# Up Against “Methodolatry”: An Autoethnography of the Pedagogical Issues in Teaching Pop Music to China Students in a Virtual Environment

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January 2022

“Critical” consideration of curriculum theory is missing from the preparation of most music teachers today. Instead, “methods and materials” courses typically stress the “how-to” delivery of prepackaged, teacher-proof teaching materials such as basal song series and instrumental methods books; or, under the auspices of what I have called “methodolatry.” (Regelski, 2005)

## Contextualising the Practice

Music educators have an increasingly arduous task of empowering students with knowledge, specific skills, and passion in an increasingly globalised world, especially when encountering intersections where conventional art forms, disciplines, and mediums converge and probe into one another, such as video and traditional music performance. This curriculum was designed for China music university students who take a semester-long online module called Virtual Live Music Performance, through Lasalle College of the Arts, a higher education arts institution in Singapore. Developed through a praxial philosophy, I replaced “methods and materials” with critical considerations for the latest mainstream musical trends, digital technologies, and industry standards, under the auspices of what Thomas A. Regelski calls “methodolatry” (2002), emerging literature on online learning, and the Constructivist Learning Theory (Hein, 1991). The intention of this curriculum is to present a syllabus that is realistic, reflective of current popular music practices, and capable of transiting learners effectively from vocation to livelihood.

## Virtual Live Music Performance

The aim of this semester-long module is threefold: 1) to cultivate an understanding of virtual music performance, 2) to equip learners with knowledge and skills in performing music for camera, and 3) to enable learners to discover their identity within the musical contexts of their choice. Learners explore performing for the camera; that is, the practice of performing music in a virtual space and the specific kinds of skills required to do so effectively. Students examine the uses of multimedia equipment and digital technologies, technology-infused performances, and design a series of technology-based performances and implement them in real-world scenarios using broadcast software and applications, social media platforms, mobile applications, or computer software.

## Rationale for the Online Curriculum

The 2019 Covid pandemic quickened the migration of music making and consumption from face-to-face to the internet and exponentially changed the way music is performed, communicated, and consumed in a globalised context, for both music performers and audiences (Taylor, 2020). Largely, four common formats of music performance have emerged. The first is a direct live broadcast or live stream, from the mobile phone or desktop, with the use of a digital application or software. The second format is like the first, but instead of performing solo, the performer gets to “join broadcast” or otherwise colloquially known as “PK” or “Player Kill” with another user on the same social media network or digital platform. The third format takes the first format to a grander scale, liken to an actual music concert, but instead of being live, performances are pre-recorded and played back during stipulated “performance times.” The fourth format is like the third but entirely live. Many musical artists across the globe are following suit. Because of this shift, I had to adjust the curriculum if I

wanted to be prudent, remain applicable, and produce relevant future music practitioners and educators for the industries–as underscored by Jones (2007). This semester-long module, "Live Ensemble" which had always been conducted in-person before the pandemic had to be modified into a completely online module.

## Critical Pedagogy and Culturally Responsive Curriculum

To be culturally responsive in one's teaching means to be starkly aware that for knowledge and skills to be created and transmitted, they must be positioned within the experiences and perspectives of the students, as what is closer to the heart carries more meaning and appeal, allowing for better and more effective learning (Gay, 2000). The demography of the Chinese students I was teaching was significantly more diverse than my (Singapore) Lasalle students. Comprising of undergraduate music students from music conservatories, adjacent disciplines such as music production and audio production, working musicians and music teachers, and mature students from disciplines outside of music, they form a complex and uneven palette of musical perspectives and lived experiences, with little common factors apart from their working language and constant engagement with music. In referencing Gay (2002), a culturally responsive educator strives to 1) create an evolving understanding about ethnic and cultural diversity inside and outside the curriculum, 2) build communities through constant interaction and caring for diverse students, and 3) include the acknowledgement of ethnic and cultural diversity within the curriculum and its instructional delivery (Gay, 2002). Coupling with Stephen Benham's idea of being culturally responsive, that is to "welcome students without reservation through open dialogue, clear communication, and self-reflection" (2003), the class I sought to provide my students will not only equip them with specific skills and knowledge, provide a safe environment for every individual voice to be heard, but empower them with a sense of community as a way of thinking.

