

Digital learning resources in higher music education

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In recent years, there has been ever increasing access to, and use of, digital educational resources in higher education in Norway (Fosland, 2015). There is a clear policy, both from the educational institutions themselves, and from the government, to take advantage of the possibilities that digital learning resources offer to the field of education (Stortingsmelding 27, 2000-2001, strategisk plan for NMH, 2015¹). Several studies have been performed on the contemporary use of digital educational resources in higher education in Norway (Fosland, 2015, Ørnes, 2015), but these studies principally focus on study programs where the traditional way of lecturing, with a teacher talking to a large group of passively listening students, is dominant. Higher music education is different from the majority of study programs in universities when it comes to teaching traditions; in music education an apprenticeship-like method with teachers working with one student at a time, or with a few students at a time, is more common. Music education is also focused on working with practical skills, not so much with learning a large amount of theory as is common in most other study programs. Because of this, the kinds of digital learning resources that are used in music education will be different those that are used in other university subjects. In the autumn and winter of 2016/2017 I performed the study "Digital learning resources in higher music education". This study investigates music students' attitudes to, and habits concerning, the use of digital learning resources. Based on this study, I will through this paper focus on two aspects concerning digital learning resources:

- Today's music students: What kind of attitudes and habits do they have towards the use of digital learning resources?
- Digital learning resources in a critical-pedagogical perspective.

The keywords for presentation are the *ability to reflect*, and the ability to *creative thinking*, *content criticism* and *source criticism*. The mindset from central critical pedagogs, such as Henry Giroux (2011) and Paulo Freire (1974), concerning the necessity of a critical

¹ [http://nmh.no/om musikkhogskolen/strategi-og-planer](http://nmh.no/om_musikkhogskolen/strategi-og-planer), sett 21.08.2016.

pedagogy to develop a critical mind with ability to reflection, is central to the discussion.

Method

As mentioned earlier, I recently performed the study "Digital learning resources in higher music education" to achieve information about music students' habits and attitudes towards the use of digital learning resources as a part of their education. The information was collected by use of a survey, and by use of semi-structured interviews. Twenty students participated in the study, which took place at the Music Conservatoire at the University of Tromsø. Twelve of the students participated by answering the survey, while eight were interviewed. The participants came from both the classical and popular music streams, from all four years of the bachelor program, and were gender balanced.

The study focused on the following questions: What kind of digital learning resources do the students use as a part of their music education; which parameters are important to the students when selecting digital learning resources; to what extent do they wish to use digital learning resources as a part of their education; to what extent do they experience that they receive qualified guidance through their education in finding and using digital learning resources; what are the students' experience of the advantages of digital learning resources; and what challenges do they experience in using such resources?

Digital learning resources: an integrated part of today's education

"we are on the internet, we use this stuff. It's an active part of our lives"
(participant in the study).

All participants in the study answered that they use digital learning resources as an integrated part of their education. They listed a large number of examples on websites, programmes, apps etc that they often use. The most frequently mentioned resources were YouTube, Spotify, IMSLP, iRealPro, Sibelius, Wikipedia, Trel.org og EarMaster. This selection of digital learning resources represent a wide spectrum of

learning resources: At one end there is EarMaster, which has a defined and particular content with a specific progression. At the other end is YouTube, where subject-specific educational goals determine the didactic use of the site.

All of the participants in the study answered that they use digital learning resources on a daily basis, and often on their own initiative. Several students did, however, emphasize that digital learning resources must only be a supplement to ordinary lessons with a "live" teacher, and that the personal guidance that they get through one-to-one-instruction or instruction in small groups cannot be replaced.

Despite the fact that all of the participants use digital learning resources frequently, only a few of them had received guidance in how to find such resources, how to evaluate the quality of them, and how to use them. In the extent that they had received guidance, it was through specific suggestions of websites and apps. The students had in general a low consciousness of the problematic aspects of digital learning resources, although they were aware of the need for source criticism to avoid fake facts. On a question concerning which parameters are most important when choosing a digital learning resource, many of the participants answered that the price of the resource, and user-friendly material, are most important; sometimes more important than, or equal to, content criticism and source criticism. This shows the importance of guiding the students in a critical use of digital learning resources, and of a critical pedagogy in a society where access to information, and to digital learning resources, is great and increasing.

