of the vocabulary of the discipline;[[9]](#footnote-9)
* Extended online discussion tasks, which allow integration of new terminology in basic responses followed by higher-order reflection and critique;
* An emphasis on peer analysis of writing, exploring positive and negative features of the writing (for example, using Helen Sword’s online Wasteline Test), and trying to identify hallmarks of the writer’s personal “voice.”

**Guidelines**

Based on feedback from students and staff in 2008 and 2010, I have developed the following four guidelines (“the four Ms”) for using online group work to improve student writing. These guidelines are relevant within and beyond the first-year music history course:

*1. Modularise, and think beyond the online module*

In his provocative article on integrating new learning technologies into the music course, José Bowen makes the excellent point that online discussion can be used to motivate, reinforce, and reflect on the lecture material.[[10]](#footnote-10) In “blended courses,” (those employing both on- and off-line learning and teaching) integrate online components with a variety of other appropriate learning modalities; choose the best tool (whether on or offline) for the learning task; and make sure that the connections between on- and off-line writing tasks are clear to the students. Note that our Internet savvy students still ask that instructors “keep it [the assignment sequence] simple” (Student I, 2008).

*2. Motivate, from a student perspective*

Students of the Facebook age are concerned about their online presence. Moving from low-stakes (small-group, non-assessed, less formal) online writing tasks to higher stakes (large-group, assessed, more formal) tasks creates a safe environment in which they can express themselves and use their digital literacy to educational ends.

Motivating the online interactions from the student perspective also means allowing the students plenty of room to bring their own ideas, responses, and examples into the discussions. In the discussions of Hoffmann’s prose, we observed that particularly productive conversations resulted when students compared their own reactions to Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony to those of Hoffmann, and brought in examples from their own listening background that had motivated them to similar levels of praise and awe to those of Hoffmann.

*3. Model the process, and permit the “teacher role”*

Consider gathering high-quality student writings as models that show, for example, how online discussion can feed into formal essays. Such authentic examples help students to see ways in which they, too, can enter the “discourse community” of the music scholar, proceeding from their own perspectives and vocabularies. Such models are at least as useful as scholarly examples of good writing drawn from within the discipline.

Students delight in the role of teacher. Allow them room to use this skill, for example by using peer review assessment rubrics that are simple and open-ended. When we first used online peer reviewing, we found that we had been too stringent in telling students how to respond. Focus group discussion revealed that the students had ideas for their peers at many levels, following on from the multi-layered prose analyses they had carried online. They wanted space to provide this feedback.

*4. Moderate, and also guide*

As one student observed, his group had generated many good questions, “but no one could answer them” (Student J, 2008). Ways around this issue include bringing experts into student discussions, who can help students to generate and find good answers. For first-year students, in particular, the e-moderator can play a significant role in guiding discussion. E-moderators can model the process of the enquiring mind, suggesting routes to answers and showing students ways to validate their own voices.[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. Diana M. Andone, Jon Dron, Lyn Pemberton, and Chris Boyne, “E-learning environments for digitally-minded students,” *Journal of Interactive Learning Research* 18, no. 1(2007): 41-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bill Anderson and Mary Simpson, “Learning and Teaching at a Distance: A Social Affair,” *Computers in NZ Schools* 10, no. 1 (1998): 25-29; David D. Curtis and Michael J. Lawson, “Exploring Collaborative Online Learning,” *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 5, no. 1 (2001): 21-55; Martha A. Gabriel, “Learning Together: Exploring Group Interactions Online,” *Journal of Distance Education* 19, no. 1 (2004): 54-72; Pamela Hodgson, “How to teach in cyberspace,” *Techniques* [Association for Career and Technical Education] 74, no. 5 (1999): 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. An exception is Antonio José Bowen, “Teaching Naked: Why Removing Technology from your Classroom will Improve Student Learning.” National Forum for Teaching and Learning 16, no. 1 (December 2006): 1-5.

   http://www.ntlf.com/html/ti/naked.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gilly Salmon, *E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online* (London: Kogan Page, 2000); and idem, *E-Tivities: The key to active online learning*. London: Kogan Page, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Toni Bellon and Richard Oates, “Best Practice in Cyberspace: Motivating the Online Learner,” paper presented at the National Education Computing Conference, San Antonio, Texas, 2002. Full text available at http://confreg.uoregan.edu/necc2002/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Loralee Lapointe and Marcy Reisetter, “Belonging Online: Students’ Perceptions of the Value and Efficacy of an Online Learning Community,” *International Journal on E-Learning* 7, no. 4 (2008): 641-655; and John M. Dirkx and Regina O. Smith, “Thinking out of a Bowl of Spaghetti: Learning to Learn in Online Collaborative Groups,” in *Online Collaborative Learning: Theory and Practice*, ed. Tim S. Roberts (London: Information Science Publishing, 2004), 132-159. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For Wordle see <http://www.wordle.net/>; for the Wasteline Test see <http://www.writersdiet.ac.nz/wasteline.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. (http://aropa.ec.auckland.ac.nz/src/aropa.php) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. http://moodle.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Bowen, “Teaching Naked.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For tips on the role of the e-moderator in empowering learners to take charge, see Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt, *Building learning communities in cyberspace: Effective strategies for the online classroom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999); their *Lessons from the cyberspace classroom: The realities of online teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001); and their Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K “The Role and the Responsibility of the Learner in the Online Classroom,” paper presented at the 19th Annual Conference on

    DistanceTeaching and Learning, Madison, WI, 2005. Full text available at http://www.uwex.edu/disted/conference/Resource\_library/proceedings/03\_24.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-11)