Therefore, upon setting up this module, I profiled the students' ethnic and cultural backgrounds and their experience with music. I studied their music performance proficiency and academic pathways to determine the types of music and modes of performances they can accomplish, might enjoy, or would accept. I investigated their access to technology and equipment. Lastly, I looked at ways to facilitate open dialogue, critical reflection, and to build a sense of community. Piecing these four pieces of information, I evaluated the opportunities for successful and meaningful transmissions of knowledge, through the lens of Lasalle's culture and values, which is to "promote the significance of the arts to effect personal, social and economic transformations", through the "development of high-level skills, creativity and critical reflection" (Lasalle, 2021).

## Philosophy Statement

Praxialism champions the notion of what music is good for (Regelski, 2005), and values the voices of students and their diverse yet unique experiences, embracing all types and hierarchies of music, including pop music, commonly thought of as a subordinate, too "standardised," and not serious enough type of music (Adorno, 2000). Believing that artistic knowledge is created by constant interaction and contention with the norms, I designed this curriculum with the intention to enable my students to create their own situated and contextually responsive knowledge: 1) by providing a conducive environment for learning through respect and inclusivity; 2) by facilitating understanding through awareness and constant dialogue; 3) through creating opportunities for reflection; and 4) through cultivating a desire for ubiquitous learning and 21st century skillsets.

## Musical Interests of China Students

Because it was the module's first semester, I used Lasalle's student profiles as a gauge for the China students. Lasalle offers music diplomas and degrees in several pathways: Western

Classical performance, jazz performance, and pop performance, composition, and electronic music. They typically enjoy Western pop, Korean pop, Mandopop, and Independent (local) music. Western pop here refers to the US Billboard Top 40s and UK Top 40s, covering hip hop and electronic music, with artists like Justin Bieber, Dua Lipa, and Kanye West. Korean pop refers to the genre of music originating from South Korea. Some of these Korean pop stars also have huge followings in the US and UK, such as BTS, SuperM, Big Bang, Girls' Generation, and Black Pink. The torchbearers of Mandopop of recent years are no longer the Taiwanese but Singaporeans and Chinese from mainland China, with some of its biggest stars being Singapore's JJ Lin and China's Hu Yan Bin, and a new generation of China's Dou Yin–China's Tik Tok–artists. Independent music otherwise affectionately known as "Indie" music, is original music from Singapore, helmed by an increasing pool of singer-songwriters not contracted to a record label.

## Implications of Teaching Music in a Virtual Classroom

**The internet as a pre-requisite.** Unlike the physical classroom where the student needs to be physically present in the classroom, the virtual classroom requires the provision of an internet connection. With good internet connection the student can enjoy the full lesson as it was intended but with poor internet connection the student can encounter a lag where video is not synchronised with sound, causing disruption in the receiving and sending of information, affecting participation and classroom activities, and resulting in a poor learning experience. As recent as 2020, issues with the internet affecting online classes still prevail (The Irish Times, 2020). To resolve this, I had to provide digital resources such as readings, weblinks, and YouTube videos to allow my students to do their own self-study before and after lessons and focus on in-class discussions understanding. I also recorded the lessons for my students to revise.

**Things we take for granted in a physical classroom.** The first thing we take for granted was sound as a natural phenomenon. In a physical classroom, the teacher walks into the class and starts the lesson by either taking attendance or simply talking. Because virtual classrooms require the interface of a computer and software, sound–and sometimes picture–is not as automatic as they are in the physical classroom. Sound and picture can be turned on and off, and their settings can pose a genuine difficulty to those with little technical and digital knowledge. A Singapore university mathematics professor realised that he did not "unmute" himself in the meeting software only after two hours into the lecture, and had to repeat the lecture (Steinbuch, 2021). To counter this, I intentionally planned a "soundcheck" before class to ensure that my students could hear me when I started each class by sharing a PowerPoint deck that has its first slide loop a piece of music. As my student entered the virtual classroom, I will prompt them via text to check their speakers. I found that I could help them resolve any technical issue before the classes and avoid affecting contact time. But this means I had to be in class earlier.

