MUSIC DISTANCE EDUCATION EXTENSION COURSES AT UFSCAR: A MODEL PROPOSAL

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ABSTRACT

The present paper regards the creation and offering of a Music Distance Education course aimed at the aptitude entrance examinations to the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCAR) College of Music Licentiate, and to the Open University of Brazil (UAB)-UFSCAR College of Music Education Licentiate. After analysing the data obtained during the course's creation and offering, based on a theoretical basis that approaches Music Education as well as Distance Education (DE), we came to a model proposal for similar courses regarding theoretical aspects of Music and Musical Perception delivered exclusively at a distance.

Keywords: DE; Music Education; University Extension.

1. Introduction

The present paper aims to present a new model proposal for a Distance Education (DE) university extension course that introduces basic musical concepts. Based on the experience from a preparatory course to the musical aptitude test of the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar) and Open University of Brazil (UAB-UFSCar) entrance examinations, we analysed this new proposal's planning, virtual environment creation and application phases.

The objective of this analysis is to propose a model for a fully DE course which could address laypeople, in terms of both on-line interaction and music perception aspects as well as theory. Having in hands data collected and stored at the *MOODLE* Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) - used in the prep course - and following a theoretical basis which deals with both DE and Music Education, we tried to reach a model that could supply the demands of our target public, i.e. applicants to the UFSCar College of Music Licentiate and the UAB-UFSCar College of Music Education Licentiate entrance examinations, as well as any person interested in acquiring basic knowledge of music theory and musical perception.

As such, the prep course was analysed as composed of two distinct moments: i. Planning and building up of the VLE and didactic material to be used by the students; ii. Course application. Eventually we reached a model proposal for an extension DE course on Music Education that is capable of going far beyond the limits of the campus and of interacting directly with the community outside the Academia circles, surpassing, even, great geographical distances.

2. Music technologies and the current scenario of Music Distance Education in Brazil

There is no questioning to the fact that the use of computers should by no means ever replace the music educator. However, many professors still show themselves in opposition to the adoption of such technologies. Such resistance is still present in professors of the Humanities and Arts, as in the case of Music, who have had little to no contact with modern, technological resources. Nevertheless, it is believed that raising awareness of computational fundamentals and tools available to

musicians and music professors may help them expand their knowledge and want to share their experiences with the application of technology to music teaching (FRITSCH et al., 2003, p. 141).

In the same sense, Freitas et. al. (2004, p.3) state about the importance of the music teacher's using new technologies:

> In the same fashion in which it happened to those resources, instruments and didactic materials that are now considered traditional, our beliefs stem from the central hypothesis that the technological instrumentalization by the music teacher is one of the very steps of the construction of new understandings about updating, intervening and using of such technologies as resources, instruments, didactic materials, spaces and media of Music Education. (FREITAS et. al., 2004: 3)

About the use of computers to the study of musical perception through ear training, Gohn (2009, p.284) emphasizes an extremely useful point:

> (…) the machine is never tired of doing exercises and correcting mistakes. Learners with access to the Internet use websites such as *Musictheory.net* (www.musictheory.net) to learn the theory and practice their perceptions of intervals, scales and chords, in a learning process that is subjected to continuous repetition of exercises. (GOHN, 2009: 284)

The current scenario of Music DE in Brazil is still marked by a feeble number of initiatives in the academic field (formal education). Since the inception of the Open University of Brazil (UAB), in 2005 – a DE program coordinated by the Brazilian Ministry for Education (MEC) – only three Federal Institutions of Higher Learning (or IFES, *Instituições Federais de Ensino Superior*) have created courses of Music Distance Education: UFSCar, UnB and UFRGS, the latter having kick-started its Music Distance Education program before being linked to the UAB, by means of a partnership with other seven higher education institutions.

3. The preparatory course: the multiple-subject teachers team and the creation of a VLE

In order to address the experience accumulated in the prep course for the musical aptitude test at a distance it is necessary to clarify some points about DE, its

teaching-learning processes and its actors. Teaching in DE, similar to regular courses, takes place in two distinct moments: a first moment of planning and a second one of application. However these moments are of a different nature in DE. What is done by a teacher in regular education is divided by a multiple-teacher team in DE. Mill (2002 apud MILL 2006. p. 67) defines Multiple-subject Teaching as the philosophy through which a team of workers is necessary to realize teaching-learning activities in DE.

