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Integrating Technology in Group Piano Curriculum for the Music Educators of the Next Generation

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Abstract

Smartphones, handheld devices, computers, and smart TVs have made listening to music a dramatically individualized experience. As young adults indulge in a wide range of music offered by popular streaming services such as Apple, Amazon, and YouTube, students may naturally find the music published in keyboard skills textbooks dull and unengaging. In this age of technology-enhanced access to music, group piano classes should consider students' individual musical preferences in delivering instruction so that students can learn the same course objectives and goals while they increase their performance with music of their preference. Moreover, embracing the technology-based learning environment can also help these students enhance their learning. For example, tools featured in digital pianos to add sound effects (reverb, compression, accompaniment, layered instructions, etc.) can add to the joy of learning. Instructors can utilize instructional technologies such as learning management systems for students to record their practice sessions regularly, post discussions, reflect on their learning, collaborate with peers on media projects, and access instructors' feedback. As a result, students can have better outcomes by staying engaged and replicate the learning activities when they become educators for the next generation of music learners.

Introduction

Advances in consumer technology have drastically changed the ways students access and appreciate music. As a result, teaching materials in the group piano curriculum have become quickly outdated. Students no longer recognize folk tunes for harmonization exercises; they prefer to listen and play music on their playlist stored in their mobile devices. Although pedagogical principles and objectives should persist over time, teaching methodologies and

materials should continuously be updated to increase students' engagement in learning. The newer generation of students favor classes that are more practical, satisfy their personal interests, and meet their degree program expectations.

Since higher education music curriculums require keyboard proficiency for music education majors, group piano programs have played a critical role of training these students. Collegiate group piano classes can be a steppingstone for cultivating a wider range of audiences by utilizing instructional technology. Music Education majors deserve attention in collegiate group piano classes as they will move on to influence our next generation of music learners. Empowering these students with innovative keyboard skills curricula delivers positive results to the future generation. To achieve this goal, innovative instruction and activities in the keyboard lab should be introduced to increase motivation for learning. This paper will describe instructional methods, innovative class projects, and the utilization of advanced digital pianos that can help create engaging class sessions that actively draw learners' participation, engage in deeper learning, and help develop tools for their own teaching environment.

Literature Review

Crappell (2019) pointed out that pedagogy must adapt to the needs of modern students. He cautioned against teachers using the same instructional strategies acquired from their own instruction without considering their students' abilities and goals in that the training they received may not directly apply to such students. He emphasized that new technologies and cultural shifts demand teachers to regularly modernize their pedagogical approaches to interactive teaching strategies. Lynn Tuttle, Director of Public Policy for NAFME, mentioned in her interview with Marchetti (2020) that music educators should take time to explore the available technology tools and techniques that can deepen students' and instructors' classroom experience alike.

Chopp and Doherty (2019) posed an important question regarding how technology might shape learning for music education majors and pre-collegiate students. They argued "A growth mindset on the part of college students when it comes to learning new technologies is increasingly allowing them to shape their own music education" (p. 24). They also believe that faculty can empower pre-service teachers to value their own students' unique skills sets,

interests, and potential for learning by embracing the necessity of technology for music education majors. Scapillato (2019) said, “technology can be an empowering tool to shape students’ music learning, share information and collect responses and data in ways never before imagined” (p. 48). He claimed that music educators should be able to evaluate options for technology tools and develop strategies for integrating technology to make the greatest impact on student learning. Cremaschi (2020) mentioned practical aspects of synchronous learning that rely on the exchange of videos and materials through online repositories. He suggests that the parties involved in asynchronous instruction interact, view, read, or respond to the material at their own pace. Carrillo (2020) suggests that teachers should develop a wide range of activities such as using loops in GarageBand, virtual instruments, MIDI controllers, among other options. He emphasizes that through the exploratory process using digital tools, students will naturally engage in improvisatory behavior while discovering different sounds and creating different rhythms, melodies, or harmonic ideas.

In addition, Ajero (2019) suggested classroom technologies to facilitate students’ performance options, helping them recreate sounds they hear in their preferred artists’ recordings. However, he also noted that “falling into a trap of implementing apps, tools, and equipment to just to fill up lesson time to make the students happy is not right” (Ajero, 2019, p. 16). Class piano instructors must be aware that integrating technology in the curriculum must be student-centered. The goal of using technology is to engage digitally savvy students, to increase motivation, and provide an optimal learning environment. Teaching approaches should focus on increasing students’ interests in piano learning to pursue a higher level of excellence.

