

“The Next Level”: Investigating teaching and learning within an Irish traditional music online community

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Abstract

Online music communities offer a new context and culture for musical participation globally. This article, employing a socio-cultural theoretical lens, examines how the Online Academy of Irish Music (OAIM) functions as a teaching and learning online community for Irish traditional music. Findings from qualitative case study research present observations of practice from the OAIM website, forums, video tutorials, and Facebook posts over a 9-month period. In addition to these collective insights, findings from participant logs and interviews with the tutors offer individual insights into the online case study. Questions are posed regarding the pedagogy of e-learning, the development of a “shared practice” and the influence of roles and relationships within the community. The online medium of interaction raises important issues for the growing technological culture of music teaching and learning and the study seeks to understand this new context for musical participation.

Keywords

Collaborative learning, Irish traditional music, Music community, Music education, Online learning, Shared practice.

Music teaching and learning that occurs online represents an emerging fast-changing environment for musical participation. The online nature of this case study sets the context for investigating the teaching and learning of Irish traditional music through the development of a “shared practice” as it is built up through roles and relationships within the online community. This research into an Irish traditional music web-based learning platform explores an online music community (Salavuo, 2006) in depth, in order to interrogate specific online issues regarding: the development of a shared practice, technological mediation, e-learning, and roles and relationships. The socio-cultural context for this case study reflects this contemporary technological environment for music education and so provides a means to understand and problematize this relatively new form of music teaching and learning.

This case study examines the Online Academy of Irish Music (OAIM) which represents a “new music learning territory” (Waldron & Veblen, 2008, p. 107) or an “online music learning environment” (Ruthmann, 2009, p. 131), both of which have gained increased attention within music education research in recent years (Burnard, 2009; Kibby, 2000; Partti & Karlsen, 2010; Salavuo, 2006; Waldron, 2009, 2011, 2013). Such online “musical worlds” (Finnegan, 2007) could also be conceptualized as representing a “digital habitat,” which is defined as:

a dynamic, mutually-defining relationship that depends on the learning of the community. It reflects the practices that members have developed to take advantage of the technology available and thus experience this technology as a “place” for community. (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009, p. 38)

This notion of interactive learning through community and technology extends the concept of “communities of practice” (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). The CoP model encapsulates a socio-cultural learning framework where concepts including collaborative learning, negotiated goals, shared repertoire, the importance of shared knowledge (as opposed to individual knowledge) and

social interaction, help to define the community dimensions of “mutual engagement,” “shared repertoire” and “joint enterprise” (Wenger, 1998). Applying a CoP lens to the case study, learning through interaction and participation is all-important within the online community.

The theories of Pierre Bourdieu are also relevant to the investigation of shared practice that underpins a CoP model of learning. “Fields of practice” (2002, pp. 230–231), Bourdieu argues, are the social and economic interactions of aesthetic experience across social classes. These fields of practice Bourdieu (2002) compares to a sporting field, where “agents and groups of agents are thus defined by their relative positions in this space . . . the space can also be described as a field of forces” (p. 230). According to Bourdieu, knowledge is gained through participation in a social world through the integration of agent, world and activity (1977, 1990). Relating back to a CoP framework, Lave and Wenger (1991) expand on this view of social practice claiming that “learning, thinking and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world” (p. 51). This world is socially constituted; objective forms and systems of activity, on one hand, and agents’ subjective and intersubjective understandings of them, on the other, mutually constitute both the world and its experienced forms. Relating this to the study then, the online music community within this theoretical framework is situated within social “fields” of play with several “agents” (such as subscribers and moderators). The field of practice can be equated to the web platform where interactions are played out to build shared practice.

Online music communities, which Salavuo (2006) claims have become “mainstream environments of musical practice” (p. 265), have attracted new research as well as debates in the field of music education. Mansfield (2004) interrogates immersion in this “technoculture” (p.44), claiming:

What constitutes musical knowledge and skill and how and what students learn or should learn are questions shrouded in uncertainty as knowledge territories of music education have become de-centered. (p. 44)

Mansfield cautions that musicality should not be lost to new technologies that are driven mainly by global neoliberal economic policies. She further states that “technological literacy and literacy in the arts ought not to be taken on without this sheltering and protection of musicality and its being” (2004, p. 53). In light of such caveats the case study examines how music teaching and learning processes within the OAIM remain domain-specific within a shared practice.

