



Viruses, rupture and renewal: on teaching music during and beyond the

Lockdown

As a somewhat “new” lecturer in my university, I closed off 2019 reflecting on what it means to lecture music(ology) in a university that is on the outskirts of the national and global metropolis. Eventually, some of the students we teach will drift to these spaces, lured by possibilities of limelight and fortune; potential role players in the vast and highly transient creative industries. Yet others’ pursuit will be an entry into academia or specialised skills, seeking admission to graduate studies in far-off universities globally. Caught in a momentary reverie, and later setting up plans for the year ahead, I optimistically figured out how to gradually overhaul my curricula offerings together with teaching and learning strategies to ensure that our students are adequately prepared.

This was, sadly, not to be. At the outset of the academic year, internal challenges quickly coalesced with the Coronavirus outbreak, throwing everything into turmoil. Hardly had the teaching year effectively started than a national moratorium led to closure of schools and institutions of higher learning. In an unprecedented rush, students were sent home in response to urgent government strategies to curb the spread of the virus, already declared a pandemic.

Everyday life as we know it simply came to a halt. Educational institutions have resorted to online teaching to mitigate the impact of the severely disrupted teaching and learning schedule. Concerns about access to online teaching portals as a result of prohibitive data costs and unreliable electricity supply have been raised. In some rural and shack dwellings where a sizeable number of our students live, there is no electricity. Thus, online teaching once again exposes the inequalities that have a direct link to apartheid’s spatial planning and related economic exclusions.

The peculiarities of teaching music

As I ponder deeply upon teaching and learning during the lockdown, the peculiarities of offering music come to the fore and raise pertinent concerns beyond just access to technology. They straddle the pedagogical, class, spatial, cultural, psychological and affective domains of music students’ lives in instructive ways.

I begin with music pedagogical challenges. For my undergraduate teaching, my area of focus is African and World Music, while for graduate teaching I work on historical and critical issues in Choral Music, African Philosophies of Music and Research Methods. In various ways, these courses are largely “theoretical”, relying on sharing written notes with students, directing them to read book chapters and journal articles, download and read scores and listen to set music from online audio-visual sources such as YouTube. These materials can be loaded on portals such as Blackboard and shared with even more ease and less cost on email and through WhatsApp. Similarly, learning tasks and evaluation methods would be relatively traditional and manageable: writing reading responses, summaries, assignments, written tests and group presentations, among other activities.

For this year, I had however intended to go beyond the more traditional teaching and learning approaches.

To gradually move away from the norm, I had planned to challenge students to work in groups to record films/videos on their cellphones as an introduction to fieldwork and ethnographic methods right from the first year. In my planning, I would encourage them to be at liberty to choose a music practice and community of their own, investigate it over a few weeks during the semester, interview key role players, photograph aspects of

the “field” and eventually produce short edited documentary films and creative ethnographic reports.

Also, I had intended to integrate current social media portals to develop the project. In the long term, students would be encouraged to critically rethink and decentre the notion of the “field” as some distant place while the city sonic spaces are construed differently. This approach would furthermore assist me in integrating new ways of theorizing sound, modes of hearing and listening, performance and reception of music.

Pandemic puts paid to plans

The lockdown promotes the notion of “social distancing” to “flatten” the upward curve of Coronavirus infections. The result is that students cannot work in groups and have to stay home. Even if students were to undertake individual projects, some would lack the requisite technology.

A more plausible way to counteract the disruption of learning and teaching is to revert back to more traditional modes of learning and assessment, steering clear of ground-breaking, innovative and boundary-pushing methods of evaluation and skills development.

Even online teaching would not be sufficient to develop some of the much-needed practical skills, critical and reflexive modes I had in mind.

“All music degrees have a compulsory practical component”, I reflected. At the University of Fort Hare, we offer voice studies in Classical singing and Jazz, African music instruments such as *mbira*, *marimba* and drumming, Classical and Jazz piano. A few students take the guitar, drum set, saxophone and trumpet. There are also technology courses at senior levels, focusing on recording techniques



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and aspects of sound engineering. How then is this dimension amenable to online teaching? one may ask.

For vocal pedagogy, it might arguably be relatively easier to demonstrate aspects of vocal training. Technicalities such as breath control, diction and melody can be transmitted through online, audio-visual means, including simple recordings of note bashing and accompaniment. However, to develop the technique and strength required for a singer; the learning process entails reproducing what has been learned, thereby demonstrating the degree of (non) mastery for further feedback from the instructor. Effective vocal training and development requires one to sing in full sound across one's range, for instance.

Upon checking in with some of my students about how they are managing with their studies during the lockdown, a number indicated the difficulty of negotiating music practice within sometimes cramped familial spaces with limited privacy. They further highlighted how families do not take kindly to what they perceive as "noise". To sing in full sound is thus seen as disruptive, if not disrespectful. Also, some families regard Classical singing as specifically "foreign" and "odd" and cannot relate to it! Rehearsal within family spaces is not conducive to vocal training with optimal results.

Added to this challenge is learning repertoire. One needs significant time to go through text, possibly recite it and be glued to the phone or the laptop with earphones on. Ordinarily, parents want their offsprings' active involvement in house chores. They view this type of learning as a luxury that tampers with the business of running a household. Accordingly, more than a month of not being on campus somewhat robs students of ample time for technical development.

Speaking hypothetically, even if all students had access to the required technology for online learning, familial and cultural dynamics would encroach significantly on the learning of some music students in ways that someone studying accounting, for example, would not be. Playing music might not be deemed as "studying"!

