



Distance Education in Piano Pedagogy Amidst Covid-19

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KeyWords: piano pedagogy; online piano pedagogy; self-directed learning; transactional distance.

ABSTRACT

Covid-19 cases are on the rise once again with Omicron variant sweeping through the globe. The effect on music education has never been poignant with schools closing down and face-to-face instruction halted in order to mitigate the effects of the highly transmissible variant. Given the current situation, studying piano in distance mode whether online, technology based such as using print, DVDs, among others forms, has prompted teachers and students to harness technological affordance in order to deliver optimal learning amidst learning disruption.

This paper discusses theoretical underpinnings, applications, challenges and recommendations of distance education as applied in piano pedagogy among piano students in University of Miami, Florida. While learning to play the piano is generally conceived as a face-to-face interaction between a student and teacher, 21st learning with the use of Information, Communication Technology (ICT) attests to the notion that technology based learning enhances deep learning-content interaction in self-directed learning (SDL) where a high degree of learning autonomy optimizes learning outcomes even with interdependence among students in a socio-constructivist setting as in the case of video conferencing conducted by a lecturer where a highly structured presentation diminishes dialogue between learner and teacher, increases transactional distance which signals autonomous learning to take effect.

The use of Distance Education in Music Pedagogy is already being done in many institutions. The benefits of adopting technology based learning answer to challenges in 21st century learning where Information, Communication Technology (ICT) is critical in flexible learning where learning control is maximized by the student anywhere, anytime. In today's high uptake of internet tools and applications, piano pedagogy adopts to changing platforms while delivering optimal result to aspiring pianists.

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Learning at a Distance Through Video Lecture: A Case in a Music Class

When I was in Florida, a friend of mine invited me to a series of video-recorded master classes in piano-playing. A group of about 30 Music students at the University of Miami gathered together at a concert hall where on a big screen onstage, a pianist conducted his pre-recorded video lectures and demonstrations on various techniques in playing the piano. In the videos, he gave guidelines on correct practicing, what exercises to use to develop dexterity, what important works of classical composers to be studied, among others. The students listened attentively to the highly structured presentation while jotting down notes occasionally. From time to time the video was paused and the students would comment on various issues about piano pedagogy. Students were composed of piano majors from different levels signifying various depths of understanding of the lecture content.

Concepts in Distance Education Applied

Based on my observation on the series of video lectures, 'the separation of learners and teacher (pianist) which profoundly affected teaching and learning indicated the presence of psychological and communication space called transactional distance (Moore, 1997). For one, even with the guided learning procedures such as correct methods of finger exercises, control of the use of the pedal for artistic interpretation of pieces conveyed to them by the teacher, students were still anxious because they were all seated without a piano around, and they were uncertain about what criteria for learning various techniques should be applied for productive playing. These apprehensions constituted the psycho-

logical aspect of transactional distance. Second, since the teacher was lecturing asynchronously, how would he be able to communicate with them especially in evaluating acquired technique? The highly structured lectures coupled with the absence of dialogue between the teacher and students in the asynchronous presentations, and the lack of any feedback directed to the pianist in real time, increased transactional distance.

Due to the high structure and absence of dialogue in a high transactional distance setting, the students became autonomous learners. In the discussions that followed the lectures in each session that I attended, learners interacted extensively among themselves so that the knowledge absorbed from the lectures became products of collective intelligence. In effect, they were learning independently and interdependently articulating autonomy as a combination of independence and interdependence (Chen and Willits, 1999, p.57) explored due to the high autonomy coupled with the presence of collaborative interactions and dialogues among students. Learner-learner interaction, between one learner and other learners, alone or in group setting, without the real-time presence of an instructor (Moore, 1989) was employed in this case. As students of piano performance, learners depended on each other's inputs in interpreting works of Chopin, for instance, based on readings from books and sharing experiences so that a high learner-content interaction juxtaposed with learner-learner interaction manifested in the educative pursuit.

To demonstrate the former, some students were reading books about Chopin, consciously talking to themselves while some were writing down notes as they voraciously read the texts referenced from the video being played. As such, a combination of learner-learner and learner-content interaction manifested as an application of the Equivalency Theorem (Anderson, 2003) which signifies high educational experience in the use of the aforementioned interaction modes with emphasis on learner-learner interaction in their case. It must also be noted that there was little learner-teacher interaction. Student behaviors and learning structures conveyed were based on the guidelines given to them by the teacher who designed pedagogy, outlined activities and motivated them as well.