In a study of the online community mikseri.net in Finland, Salavuo (2006) found that the domain of music was actually crucial to the motivation to join and learn within the online community, as “online communities are usually domain-specific, and expertise is expanded within them” (p. 255). In studies of Old Time and Irish Traditional online communities (Waldron, 2009; Waldron & Veblen, 2008), similar findings emerge where a passion for music itself fuelled online interaction and learning. “Participants are aware of their learning styles and how to learn: they use, adapt and manipulate technology for music learning; ask for feedback; help one another; freely share resources; ask and answer questions; and demonstrate knowledge and understanding” (Waldron, 2009, p. 109).

Through such shared musical interests, it is found that online music communities work in a similar vein to offline ones. Waldron and Bayley (2012), in their ethnographic study of the OAIM, found that the tutors were “first and foremost a locally based IrTrad [Irish traditional music] community before OAIM became an online entity” (p. 64). Therefore, the offline domain specific expertise and networks amongst the actual tutors impacted on the quality and reputation of provision online.

Partti and Karlsen (2010) argue that online music communities “challenge music educators to a profound reconsideration of where, how and by what means people become musically educated in this day and age” (p. 379). Through the examination of music teaching and

learning within the OAIM this case study aims to capture a unique window into these continually developing online music communities and contribute to the knowledge base to inform new directions in this area of teaching, learning and research.

Methodology

Table 1. Data fieldwork period.

| OAIM fieldwork phases | Activity | Methods | Data collected |
|--|---|---|---|
| Phase 1 Oct, Nov, Dec 2010 | Negotiating access Building relationships Making detailed observations Collecting data Distributing and collecting logs Preliminary analysis of data | Observations Informal meeting with co-founder Participant logs | Observational field notes of website and video tutorials Threads from discussion forums Participant log 1 entries |
| Phase 2 Jan, Feb, March 2011 | Observing online interactions and video tutorials Distributing and collecting logs Continued preliminary analysis of data | Observations Participant logs | Observational field notes of website and video tutorials Threads from discussion forums and Facebook posts Participant log 2 entries |
| Phase 3 April, May, June 2011 | Conducting interviews Transcribing interview data Making detailed observations of website, discussion forums, and Facebook page Observation from the “cyber session” Distributing and collecting logs Continued preliminary analysis of data | Interviews Observations Participant logs | Observational field notes of website, video tutorials and “cyber session” Threads from discussion forums, “cyber session” and Facebook posts Participant log 3 and 4 entries Interviews: - 3 individual interviews |

A qualitative instrumental case study approach was employed in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the teaching and learning processes within the OAIM. A leading expert in case study research, Robert Yin, asserts that “the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena” (2009, p. 4). Using a sequential design (Creswell, 2007, 2009), OAIM activities and interactions were examined over three phases within a 9-month fieldwork period from October 2010 to June 2011 (see Table 1).

Observational data of video tutorials, a cyber session, 1 chat forums and Facebook posts presented collective understandings of the shared practice within the OAIM. Individual participant logs as well as interviews with the co-founder (Kate) and two of the tutors (Ben and Tim) allowed for further individual accounts of the OAIM teaching and learning experiences. Four participants (Alice, Irvine, Lauren and Andy) within the OAIM kept complete participant logs and these were also used for analysis within this article. Through utilizing these varied research methods, data was triangulated, as promoted by case study methodologists (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 2009; Robson, 2002; Yin, 2009).

The online interactions through the OAIM chat forums and Facebook posts are forms of group, dialogical data. As such, they are particularly vital to building up a picture of shared practice within the online music community. All data was imported into the qualitative data software package NVivo and went through multiple phases of analysis. These phases of analysis followed a procedure whereby data was coded through an “immersion approach” (free nodes) and a “thematic approach” (tree nodes) (Robson, 2002, p. 258) to allow for inductive and deductive analysis, respectively. The thematic approach drew from reviewed literature. For example, “shared practice” as a literature-related code, resonated strongly with the writings of Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 2002).