In other words, what could be done by a single teacher in regular education is done by a team of teachers in DE who, in a given moment, plans all activities and then applies them. Also, planning of the teaching-learning activities in DE must be done minutely as opposed to regular education "in which the teacher may prepare a sketch only of the class for the next day (or even improvise a lecture without any prior planning)" (MILL, 2010: 3). All the pedagogical material and schedule must be already available to students at the beginning of the activities.

From among this multiple-subject teachers team, some are responsible for material creation only, while others are in charge of its application. Still others share in both fronts. PINHEIRO (2002) lists several professionals he judges indispensable to this group. From those we highlight the ones who, by his description, fit the team members in the preparatory course for the musical aptitude test:

- **Coordinator or Project Manager:** project's general manager;

- **Subject teacher:** specialist who contributes to framing the course and its implementation;

- **Content teacher:** responsible for the pedagogical material and its adaptation to DE;

- **Instructional designer:** realizes the course's blueprint along with the coordination and teachers;

- **Tutors:** work alongside teachers, helping students.

MILL (2006) characterizes such team in a similar manner, while using different terminology and admitting that one or more of the multiple-subject team members might accumulate more than one function. For instance, his denomination for subject Coordinator is the one:

> (…) responsible for elaborating the subject's content and coordinating the subject's tutors' and monitors' activities. In some cases, we observe that

> such teachers offer "classes" by videoconference and that, at times, are mistakenly called content teachers or subject teachers. (MILL, 2006: 68)

He also adds to the virtual tutor the definition of:

> (…) a specialist in the subject area of expertise and subjected, in all senses, to the subject coordinator. Etymologically, they are as closest as it can get to the teacher from traditional education. (MILL, 2006: 68)

Although Mill might disagree with Pinheiro's terminology, the term teacher was used according to the scheme of the latter for the prep course, as opposed to coordinator. That happened due to the fact that it was a UFSCar extension project under the UAB system, which uses the same teacher designation to what Mill calls subject coordinator.

In addition, some professionals accumulated some of such functions. Those in charge of being content teachers, at least in some occasions during the prep course, also acted as tutors, subject teachers (coordinating other tutors) and instructional designers. In other words, they interacted directly with students mediating their knowledge production, were responsible for the creation of the VLE and its media, and coordinated the multiple-subject team of tutors.

The UFSCar preparatory course for the musical aptitude test had five members in its multiple-subject team, represented below by letters of the alphabet. The following table shows the participants task division:

	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D	Participant E
Project Manager	X				
Content Teacher		X	X		
Subject Teacher		X	X		
Instructional Designer		X	X		
Virtual Tutor		X	X	X	X

Table 1: The multiple-teacher team

As shown in the table, two participants accumulated most of the tasks. They were responsible for the environment, tutoring coordination and direct interaction

with students. It resulted in a heavier workload in both phases of planning and application of the project to these two members.

For the design of the virtual learning environment the DE adaptations to pedagogical strategies and methodologies had to be taken into account. Still in his dissertation Pinheiro elucidates about pedagogical matters in DE:

> Pedagogical strategies for distance education courses must be based on theories that prize a constructivist approach, i.e., the individual and cooperative construction of knowledge by the very student through the media. Such strategies are, at the moment, the use of didactic material which incites the student to think, presenting challenges (problem situations), encouraging research, fomenting collaboration and cooperation through the Internet, making full use – to such an end – of discussion boards and forums so that students may create virtual communities where they themselves raise questions and look for answers. (PINHEIRO, 2002: 60)

Machado, while talking about virtual communities for learning and about how knowledge is constructed among its participants, states in his work that "it refers to a construction that is individual but it is reached through the collective, the exchanges – through the living experience in community." (MACHADO, 2007. p. 8)

Meanwhile, according to the target public at which these activities were aimed and due to the fact that this constitutes an extension course open to the community, outside of the academic sphere, the environment should be planned in a way that it addressed the needs of laypeople in terms of both music education and distance education. These were individuals who did not possess the bare minimum in notions of netiquette, were not used to participating in virtual discussion threads or even to building knowledge in collaboration with colleagues, neither possessed the self-sufficiency necessary to study by themselves outside the virtual environment.