The presence of "guided didactic interaction" (Anderson, 2003), a situation where a teacher's influence on instruction emanates in student consciousness, based on the video lectures, represented learner-content interaction just as well in this case. It is fitting to note that autonomous learners may at times be instrumentally dependent on teachers but they will not be emotionally dependent on them (Moore, 1997). From a pedagogical sense, a high social-constructivist approach (Anderson & Dron, 2011) was observed from the creation of knowledge based on social interaction among the students. Knowledge was created and enhanced in the social setting through various interactions that took place. For example, techniques of piano playing would normally be applied in various levels of intensity depending on student needs and capacities. As such, application of knowledge in piano virtuosity was based on internal interaction (Holmberg, 1989) putting emphasis on acquired knowledge from the teacher with the student's own individual perception and application.

Still on the subject of autonomous learning, two dimensions of distance education become important: the pedagogical dimension and the psychological dimension (Peters, 1998). From the pedagogical dimension, students' initiative in formulating learning such as incorporating new techniques with previously learned ones and articulating nuances of romantic playing such as expressive tonality indicated that a high autonomous learning was in effect. It also showed that autonomy was a mode of pedagogy by itself since the students devised activities on their own in the absence of the teacher. In the 'psychological dimension which focuses on meta-cognition where autonomy requires an awareness of one's knowledge and the ability to monitor and reflect on cognitive strategies during learning' (Peters, 1998), students' group discussions provided avenues for sharing and evaluating their experiences. For example, one student asserted that mastering piano technique should not be the main goal of a pianist but rather to unleash a deep, unique sound should guide student practice in order to achieve musicality. Internalizing these words made them realize that technique is secondary to musicality, a reflection that further enriched learning.

Self-directed learning (SDL) in connection with autonomous learning is worth pondering. Candy (1991) explains that the learner has control of his learning even with some influence from the teacher. Based on student interactions, even with self-directed effort to re-learn new ways of playing the piano in search of a unique sound, conformity with the teacher's instructions in the pursuit of such sound had to be applied. Moreover, since the class was composed of students from different year levels, it was a mixture of young and old learners who exhibited some level of authority in their respective groups at differing intensity. The apprentice students were more dependent on the teacher so that they were generally not ready for self-directed learning (Smith, n.d.). Such behavior was observed based on their comments about teacher-guided learning as an important factor although some of the students asserted total independence. This further explains that guided individual practice among pianists is critical in the development of correct techniques such as articulation, fingering and singing tones. Even with the independent nature of these practices, a teacher's 'guided didactic interaction' (Anderson) should always be present to hone skills.

On a critical note, SDL does not always hold that learning is individualized learning always conducted in isolation (Brookfield, 2009). In piano pedagogy, emphasis on individual rehearsal cannot be overstated considering the high degree of learner-content interaction which takes place in interpretation of music. That having said, group dynamics can still emanate while an individual student ponders on independent task of deciphering meanings. This analogy can be likened to a class setting where group discussions among learners instigate peer interaction but in paper examination, each student faces a self-directed deciphering of writing down answers.

Based on the foregoing applications of Distance Education (DE) concepts, what prompted me to study DE was the fascination with technology-driven education we have today. I would like to continue my studies in Music in distance mode making use of new technologies with focus on technique enhancement. For example, the 5th generation distance education (Taylor, 2011) called Intelligent Flexible Learning Model which emphasizes highly interactive multimedia that is so advanced, innovative and practical in today's learning, can be explored in music performance classes where the use of online sources or other electronic video media can be tapped in instruction and evaluation. The use of teleconferences in piano lessons, for instance, will reduce the one-to-one mode of instruction in standard classes paving the way for inter-

learner dialogue because learners will constantly hear from each other and can comment on it the same way a teacher does in individual lessons most especially in chamber music where ensemble playing requires sensitive listening with other instrumentalists in order to create harmony and balance.