Piano Labs of the Past

The earliest group piano labs featured multiple acoustic pianos. Shaftel (2011) stated that the metronome was the most advanced, if not the only technology in the studios, apart from the acoustic pianos. Fischer (2010) noted that the first implementation of the electronic piano lab in 1956 had a profound impact on college group piano programs and methods. Digital pianos and headsets enabled instructors to create a variety of individual or group instruction without disturbing other students’ playing. Additionally, adopting keyboard visualizers enhanced the learning experience in the keyboard classroom. The visualizers lit up the notes that the instructor

pressed. With the aid of visualizers, students could see the notes that they were instructed to play, and the tool facilitated students' understanding of theoretical concepts being realized on the teacher's keyboard. However, the visualizer still suffered from functional limitations as it was not designed to show the teacher's hand position that students still needed to visually confirm to play properly. In order to provide clear instruction, teachers had to move to the student's keyboard to demonstrate. Digital keyboards, headsets, visualizers, and blackboards served as communication tools for teachers to give individualized feedback and announcements in the piano labs. Also, before instructors incorporated learning management systems (LMSs), the blackboard served as the communication medium between teachers and students in the classroom. LMSs and easy access of recording devices brought significant advances in the new chapter of group piano teaching.

Technological Advancements: Modernizing Collegiate Group Piano

The core curriculum in group piano for music majors includes skills such as harmonization, transposition, improvisation, open score reading, and ensemble playing, as well as technique exercises and solo & ensemble repertoires. Although these traditional keyboard skill techniques can be daunting for students, technological resources enable a more efficient and appealing learning process. Students become more engaged when activities incorporate a digital piano's built-in function and online materials that allow students to extend their interaction through communication tools, such as discussion boards. Students understand the need to practice regularly to improve their skills; they agree that technological tools facilitate learning.

First, feedback and assessment have improved through convenient accessibility of various recording devices. While students' performance anxiety is an important topic discussed in piano pedagogy, recording can be a helpful approach not only for students to improve their skills by hearing their own playing, but for teachers who can also take sufficient time to review them and give feedback without being limited to class time. Recording is also helpful for students since they can achieve a higher level of performance with the ability to record their performances multiple times until they reach a satisfactory level of performance.

Second, interaction between instructors and students has changed considerably with advances in learning management systems (LMSs) and increased Internet bandwidth. There are multiple ways for students to share their recordings, such as YouTube (with the appropriate privacy settings), Dropbox, or similar filesharing options. If the LMS supports large video file sharing, the instructor can designate a space for uploading files, which can be a convenient way for students to post files and for teachers to manage all the recordings in one place. LMS instructional features allow teachers to provide a variety of additional resources and extensions of classroom activities based on the students' needs. LMSs allow students to review these course materials as many times as needed to increase their understanding. LMSs also include online sign-ups, blogs, polls, and forums that enable communication between instructors and students, or even peer-to-peer interaction to aid their learning process. In addition to video sharing, there are many possibilities for posting assignments, setting automatic reminders for due dates, uploading resources, and sending out group emails to the entire class. When instructors utilize the full potential of an LMS, students can save their time locating assignments, exam materials, etc. LMSs also provide detailed information regarding if and when students access resources and submit their work. Hence, instructors can keep track of students' progress more effectively.

Third, a variety of classroom technologies are available in keyboard labs to improve communication and learning. Cameras and TV screen monitors are relatively inexpensive investments for the classroom. Monitors clearly display instructors' hand movements on the keyboard, and students can visually confirm the details required to perform. Monitors also help the instructor demonstrate subtle details of pianistic performances to all the students, not to just the students who happen to be near the instructor. Multiple cameras should be installed to exhibit different views. With appropriate cables and wires connected, the teacher can share their computer screen to show relevant resources, such as images of historical keyboards, video clips, and music scores. Compared to the limited view of visualizers, wide-screen monitors have unlimited functions to enrich classroom learning. In addition, if the budget allows, SMART boards can effectively show musical examples for discussion. Paperless classrooms are now relatively common. Instead of carrying heavy textbooks, students carry a laptop or tablet that holds digital materials, keyboard exercises, and applications. Students can easily access a variety of repertoires, sight reading examples with increased levels and techniques, and other functional keyboard skill exercises that cater to all proficiency levels. Students may also find it easier to

follow the notes on scores as they are highlighted in real time. *Piano Marvel*, *My Music Staff*, and *eNovative Piano* are some examples (eNovative Piano, 2020; Piano Marvel, 2020; Port 443, 2020). Such course material apps often boost learning and self-assessment as they record the user progress. In addition, app options allow users to choose different levels for examples helping both teachers and students in sequencing tasks.