It was necessary to create an environment that not only served the necessities of the UFSCar entrance examination applicants, but also that taught them to use the environment itself and to study autonomously while in cooperation with their colleagues. Additionally, before entering the environment the students had the first instructions on how to log in, through a support website.

Part of the environment had to be exclusively dedicated to basic directions as to how to browse *MOODLE* and its fundamental tools, how to update their profiles

and even short directions concerning how to study and do the activities. Also, part of the environment was dedicated to useful tips such as what was the best browser software to visualize the VLE and links that directed the students to websites with netiquette notions for smoother interaction. Lastly, an activity map was made available to the students containing the whole schedule which divided the course in modules called "unities".

The Music Theory and Music Education contents were based on previous editions of the UFSCar entrance examinations. Music Theory and Music Perception activities were adapted through audio, video and text tools. Perception activities contained audio files for the study of rhythmic, melodic and harmonic perceptions.

Since the course was expected to last beyond the aptitude examination dates, a forum was opened at the Complementary Topics unity so that students could debate the test and its content. This space was also used to divulge the names of those who passed the examination. That same unity contained a musical aptitude mock test in PDF format with questions and audio files which the students were supposed to listen in order to come up with answers.

All unities contained links with directions about the theme in question and the proposed activities. A Q&A forum was also common to all unities, through which students could post their problems and doubts so that teachers and tutors could provide help. In addition they could also resort to e-mail to such an end, but the use of forums was encouraged so that their doubts and the answers given by tutors and teachers could be available to all – as thought it had been a question asked in class and answered by the teacher before all students.

4. Relevant data to analyse the model

500 positions were opened to the preparatory course and all of them were applied for during the application phase. The results presented here had as its main source of information the final data collection, which took place at the end of the course. 18% of the total, i.e., 90 students, answered the final questionnaire. The set of objectives of said questionnaire was to collect data related to the students' general perception about the course and also to the students' profiles. Such data may be of use in the formulation of a final model, i.e, apart from shedding some light upon the target public's profile it may also provide students' feedback concerning the prep course.

4.1 Students profile

It was shown that 57% of the students were male while 43% were female. Previous music formation presented varied results with prominence of private classes (59%) and informal music courses (46%). The majority (67%) had never participated in a distance course. A brief analysis of this data highlights the importance of the creation of an adequate environment to a lay public as regards to DE, that is, for people who are not familiar with VLE's. It also points out the importance of Music Education-related subjects, taking into consideration the fact the vast majority of the students had only had instrument-playing classes and, additionally, that the UFSCar aptitude tests approach such questions.

4.2 Students' perceptions about the preparatory course

Most of the students (62%) showed positive responses to the course's VLE, with no difficulties in browsing through the environment. Furthermore, 71% stated that the course's content was essential for the completion of the aptitude test. The crushing majority (98%) believes that UFSCar should offer a larger variety of distance extension courses related to Music, through which we take that there is a clear deficiency in the offering of such opportunities.

4.3 On permanence and evasion

The issues about permanence and evasion are pertinent when dealing with an extension course and they are even more pronounced when it comes to DE environments. According to Favero and Franco (2006, p.9):

> (…) the evasion issue is a reality and almost every institution that offers DE courses, if not all of them, faces this problem. (…) when developing a DE course it is important that dialog be taken into account by allowing learning growth and lesser evasion from learners.