Furthermore, asynchronous Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) which basically focuses on computer-based learning allows for reflective insights among students as it gives them more time to internalize concepts. In this manner, pianists can access lectures/demonstrations of their teachers asynchronously and apply them in their individual practice, as independent learning in piano pedagogy is high considering consistency in long hours of focused practice a pianist must indulge to perfect the craft. Learner-paced study (Anderson, Annand & Wark, 2005) which exemplifies independence will be a valuable model in this regard as group communication is somewhat minimized in individual practice. Paulse (2003) further articulates the challenge of the learner-paced model with regard to group communication, group collaboration, making piano performance course effective even in distance learning mode. One of the main reasons for a high learner-content and generally low learner-learner interaction in piano performance is the individual interpretation of the music being learned. In fact, a student is discouraged from listening to recordings of the same piece by other pianists while learning the piece for the reason that techniques, and nuances of interpretations can be influenced by other artists and the production of a unique sound is not achieved. Another striking feature of the learner-paced model that can be applied in piano pedagogy is that students may enroll anytime of the year and finish based on their individual strengths, patience, and interests. Keegan's (1990) principle of "reintegration" is relevant here as piano teachers can distribute carefully designed, step-by-step instructions on productive piano practice as handouts for student guidance just like in standard one-to-one instruction.

Conclusion

Finally, the use of DE in Music Pedagogy is already being done in many institutions. The benefits of adopting technology based learning answer to challenges in 21st century learning where Information, Communication Technology (ICT) is critical in flexible learning where learning control is maximized by the student anywhere, anytime. In today's high uptake of internet tools and applications, piano pedagogy adapts to changing platforms while delivering optimal result to aspiring pianists.

In many ways, learning to play the piano as a professional career or as hobby should not be hindered in a time of isolative situation brought about Covid-19 restrictions. While pervasiveness of online tutorials abounds in today's digital world, piano pedagogy in offline, distance mode using older technologies such as DVD-ROM, printed sheets, mass media tools should also be harnessed where highly structured content paves the way for autonomous, high learner-content interaction developing critical skills among students.

Challenges and Recommendations

The greatest challenge espoused in distance pedagogy in learning how to play the piano is the geographical distance between the teacher and student. Like any other instrument, piano playing requires immediacy of communication with the teacher facilitating, demonstrating, and verbalizing nuances of technique and expression in a natural, undisturbed and spontaneous manner. While all of the givens can be done via distance, the degree of communication is greatly reduced and transactional distance is heightened making it difficult to absorb and apply all learning applications. Second, learning autonomy may not produce quality for some learners who need constant guidance in their developmental stage. The culprit lies in developing wrong technique unnoticed by a novice learner simply because the teacher is not around to correct mistakes. Corollary to this idea is the learner's audacity to play the entire score without paying attention to small details which should be directed by the teacher. As such, self-direct learning can ultimately misdirect learning attention to lackluster playing as a disastrous art. Third, it is rightfully implied throughout this paper that the role of the teacher in distance learning is paramount even with learning autonomy in place. Whatever it is that mediates communication the fact remains that the teacher stays as pedagogical master in piano technique. Lastly, learning attention in distance mode can bring disruptive results in terms of concentration with all distractions in technological uptake, for instance.

As such, the following recommendations for functional literacy in piano pedagogy in distance mode are hereby stated:

First, students studying online piano must constantly check internet connectivity in order to have a smooth synchronous communication with the teacher. In case of signal disruption, learner-content interaction can suffice the need for deep learning such that self-evaluation, reflective performance with currency and immediacy are in order. Second, asynchronous learning due to poor internet connectivity must be absorbed by the piano student through self-directed learning approach where errors in practice are rectified, proper execution and lastly, individual interpretation is sought. By simply taking down notes of any significant development and reporting it to the teacher later, learning ensues continuity. This, however, can be a challenge in itself as focused attention is a profound necessity to act upon immediate errors. Third, separation between the teacher and student in distance education should not put the student in a box with fixated views, learning inadequacies as restrictions to magnify creative artistry in performance. In this regard, learning autonomously should welcome new opportunities and possibilities for human creativity. Fourth, technology is a medium not the message in 21st learning. Thus, it should be construed as an aid not the solution to solving technical and interpretive challenges in piano playing. Piano pedagogy is a dictum of musical expression, a human capacity to dwell upon critical and emotional elements in elucidating musical poetry. As such, pedagogy of nearness in both face-to-face and technology mediated learning should deliver quality learning.

As a concluding remark, Covid-19 restrictions are not supposed to deter aspiring musicians to expand musical horizons. The secret to exemplifying functional literacy in piano pedagogy is to continue learning, exemplify artistic endeavors as sacrosanct expressions where quarantine protocols turn into magical moments serving mental and spiritual balance.

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