Specific considerations are required due to an examination of the OAIM being an online case study. Ethical considerations are therefore important and permission was granted initially through the co-founders and tutors. Merriam (2009) states that “explicitly considering and describing the impact of these factors is a new responsibility of the qualitative researcher” (p. 162). Similar to Waldron (2009, 2011, 2013), the researcher role in examining the OAIM was one of a “lurker;” essentially an observer who does not input into online discussions. While there were concerns over the hidden nature of this role, gaining informed consent was of

crucial importance here. Once permission was gained through the “gatekeepers” (moderator and tutors), information about the research was posted on the discussion forum, Facebook page, and monthly e-newsletter. An email was also sent directly to all subscribers of the website. Participants were given assurances regarding the anonymity of their posts and were told that they could withdraw themselves from the research at any time or request that their posts on message boards would not be used. The other forms of data collection (interviews and participant logs) gained direct informed consent. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to retain anonymity.

The case study

The OAIM (www.oaim.ie) is a web-based platform for delivering Irish traditional music tuition online. Set up in October 2010, with an office base in County Clare in the south-west of Ireland, the website involves an e-learning system where tutorials combine video, audio, manuscript, text and optional feedback. It aims to “become a large online community of tutors and students of traditional Irish music” (OAIM website, 30 June 2011). It is a subscription site where free basic membership allows one to browse the site with limited access to sample lessons (“tasters” of the video tutorials). A full access subscription incurs monthly or weekly fees, which gives unrestricted access to the website and its resources.

By the end of the data fieldwork period (June 2011), the site had over 120 video tutorials available across seven instruments used in Irish traditional music: fiddle, bouzouki, bodhrán, tin whistle, Irish flute, uilleann pipes and concertina, in addition to Irish singing. These videos attempted to mimic offline Irish traditional music pedagogy where learning is “by ear” and the student learns phrase by phrase through repetition. The tutors are highly reputable musicians and educators of national and sometimes international acclaim in Irish traditional

music circles. The OAIM also has chat forums for subscribers, monthly emailed newsletters for basic members and subscribers, as well as a Facebook page with open access.

Discussion of findings

For the purposes of this article, the findings are presented here under three themes of: the pedagogy of e-learning; shared practice; and roles and relationships. Data across all sources (see Table 1) is drawn upon to illuminate significant findings and issues in relation to teaching and learning within the OAIM.

The pedagogy of e-learning

E-learning is the most significant recurring theme within the NVivo analysis, with 71 coded references across 13 data sources. The structure of the OAIM e-learning system on the website is set out as a four-step pedagogical process: (1) online courses, (2) support materials, (3) chat forums, and (4) optional feedback. Video tutorials employ an Irish traditional music pedagogy that encourages aural and oral learning through repetition, albeit in a technologically mediated space. Sheet music, mp3 audio files, discussion forums for subscribers and tutors and other relevant resources are offered as support materials.

Subscribers can avail themselves of a course of video tuition with learning tools such as notation and then interact with the tutors and other subscribers through the classroom chat forums. Subscribers can gain specific tutor feedback by purchasing “tokens” where subscribers upload a video or audio of their playing and feedback is provided from the tutor.

All of the video tutorials take place in the tutors’ homes and so each one has a distinctive background. The tutors sit closely in front of the video camera and talk, play and/or sing

directly into it. Each course follows a course structure where tunes are taught over 12–14 lessons, which last approximately 15–30 minutes each. Technique, skills and style are developed or scaffolded through the repertoire. The repertoire spans different Irish traditional genres, including hornpipe, jig, set dance, slow air and reel.² The pedagogy of the tutorials builds on such aspects as ornamentation, variation, phrasing and articulation over the full course, through actual repertoire/tunes.

The video tutorials promote a traditional style of learning Irish music which is often referred to as “passing it on” (an aphorism used to describe oral transmission). In this way, traditional music pedagogy is transformed through technological mediation. Instrumental tuition is performed aurally, with tunes and songs taught phrase by phrase. For example, a course in “fiddle basics” sees the tune *Rose in the Heather* taught through phrase-by-phrase repetition of the first part of the tune, with a focus on “rolls” (a technique in ornamentation) worked into the lesson through actual tune playing. From the video observations, there is strong focus from the tutors on repetition and imitation, as is customary in the teaching of Irish traditional music. In the pre-recorded video tutorials the learner is encouraged to “try that again” or repeat sections, despite the tutor not actually hearing the practice. Here, the tutors often use language associated with face-to-face lessons, such as praising the learner after a phrase is practised or repeated. Comments such as “well done,” “very good” and “that was great” are used frequently across all courses; on average, 10 phrases of praise per lesson were recorded.

