Music studies in synchronous learning environments

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Studying music at any level has been very traditional in comparison with other subjects. Classroom teaching, following the teacher, etc. are methods that are used both at elementary schools and universities. Computers help students to create and print music, but they do very little else. The term 'distance learning' means, or at least seems to suggest, music education as a correspondence course for amateurs.

Distance learning in music faces a variety of difficulties of which I would like to mention two: How to adapt existing distance learning practice, when one has to leave this practice because of the difference of the subject. Furthermore, there is quite natural reluctance to change one's established teaching habits and to be willing to spend extra time, within a busy schedule, to do so.

Distance learning has concentrated mainly on its asynchronous modes. The need for non-verbal, synchronous interaction in music studies is considered to be the main reason why distance learning has not been attempted until very recently. We have started to break the barrier by utilizing both asynchronous and synchronous techniques.

The staff training in the Finnish Virtual University has started and we can see slight adoption of new teaching habits. To strenghten this process of development we have planned a system for studies in music distance learning (for Bachelors and Masters of Art). Both these aims are part of our future vision. The background for this planning and some methods will be explained next.

In Finland there is a group called MOVE (the Finnish acronym for Networked Music Education) for research and training of new technologies. It is funded by the Ministry of Education, the Sibelius Academy and the Universities of Jyväskylä and Oulu. It coordinates the research and structures of networked music education in Finland including both Web-based and real time alternatives. For this study I interviewed MOVE's researcher Philip Donner. We share the problem of music distance learning.

According to this process it is possible to divide planning into three steps. The first step is the empirical gathering of data during a longer period. Then, using an analytical approach, one has to build a structural model. This model will test its particles and finally combine them into a system. The model or system is the basis of action theory.

During the process the existence of a concept is vital. There are particles that might not fit in with reality just now but they are still important for the theory.

Creating visions. A threat to this is dullness. 'Is it meaningful to do this' is the wrong question, 'why not' is the correct question. In the bureaucracy of universities another threat is the hierarchial top down -administration. It is the opposite of collective improvisation and exchange of ideas. On the other hand, one has to admit that strong resistance quite often guarantees the best progress.