Implementing a MELT-based Paraxial and Simultaneous Music Learning model for Piano Teaching

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Abstract

The traditional one-to-one master-apprentice teaching model, which dominates music instrumental education in music conservatories and private studios, is still a common mode of instruction to this date. In recent years, new teaching models such as the paraxial and simultaneous models have been advocated that steer away from this old model of music being regarded as merely aesthetic. A broader aim of humanistic education in new teaching models is emphasized where music making is both a product and process. In this study, a MELT-adapted Paraxial and Simultaneous piano learning model is presented with a 21st-century learning theme. The study involves two phases with action research in the first phase on one-to-one piano students to observe how best to test pilot the model. Phase two will involve more empirical data collection with case studies on small-group instrumental learning classes using the new model, and to study how student motivation and students’ music conceptual understandings are influenced.

Introduction

The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), which is one of the leading music examination authorities in the UK, has advocated a new teaching strategy termed “simultaneous music learning” in recent years (Harris 2006). Harris (2006) described one-to-one instrumental teaching as the master-apprentice model, which was traditionally promoted in the past by music conservatories and by teachers in schools and private studios. This model is now under question (Persson 1994; Persson, 1996b; Swinkin 2015) as traditionally most instrumental teachers’ lessons are dictated by the requirements of graded exams and focused mainly on modeling teacher’s playing and performing well in technical work, pieces, sight-reading, aural skills and music theory in segregation. Little has been taken into account on recent understandings about the learning
process and the role of a proficient teacher. This outcome-centered approach emphasize on teaching students on how to become a proficient performer while neglecting the importance of understanding and internalizing musical concepts.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

As a piano teacher of over fifteen years, I see many of my fellow instrumental teachers still adhering to the master-apprentice model with little awareness of recent advancement in learning theory research. Often there are many cases where students are just not motivated with many giving up on learning a musical instrument after years of persevering.

Through this research, I want to study how to improve piano teachings to promote better student motivation and understandings of musical concepts to steer away from the traditional methods of outcome-centered approach. The study attempts to address the following research questions:

1. Does a MELT-based paraxial and simultaneous model proposed in this short paper have an effect on improving student motivation and music understandings?
2. How can one effectively facilitate one-to-one piano lessons using this new model?
3. Can the model be applied successfully in a classroom environment for small-group digital piano classes where learning can take place co-operatively? Can the model be applied effectively for other musical instruments?
4. What are the problems and challenges in implementing this model? How do outcomes vary across different age groups?

**Literature Review**

1. **A Paraxial and Simultaneous approach to music learning**

In recent years, a paraxial philosophy in musical learning (Elliott, 2010) has been proposed. This is the first time that the value of music has been linked to the broader aims of humanistic education, moving away from a purely aesthetic education (Elliott, 2010). The word paraxial or praxial comes from the word “praxis” used by Aristotle in his Poetics. The word “praxis” connotes “action that is embedded in and responsive to a specific context of effort.” (Elliott, 2010). In the context of music, Paraxial philosophy emphasized that music should be understood in relation to values and meanings in the action of music making and listening. A central idea of paraxial philosophy is that music is both a product and process where listenership and musicianship is the key to understanding music. Students must be actively involved in music making, listening and make their own choices in authentic music-producing scenarios.

Harris and Crozier (2000) and Harris (2006) promoted a simultaneous approach to teaching where listening, aural work and sight-reading are all related to the
particular piece introduced. This approach is also the main focus of instrumental teacher courses offered by ABRSM in recent years. This integrated approach encourages students to listen and internalize to develop aural awareness, play and sing, and to create music through improvisation exercise and composing. As Harris (2006) points out, “techniques should serve the cause of music-making, not dictate it”. Figure 1 shows how the different musical elements and activities are inter-related and should be taught simultaneously with the piece a student is learning.

2. Co-operative Learning and Piano education

Co-operative learning is a well-researched peer learning strategy that encourages the positive interaction of students in small groups (Johnson and Johnson, 1992; Featherstone, 1986.) In the study of Goliger (1995), he developed and implemented a group piano program for high school students based on co-operative learning theory. In the study, Goliger (1995) found a “dramatic improvement in grade results” in final exam as well as “surprising musical and creative outcomes”. However, Fisher (2010) suggested that there were problems in the implementation of co-operative learning and many considerations are necessary before implementing.

Figure 1. Simultaneous Learning Map (Harris, 2006)

In a review by Cogdill (2015), he reasoned logically that teachers’ lack of understanding about current learning and motivational theories is detrimental to students’ music learning. Learning theories such as learners’ self-concept (Greenberg, 1970), the self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1995; Maehr, Pintrich and Linnerbrink, 2002) and expectancy-value theory (Eccles and Wigfield, 1995; O’Neill and McPherson, 2002) explain what factors motivate students to determine a learner’s success in any given field. In instrumental learning, motivation theories are extremely relevant as student dropout rates are traditionally high.

Cogdill (2015) had provided a good review on these theories. Self-concept in music is a critical factor to determine whether a student has the motivation to persist in music learning. This self-concept begins at an early age and a positive musical self-concept and regarding oneself as a capable musician at an early age is crucial for learners to persevere in music learning. Self-efficacy theory is defined by Bandura (1995) as “one’s beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments (p.2)”. Every music teacher should strive to foster a positive self-efficacy in their students so they can experience success. Students who have little self-efficacy will struggle with internal dialogues that remind them of failures and would lead to giving up an instrument. The expectancy-value theory explains that for a student to be motivated in an activity, they must place value on it first and also expect themselves to be successful with it.