Fourth, newer digital pianos' built-in functions bring other joys and possibilities to learning the piano. Various kinds of prerecorded rhythms and drum rolls for tedious technic exercises brighten up the classroom atmosphere. Keyboards feature a variety of rhythmic patterns that help students maintain consistent tempo throughout the class time. Ensemble rehearsals can be delivered effectively for duets by connecting two headsets to one keyboard or grouping multiple keyboards. In addition, a variety of sound effects from different instruments can be used creatively to engage students. Furthermore, students discover the possibility of splitting the keyboard sound into two different instruments at the same time in different registrations allowing students to imitate soundtracks from popular video games or movies, as well as to utilize various instrumentation options in their improvisation.

Fifth, technology supports collaborative student projects that can increase motivation and participation, and enable them to apply what they learned. In such group projects, instructional guidelines and rubrics for students can clarify expectations. Students can use their cell phone cameras and video editing programs such as iMovie or Adobe's Spark to create movies that demonstrate learning outcomes in personalized and entertaining ways. These projects cultivate a piano class community of learners. Students often show their excitement in discovering the right apps to use to collaborate and often choose their own method of communication. Mobile apps, such as SnapChat, Facebook Messenger, GroupMe and others, allows students to share files directly from their cell phones for editing and collaborative project creation, thus extending their learning beyond the brick and mortar classroom.

Participation in such activities that continues beyond the classroom may be challenging and time-consuming without consumer technology. Such technology facilitates effective communication and extends opportunities for collaboration in media projects that deeply reflect what students learn. While students learn traditional keyboard functional skills that are useful for their career, they experience the unlimited possibilities of technology to adopt in their own teaching environment.

Challenges and Suggestions

While technology evolves rapidly, incorporating newer technology in collegiate group piano classes may be limited by budget concerns. Universities may not be able to upgrade classroom equipment with the most advanced technology. Headset wear and tear problems, which may be the most common problem with keyboard labs, can be resolved by replacing the headsets with wireless Bluetooth ones. While students are digital natives and may prefer to function using technology, educators and universities should reach a mutual understanding that instructional technology should not become merely a tool for entertaining students, but help them better engage in learning and improve their performances. Considering the diverse levels of students in one classroom, technology enables teachers to constantly individualize curriculum to benefit all students.

The recent outbreak of COVID-19 has also made technology a necessity in delivering group piano instruction. Educators are striving to find solutions to create an effective virtual classroom environment, while students are using available devices to connect with their instructors and demonstrate their learning. Despite the advantages of technology that offer affordances for learning, both instructors and students have succumbed to its limitations. Instructors, for example, have modified the piano curriculum by combining synchronous and asynchronous activities due to audio quality issues in online meetings, where Internet bandwidth can affect the quality of the interaction. Such modifications require increased investment of time and energy, as utilizing conferencing software for instruction requires not only training and preparation but also increased cognitive load during the session due to the amount of details to tend to during live sessions. Furthermore, collaboration activities in class piano can also be one of the most challenging aspects of instruction in a virtual setting. Notwithstanding the variety of phone apps and computer software for sound/video editing tools, it is impossible to convey the dynamic of in-person collaboration even with significant modifications to the course format. Hence, educators around the globe should work towards overcoming these challenges with technology-enhanced curriculum that will increase engagement and satisfy individual preferences.

Conclusion

Technology can increase students' motivation and learning when instructors incorporate it in their classrooms to enhance both instruction and communication. Technology assisted instruction and projects can influence students to design curricula for their own students in the next generation. Maximizing the potential and possibilities with the collegiate piano lab technology resources is a key to enhancing students' motivation and learning outcomes. Innovative teaching methods for keyboard skills connect students and their desire to acquire keyboard skills. Ultimately, their experience can be applied to other music courses and their own future teaching environments.

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