The video tutorials’ use of oral transmission practices is in keeping with the traditional culture of the genre. Comments on the chat forums highlight the importance of visual learning for the subscribers. For instance, Paul posts:

Although I've been playing wooden flute for two years I still consider myself a beginner... and without realizing it, I was developing some bad habits. Seems like I was spending as much time trying to figure out how to interpret ornamentation from books and write down the "notes" as I was actually playing them!? Since finding you guys, I have stopped writing everything down and instead, will just watch you play slowly through a tune. This has REALLY freed me up...its actually fun to practice now. The more I practice, the more fun it is, and the more fun it is the more I play. HaHa. (Paul, Retrieved from the OAIM website, 20 June 2011)

In the extract above, Paul essentially finds "fun" through e-learning with the OAIM and he claims he was "freed up" by abandoning standard notation. This reinforces the pedagogical effectiveness of Irish traditional music oral transmission which is being transformed in a new media context through OAIM video tutorials.

It emerged that practising habits for learning through the OAIM vary from person to person. However similar features of the use of learning tools (such as notation and metronomes), and specifically e-learning tools (such as software to slow a tune down as well as the OAIM video tutorials), are common. For example, Alice uses multiple resources for practising, including the video tutorials, notation, books and specialized software, therefore mixing technology with more traditional tools for learning:

I listen to the videos and then play along with the sheet music. I have not tried by ear very much but I will. I practice in my apartment in NY in the living or dining room with the computer on. I then practice from many books. I have other material using "Transcribe" which slows it down for me to play. (Alice, participant log 2, 20 March 2011)

With e-learning, the learning pace is dictated by the learners' own time with the function of being able to rewind, pause and replay the lessons and this is encouraged in the videos by the tutors. This finding resonates with those of Waldron and Veblen (2008), who found that "Irish instrumental music offers a most convenient and portable meme for transmission in emerging media. Each tune is a complete unit, a small and finite form that includes repetition and opportunities for variation within limits" (p. 101).

Within the interviews with the co-founder (Kate) and tutors (Ben and Tim), there is a strong sense that e-learning is emerging as an important new means of Irish traditional music tuition.

Kate comments:

[Y]ou get to a point in life where you know what you're good at. Particularly I love teaching music one on one, it's what I've had the pleasure of doing over the past 10 years...now it's just really bringing it to the next level.
(Kate, interview, 27 May 2011)

The tutors are excited about exploring a new online environment as a new approach to Irish traditional music teaching and learning, with notions of expanding what is possible or “bringing it to the next level.” There is an exploratory or experimental feeling to all of this, as Kate claims, departing from 10 years of experience in face-to-face tuition. Ben is keen to reiterate the value of “the local” and high teaching standards regardless of the medium (live or in cyberspace). He states, “I think getting lessons directly from someone who is living in Clare is a lot closer to a notional ‘source’ than a lot of people get by internet or live means outside of Ireland” (Ben, interview, 22 June 2011). These tutors – notably all under the age of 40 – are clearly choosing to teach in this technologically-mediated way to explore new approaches to teaching and learning Irish traditional music. However, they are also mindful of retaining a sense of authenticity in this environment.

The data produced important insights into the teaching and pedagogical approaches involved in e-learning, especially in regard to the genre of Irish traditional music. While there is much excitement and enthusiasm for a new Internet environment to teach Irish traditional music, there is also a strong wish to preserve traditions within the genre. For example, the teaching styles of mimicry and repetition, as well as facilitation of dialogue through the chat forums, Facebook posts and cyber sessions further reflect this desire to encapsulate a strong Irish traditional music style of teaching and learning, albeit in a new technological environment. The preservation and transformation of traditional pedagogical approaches within an online

environment makes for an interesting pedagogical combination for music teaching and learning.