Students' experiences of learning in lockdown in the USA

Interested in checking whether the challenges cited above are unique to my institution (or even to South Africa), I checked in with a few more South African students studying vocal/operatic performance at institutions in the USA, which are also closed for similar reasons: government orders to curb the spread of the Coronavirus. I was curious to find out if their experiences of online music tuition would yield different insights since they attend top-end, affluent, "first world" institutions.

Undoubtedly, issues of fast, reliable internet access were not a challenge for them. A recurrent concern among all of them, however, is handling practical vocal classes, be they individual or group based. As all these singers are preparing for final recitals and end-of-term operatic productions, online tuition disrupts the personal nature of vocal training and coaching and other performance-related dynamics. For some, what slightly disturbs an online rehearsal or coaching session is sound delay in the transmission between singer and voice teacher or coach. Furthermore, it does little to boost confidence and psych one up for the role they are preparing or enhance interpretation of the music.

Another singer raised the psychological challenges of online teaching during the time of lockdown and how they hamper

ideal learning. Attention, concentration and focus are marred by constant thoughts about the wellbeing of family and friends across the world. Once again, all these anecdotes dramatize and highlight the unique challenges to online teaching that emanate from the absence of the very personal, communal and embodied nature of music teaching and learning.

Back at Fort Hare, one of my students echoed similar sentiments by drawing attention to the fact that even if an ideal existed where everyone had a computer and a smartphone with relevant apps downloaded, learning music is frequently interactive. So composition exercises being played out through group study sometimes require real-time, peer-critical commentary. Learning individually somewhat takes away the communal aspect of music making and dims the spontaneity of the creative process and related affective responses and stimulation. Evidently, music students' experiences are not only aggravated by technology-related dynamics, but also by the very nature of the discipline's idiosyncrasies when its tuition and related learning are altered or removed.

To further complicate the matter, the physicality of instruments like the piano is key! The student has to touch the keys of a real instrument to learn. Our students simply have no pianos wherever they are. One student in my class mentioned that owing to the lockdown rules, she could not even borrow an electronic keyboard from her church as it had been closed. Therefore, no learning would take place even if there were online piano classes.

One supposes the same can be said of the *marimba* ensemble. Not only do students need to have instruments, but meaningful learning of the technique and repertoires takes place in groups. From the side of the teacher, one might also



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need to develop pedagogical techniques and competencies to successfully teach students with no instrumental access so that they can transfer whatever learning to the instrument at a later stage.

Rupture: future pedagogies beyond lockdown

At this stage, I am inclined to ask: what is to be done? Collectively, the higher education sector laments the inconvenience brought about by the outbreak of COVID-19 and its far-reaching effects globally. Undoubtedly, the future seems grim and we have no way of gauging what it holds. It is at these unpredictable moments that we can make use of our collective faculties to chart new paths. Hindrances to teaching and learning notwithstanding, a music department can think and plan how to mitigate these in the future.

As a start, we might have to think about ensuring that all students have relevant technology to make learning possible right from the outset. A new operational model for music students might assist them as soon as they are registered to ensure that the necessary equipment is accessible to them. Owning a laptop and a smart phone is but one of the means to an end. The department itself, I suggest, could be proactive in exploring wide-ranging options for electronic resources and recommend apps students could download or that could be made available through the library services and related information centers.

Yet another point to consider might involve exploring new methodologies such as how to teach an instrument like a *marimba* or a piano in the absence of actual, physical, tangible instruments. Such approaches and methods to instrumental teaching might not have been developed nor explored elsewhere; yet further

research and training might enable our staff or those who develop learning materials to create pioneering solutions. These approaches could be multimodal as online downloadable classes, live streams, relevant apps and pre-recorded lessons on DVD, perhaps with a range of supporting graphic materials such as charts, pictures and sketches. Ultimately, all these must be designed to enhance self-directed learning, even off campus.

Furthermore, we might have to rethink and reconfigure the academic calendar for music students to enhance their orientation activities. This might involve an "immersion session" at the beginning of the academic year where students are equipped with requisite competencies to self-navigate the various online learning platforms. In my view, the abrupt outbreak of COVID-19 and the drastic measures taken to curb it caught everyone off-guard. It might not be a wasteful exercise to plan ahead and figure out best practices to equip all students to be ready for online learning and teaching at any time. This has definite budgetary implications for resource allocation for departments, faculties and the university as a whole. One hopes university planners will integrate the unique requirements of departments such as music and accordingly grant the necessary finance, training and equipment.

On the side of the lecturers, they might need to unlearn, re-learn and acquire new skills that meet challenges of future pedagogies. I envisage a future where our music department might need to move towards blended learning; integrating online open distance learning approaches with innovative contact tuition. I cannot deny the expense, stress and all other costs linked to this potential overhaul of the familiar teaching strategies. In my

view, however, any future disruption to the higher education field should find us much better prepared. Among other positive spinoffs, a meticulously preplanned blended learning environment might accelerate students' overall learning in the course of the year. For instance, those students who enter the system with no prior music education can use such resources to fast-track their learning of basic music skills and knowledge offered in the theory bridging course. Moreover, students are enabled to access the materials at any time, using pre-recorded lectures, self-assessment exercises, reading and materials, among others, as many times as they wish to support and refine their knowledge of the subject matter.

In a superbly written and convincingly argued essay on the outbreak of COVID-19 in India and the effects of the government's reaction, Arundati Roy insightfully reminds us that "[h]istorically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice ... our data banks and dead ideas ... behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it."

And so, as I awaken from the abject despair I deeply felt as I began to write this reflection; I am enlivened by the opportunities for renewal that might skill our students to be where they need to be: on the centre stage of the constantly evolving creative industries, music teaching and research as well-equipped and excellent role players. As academic institutions offering music in South Africa, it simply can no longer be business as usual. ☀