The second thing that was taken for granted is the range of our visibility. In a physical music classroom, I have full view of my students. I have no difficulty in shifting my gaze to observe any student practice. However, in a virtual classroom, the default view I got was the upper half of my students' bodies. As a result, much time was spent on getting my students to adjust their camera angles so I could effectively guide them on their posture, intonation, and practice. To lessen the impact of this inconvenience, I prepared video tutorials on how to set up their cameras and manage the sound settings for virtual classes. As a result, it took longer to prepare and deliver the same amount of content online as compared to the physical classroom (Skordis, Haghparast, Batura, Hughes, 2015).

**Interaction, learner participation, and sense of community.**

Learning is a social process (Johnson, 2008) and interaction is the "single most important activity in a well-designed distance education experience" (McIssac, Blocher, Mahes & Brasidas, 1999). With the virtual classroom, students learn remotely and often without their peers. This removes the interaction between classmates and causes a sense of learner isolation, muting the overall learning experience (Skordis, Haghparast & Hughes, 2015). In the virtual classroom, where students do not naturally have the freedom to interact with their peers in the way they can in a physical classroom, the responsibility of creating a connection amongst students and building a sense of community within the class lies on the shoulders of the teacher (Huss, Sela & Eastep, 2015). To overcome this, I employed a palette of digital tools for my class activities such as Padlet, a cloud-based software that hosts real-time collaboration in order to share ideas; Kahoot, a game-based online learning platform for real-time quizzes; and the "breakout rooms" within Zoom, a cloud-based teleconferencing software to create interaction amongst my learners. I used these tools not just because they are online aids for teaching, but that they are my learners' preferred mode of learning (Nicholas, 2020).

**The Role of the Teacher and Students in a Virtual Learning Environment**

If education is to inform, transform, and empower–core ideas from Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970)–it cannot cease to renew itself. As educators, by holding on to "what worked" we wilfully disconnect ourselves from the ever-changing world around us and our students. In music education, our obsession with "methods and materials" as postulated by Thomas Regelski (2005) has blind spots that have become glaring in today's internet age. It assumes the learning disposition of all students, disregards their musical experiences and interests, and fails to consider the amount of information they have access to–all contributing to the marginalising of music learnt in the school context.

Frank Abrahams' (2005) example of how a middle school teacher in New Jersey found the basal music series to be useless in teaching music to the students because they were influenced by hip hop is not only a perfect example of the disconnect between the music students love and the music teachers want them to learn, but also an indication of the lack of critical consideration of curriculum theory–to which Regelski (2005) calls "methodolatry." My students were tasked to hold up to four online performances, each about 20-45 minutes in duration, through the semester. They were encouraged to perform songs that they liked or were meaningful to them. Therefore, they were the ones who decided on the repertoire, style of performance, and instrumentation. My role was not to *teach them* what is good music but to *help them show me* what they regarded as good music.

Technology-mediated learning grants the student and the teacher significant access to information. It is easy for students to surpass their teachers in any topic in a matter of "clicks." So, we must acknowledge that we as teachers are no longer, as what Alison King (1993) calls, "sages on the stage" imparting knowledge to students–assuming students to be "empty vessels"–but "guides on the side," facilitating understanding and assisting students in making their own situated connections. For my class, I employed mainly Constructivist concepts (Price, 2019), especially Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Price, 2019) where I helped my students achieve the learning outcomes through scaffolding and a series of tasks intended to sharpen their technical skills and improve the aesthetics of their performance.

**Standards and Assessment**

Even at the end of the module, I regarded my students as "work in progress" rather than "tried and tested," and this made assessing and evaluating less straightforward. For one, it is hard to place standardised testing. Let me provide an example. One student who was less proficient in playing an instrument chose to sing to a backing track, while another student who majored in Western Classical violin performance chose to put up a pop trio performance. The student who performed with the backing track spent time removing the vocals from the backing track

with an audio software while the classically trained student put in hours of practicing, rehearsing with the other musicians of the trio. It would be unfair if I had assessed them on the complexity of music performed. Rubrics had to be adjusted to be more accommodating, in a way that celebrates musical diversity and proficiencies without sacrificing learning outcomes.

**Conclusion**

Virtual Live Music Performance and its likes will lead a new wave of online music education for online music, where both teachers and students not only embrace ethnic and cultural diversity, but also infuse their music performances with up-to-date and emerging digital technologies, all bearing in mind the fast-changing ways of all things online. It is paramount that educators embrace and learn to negotiate new areas and ways in which their practice can perpetuate in an increasingly virtual education landscape.

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