Shared practice

Table 2. Categories and samples of shared practice from the OAIM chat forum.

| Categories | Samples from threads |
|----------------------|--|
| Clarification | Now that I am starting to get the hang of rolls and taps and slides, how does a relative beginner go about learning a new tune? I mean, would it be best to master these rudiments before trying to use them? Or maybe plug them into a new tune from the very beginning? (Paul) |
| Requests | Regarding sheet music, although I try to get the tunes by ear, which is relatively easy taking into account that you teach them in very short phrases and slowly... I prefer to have the sheet paper at hand! (Lotti) |
| Progression updates | Making really good progress – a few things have fallen into place this past ten days and the mandolin playing is proving its worth in terms of l/h technique and general co-ordination. (Irvine) |
| Relating experiences | I did a few online lessons with Harry Bradley, and I attended a workshop with Hammy Hamilton and J-M Veillon in Cork a few years ago! (Andy) |
| Knowledge sharing | . . . as far as finding a more serious bodhrán is concerned. I'd nearly advise waiting to actually try one from a maker you like or at least order one from a maker who's drums you've heard live? By the way, they all sound awful for the first year! (Ben) |
| Feedback | Really pleased with how things are going... lessons are truly excellent – the more I play, the more I appreciate how well graded the tunes are. (Susan) |

Across the topics and threads in the OAIM chat forums, there is evidence of the development of a shared practice amongst tutors and learners. The types of dialogical practice, through questions and comments, can be broken down and summarized into the following categories: clarification; requests; progression updates; relating experiences; knowledge sharing; and feedback. Table 2 categorizes samples of the comments from threads relating to each type of shared practice found.

As seen in Table 2, there is much interaction and sharing in the chat forums about progression, musical experiences, musical knowledge and resources as well as many comments about musical technique. Despite the often-assumed solitary nature of learning

from the Internet, much of the learning is carried out and/or related in a collective manner through the chat forums. For example, in Table 2 we see learners self-assessing and reflecting on their progress (“a few things have fallen into place this past ten days”), accessing expertise from tutors as they need it (“would it be best to master these rudiments before trying to use them?”), applying knowledge gained (“I try to get the tunes by ear”) and feeding back on their learning (“really pleased with how things are going”). In this way the chat forums emphasize both individual and group learning reflection processes within the OAIM.

Subscribers to the OAIM website often share their experiences of learning on the Facebook page (akin to the chat forums), as seen below:

- Martin: Awesome Place and site...love it
- OAIM: Glad you are enjoying it! We are constantly developing the site - thanks for the encouraging feedback.
- Martin: Accessibility is a great gift and more with awesome Artists in there giving time and energy...Go raibh maith agat...Le meas
[translation from Irish language: “Thank you...regards/with respect”]

(Retrieved from the OAIM Facebook page, 7 March 2011)

Here, Martin is expanding the audience from the classroom chat forum to share his experience or practice with the OAIM on Facebook. As seen with the chat forums previously (see Table 2), here the OAIM moderators encourage feedback and mark their appreciation. Martin also recognizes the issue of access to traditional music and refers to the OAIM as “a great gift” in opening up Irish traditional music learning opportunities through the Internet.

Despite being disappointed that the forums are not busier, subscribers indicate that interacting on the chat forums about practice is a source of extra support. This interaction includes posting videos or audios of their playing, but more often occurs through written statements. Participant logs illustrate the inclusive feeling that exists between members, as recorded in comments such as, “we’re in this together.” There is a feel-good factor associated with this

building of community and shared practice within the forums, as exemplified in Lauren’s statement, “I get support, makes me feel better about my playing” (Lauren, Participant log 2, 11 June 2011).

The cyber session gives the observational research a focus on shared performance practice, whereby live streaming is utilized by the OAIM to portray a traditional Irish music session to an Internet audience. This cyber session was a traditional music session in a public house (pub) in Co. Clare in Ireland, which was streamed live in April 2011, using a partnership with LiveTrad. The session featured live performances of Irish traditional music by some of the course tutors as well as local musicians who join in. Figure 1 depicts a screenshot from the live traditional session.



As seen in Figure 1, the cyber session very much appears to capture a characteristic traditional Irish music pub session or performance practice. This is demonstrated in the tunes that were played, the casual unrehearsed atmosphere, the old-style pub setting and the arrangement of the musicians in an inward-looking circle, as well as the structure of tunes

(there appeared to be few limits to the playing, with musicians coming in seemingly where they “feel” it is time to play) and non-verbal gestures used (eye-contact, nods and foot tapping).