A critical-pedagogical perspective on digital reality in education

The Music Conservatoire at the University of Tromsø states on its website: "Our aim is to educate performers and music pedadogs with the will and ability to create development and change in their fields" (UiT.no²). Achieving this vision demands an education where the students develop their aptitude for creativity, reflection, and independent, critical thinking. This should be reflected in the way of teaching, in the

² https://uit.no/om/enhet/forsiden?p_dimension_id=88173. Sett 14.02.2017

choice of teaching methods, educational resources, and in the way that educational resources are used.

Digital learning resources are often easy accessible, and offer many answers and a large quantity of information. The demand for the user to be reflective and critical when reading or using the material is rarely present. An unconscious use of digital learning resources might lead to a kind of pedagogy that is *instrumental*: where the students learn through a passive transmission of knowledge, and where the education fails to develop important abilities such as the ability to reflect and think creatively. In the perspective of music education, that kind of pedagogy stands in the way of development and change, both when it comes to rehearsal practice, musical interpretation, and musical performance. In the societal perspective, that kind of pedagogy undermines the democracy, who only can properly exist in a society where the population has the ability to reflect and think critically (Giroux, 2011). Important critical pedagogs, such as Giroux and Freire, insist on a *problem-based* pedagogy to stimulate the students aptitude to reflection and creativity (Freire, 1947).

” A problem-based pedagogy sees the world as a world in development and change (...). Problem-baser pedagogy is based on the ability to think creatively, and stimulates true reflection and action” (Freire, 1947).

Through a problem-based pedagogy, students and teachers can use digital learning resources as part of a process where the students *construct* their own knowledge and insight, e.g. the teacher can ask the students to compare different performances of the same piece. The students must explain the characteristics and differences in the performances, and link these differences to existing theory of e.g. performance practice. These kinds of tasks will stimulate the students’ abilities for critical, independent thinking and reflection. The streaming channels of today, such as YouTube and Spotify, will be important educational resources when working with these kinds of tasks. The same can be said about the great amount of accessible information on the internet. Later, when the students will interpret the piece themselves, the insight that they achieved from the task will make creativity possible.

The study that I performed shows that students *are* aware of the importance of source criticism when using digital learning resources. The importance of source criticism is, of course, also present in the use of non-digital learning resources, but some aspects of digital learning resources make source criticism even more fundamental:

When publishing on the internet, there is no demand for editorial approval, peer review, or quality assessment. Basically, anyone can publish anything. Because of this, knowledge about and consciousness around who produced the material is of great importance. Factors as the author's background, education, and social, political, and professional point of viewing the world, together with their attitudes, professional status, values, views on knowledge production, and perspective on the subject to be taught, will contribute in the selection of knowledge that is emphasized and communicated.

The lack of editorial review on educational resources published on the internet creates a need for questioning whether somebody, and eventually who, profits when students learn the subject from a certain perspective. Is knowledge communication part of political or commercial propaganda? The focus on fake and alternative news due to Trump's inauguration as US president, offers a relevant example of the necessity of critical awareness in handling knowledge and information communicated through digital channels.

The ever increasing amount of accessible digital learning resources, combined with the aim from the educational institutions, in line with students' wishes, to use such material, makes it more important than ever before to maintain critical pedagogy in higher education. Critical awareness in dealing with digital learning resources must be focused on, and my opinion is that there is a need to developing systematic, methodic, educational material for higher music education that focuses on analyses of digital learning resources.

From time to time institutes such as Norgesuniversitetet³ offer money to support the development of digital educational resources for higher education. To receive such funding, the learning resource usually has to either stimulate student activity in the learning process, or create links between education and professions. It is seldom

³ <https://norgesuniversitetet.no>

demanded that the learning resources to be produced aims to stimulate the students' ability to think critically, creatively, and independency, and to reflect on their learning. In my opinion, this should be changed, so that a central requirement of such funding is that the material supports the development of these abilities.

By focusing on these matters, digital educational resources can, to a greater extent, contribute to educating citizens who can think critically and become socially engaged, and to educating performers and pedagogs who are able to, and willing to, creatively develop and change their professional fields.

Sources

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