In addition, music educators in the information age must promote a growth mindset in students to motivate life-long music learning. Music teachers’ mindsets can reinforce a fixed mindset or a growth mindset (Dweck, 2007) in their students. Cogdill (2015) argued that music is inherently human; participation and enjoyment of music should be promoted across a learner’s whole lifetime. The traditional classroom model of ensembles and teaching pedagogy may not be the most efficient way to tap into the musical creative abilities of this generation. Music teachers should also provide feedback that encourages students to be lifelong learners of music. They should also provide an enriched environment with challenges, interesting repertoire and opportunities to compose or improvise, perform and arranging music through sound-mixing (Cogdill, 2015).

**Methodology**

This pilot study will modify an existing Research Skill Development (RSD) framework (Willison & O’Regan, 2007) and the MELT model. The MELT and RSD models are student-centered and bring together different educational theories into one framework. They combine well-researched educational perspectives such as student autonomy (Boud, 1988; Butler, 1999), Bloom’s cognitive realm taxonomy (Bloom, Furst, Hill & Krathwohl, 1956) and self-constructivist (Kelly, 1955) and social constructivist theories (Vygotsky, 1978).

This paper adapts this MELT diagram to a paraxial and simultaneous philosophy of music instrumental learning with a 21st century learning theme. The model will
be implemented and tested for its effect on student motivation and learning outcomes. Use of ICT and the need for positive teacher feedback are also integrated in this adapted model to promote music life-long learning. See Figure 2. The phrase ‘when in doubt, go to the center’ has been revised to ‘when in doubt, go outside the center’ to emphasize that in order to achieve the goals of performing well (facet F in the center), it is crucial that students have well-understood facets A to E (outside the center) well because they provide a solid foundation to achieve the end outcome of performing successfully.

Figure 2. Paraxial and Simultaneous Piano Learning Pentagon is a MELT by Maggie M.K. Chan created on August 2017. See www.melt.edu.au & contact a1722647@student.adelaide.edu.au for any comments.
The pilot study will involve two phases. The first phase will involve action research on my students’ one-to-one piano lessons. A five-week reflection diary will document the students’ progress with cycles of improvements in each week. A self-reflection diary will also be kept to document my own learnings through
instigating the change in teaching styles. The main purpose is to develop teaching strategies, lessons plans and to gain experience in implementing the new model.

The second phase of this study will involve more formal data collection on group digital piano classes. Following university ethical approval, students will be chosen with their parents’ consent from a start-up company. Further collaborations from local primary schools and local university will be sought to extend data population and also to test for generalizability of results from the company. The age group will be chosen from eight years old to ten years old where students will have better co-operative learning skills. The group size will be from 6-8 and the duration of the intervention will be five weeks.

Several case studies involving different classes will be conducted, including in-class observations, interviews with music teachers, students and parents, and student surveys designed to observe student engagement and motivation qualitatively before and prior to the intervention. To ensure reliability and validity in these case studies, a number of methods of data collection will be used to enable observation of possible triangulation with different sources of data.

**Preliminary Results and Discussion**

The following preliminary results document five weekly piano lessons with one ten-year old Japanese student with intermediate piano skills. The series of reflections focus on how the new model impacted on the student’s musical learning and motivation as well as my own teaching practices. The one piece that we have chosen to learn is a Mozart Sonata in C Major.

After implementing the six facets, I found that Student A was asking more questions in the third and fourth weeks. She no longer just followed my suggestions on dynamics but would listen to different musicians playing on YouTube and plan her own interpretations. She also started to evaluate and gave her own opinions about how dynamics should be arranged. Even though there were discrepancies between the harmonic progression and the dynamics she suggested, her musical style was quite mature for that of a ten-year-old; something which I had not noticed before. She also started to appreciate the harmony and shaping of melody and focused more on the musical ideas rather than her technical problems. In fact, through understanding the musical ideas, her technical problems were also partly remedied.

It is too early to know whether this model will have equally positive effects on other students, as we need to wait for more student participation. But as a teacher of fifteen years, I know that it has made a significant impact on how I conduct my lessons. I think this new method in teaching really helped the students to internalize the music through a student-centered approach in investigating the musical elements and be creative. Also implementing such a new method was rewarding for me because it allowed me to facilitate innovative teaching strategies. This has made the lesson more interesting for me. By explicitly stating the cognitive steps in the model, the students are made to think and reflect, rather
than just modeling the teacher’s playing. As a result, students take a more proactive role in learning, which makes them more enjoyable to teach.

Even though the melody that the student wrote was not very well balanced, I did praise her for her effort and assure her that she would improve as she listened to more classical music. I also gave her a few examples of how I would improvise and asked her to think about improving her melody as homework. I hope by doing so will encourage her positively to instill a mindset of lifelong learning.

However, this integrative approach takes lots of class time and it is not practical to implement this in the context of every song that she learns. But surely, it can be facilitated for more than 10 songs a year at least. The MELT framework complements the weakness in the simultaneous model as it describes a sequence of thinking and encourages the student to reflect on his/her own playing and perform the piece as a project. Thus apart from exams, the students feel that they are consistently working towards an outcome of creation and performance and to realize that the understandings of the musical concepts, their self-reflection and continual learning is crucial in order to succeed.

**Conclusions**

1. The traditional way of teaching piano may not be the best approach to teaching students in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. In the light of new evidence on the science of learning, instrumental music teachers need to understand theories of motivations such as self-concept, self-efficacy and expectancy-value and take them into account in planning their lessons. The rising popularity of the simultaneous methods in the ABRSM calls for a rethink about how instrumental teaching should be conducted.
2. This MELT Pentagon can be used as a framework for music instrumental lesson planning and formative assessment to encourage more student-centered learning with an emphasis on listenership and musicianship.
3. Implementing this model also could potentially change the teachers’ attitudes about lessons, which in turn could have an impact on the quality of the lesson conducted.

**References**