After the conclusion of the course it was also asked of the students, in case they had not finished it, to share the reasons why they did not make it to the end. Eighteen justifications were obtained and they were later categorized as show below:
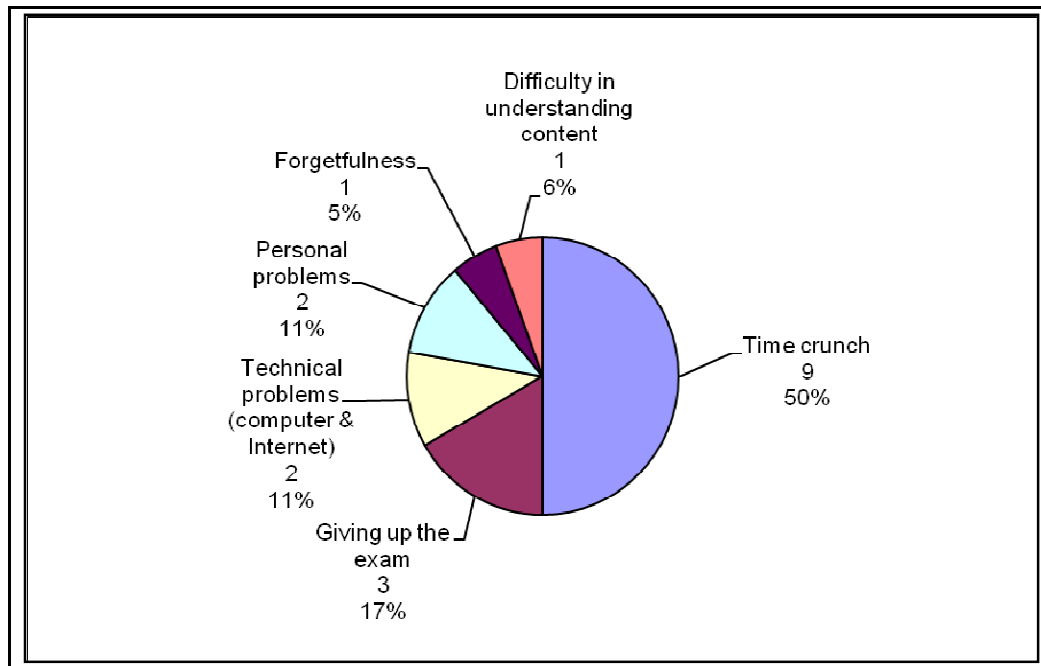
Graph 1: Validations regarding the non-completion of the course

From the eighteen replies obtained and analysed it can be noted that nine of them pointed out time as the principal factor for the non-completion of the course. From among these nine, three replies specified that the lack of time was due to work obligations and other studies, which reveals a certain difficulty in conciliating their personal routines with the distance education course.

From the remaining accounts, while the main objective of the course had not been to prepare students *strictly* for the UFSCar aptitude tests, three of the students justified their non-completion of the course by their giving up applying to the University's Music courses entrance examinations. Still two other replies alleged technical problems with computers and the Internet; two alleged personal problems; one student admitted to forgetfulness, and one of the cases showed lack of motivation due to non-understanding of the content.

In this regard, we must emphasize here the importance of the tutor in DE courses who should have as one of their outstanding qualities the ability to rescue students who are treading the way to evasion. The tutor in this case must look for alternatives as regards to the reintroduction of the student and provide them with a reflection about the importance of an agenda for systematizing study time.

5. Final considerations and future developments

After the offering of the preparatory course, an analysis of its planning, VLE construction and application phases was carried out. From this analysis, based on the theoretical reference, we were able to elaborate a model that may work as a proposal for an extension distance education Music course.

In this model, the planning starts with the constitution of a multiple-subject teachers team capable of building up an environment with activity proposals which make the construction of knowledge viable, in an autonomous, and yet cooperative way. It is also necessary that the participants possess not only adequate music knowledge but that they know how to adapt musical-pedagogical practises to DE.

In other words, they need to be on par with the technological tools and to know how to use them in a way that allows them to create relevant virtual activities for music learning, be it theory or perception. Ideally the professionals should not accumulate functions in order to not be overloaded by an excessively heavy workload. Team participants who are going to be in direct contact with the students, such as the virtual tutors, need to know how to mediate interaction among all those in the environment, stimulating learning and answering questions about the theory material, navigation problems and usage of the virtual tools.

The VLE must be adapted so the students may be able to study independently but in a way that also encourages student-to-student and student-to-tutor interaction. The schedule must be minutely planned and should be made available to students from the beginning. It must be taken into account that it is very likely that the target public is lay, not only concerning the music requirements of the aptitude test, but also concerning distance education and, therefore, is in need of assistance in that sense – from making use of the VLE tools to on-line interaction.

Lastly, it is necessary to understand that when we deal with distance education the students are the central figure in the construction of their knowledge and that they *are* able accomplish this while in interactivity with their colleagues, as mediated by tutors and teachers.

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