During the live broadcast, engagement from the Internet audience (which reached thousands) was encouraged through a common message board for comments. These comments appeared on screen for those watching but also were read out by the musicians, therefore attempting to “connect” viewers to the physical context. Comments predominantly centred on “connecting” with both Irish traditional music and Ireland. One described the function of such an online resource as “far away, but so near,” while another directly related to old memories of Ireland. The cyber session very much appeared to try to capture the essence of group music making in Irish traditional music that is unachievable in the OAIM website teaching and learning format. Through capturing this performance practice the OAIM is further creating access to a shared practice, an aspect of Irish traditional music that is very significant to the genre’s identity and tradition. Evidently, cyber sessions such as these provide opportunities to listen to live music, “to take part” across the Internet through comments and, potentially, to participate by playing along.

The OAIM is an emerging or developing online community. It is finding its way and forming an identity as it grows. This identity is being shaped by the users, through the shared practice of subscribers and tutors. The developing nature of the website is often mentioned in the interviews and so changes and evaluation are ongoing. Tim asserts, “it is still at that early stage and we are still talking about how we are teaching, and re-jigging and changing things” (Tim, interview, 30 June 2011). Kate specifically singles out one subscriber who had a very direct impact on the OAIM e-learning system:

One in particular was an e-learning specialist, we chose to take it on board what he was saying and that was when we changed all our lessons into their current lesson templates. We started to devise more of a system and made it more much more visual...it has really made it something; it's not just a video anymore. (Kate, interview, 27 May 2011)

A form of “collaborative knowledge building” (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1996) is present in this community (“knowledge building” was coded 43 times in NVivo) where, as quoted above, the advice from subscribers is taken very seriously in adapting the pedagogy of e-learning within the OAIM.

Feedback within the chat forums is also widely used for updating, sharing musical progression and requesting repertoire to be taught (as shown in Table 2). Learning tools are shaped and built-up collectively through the community as needs arise. For example, MP3 files and notation were included as supplements to the video tutorials in response to learners’ requests. This sense of “mutual accountability” (Wenger, 1998) was continually present in the chat forums, often facilitated and fostered by the tutors.

- Kate: If any of you have requests for tunes you would like me to teach in my next course - let me know. I can't promise that I will include them - it depends on their appropriateness for the techniques I'll be covering
- Tommy: McFadden's handsome Daughter
- John: thanks for this nice offer Kate, my request would be for you to teach a tune you really like that hasn't been recorded commercially, or that has not been recorded very much or for a long time - that would be really cool and special
- Fiona: There are a couple of tunes I'm learning from sheet music: “The Ashplant” and “The Old Woman in the Glen”; I don't know if they are suitable for the course. Then I'm also learning on the flute (transposed into D) a Scottish tune (a set actually) as played by The Tannahill Weavers: “Roddie MacDonald's Favourite” Cheers!
- Kate: So, I have just set up the microphone and the video camera - any last minute suggestions? I'll be doing McFadden's Handsome Daughter, The Ashplant and a couple of lesser known ones for John. Here goes!
(Retrieved from the OAIM website, 28 June 2011)

Here, Kate seeks guidance and collaborative input when planning the actual video tutorials, thereby fostering a sense of shared ownership over the decision-making in the OAIM. The learners link back to previous knowledge and experience in order to influence this

collaborative knowledge building and shared practice within the OAIM. Kate displays a very open manner, taking on suggestions and keeping members informed of her decisions and actions. Also, there is a feeling of excitement and involvement in Kate's final "here goes," thereby instilling a sense of "togetherness" in the upcoming course despite the fact that she is recording the video tutorials alone, in front of a video camera.

Essentially a shared practice is created through the Facebook page, chat forums and cyber session. This practice is casual and the language used is accessible, placing an emphasis on collaborative knowledge building, shared ownership and reflective learning. Further, the practice is rooted in a sense of the "local" in the global, evidenced by the use of the Irish language, references to local tunes and the cyber session context of a local County Clare pub. The OAIM, as an emerging teaching and learning online environment, provides insight into how this medium is negotiating and becoming a shared practice. Documenting this collaborative practice and developing "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990, 2002) is of crucial interest to music education research.

Roles and relationships

The roles within the OAIM are clearly defined between teachers and learners. From the observations and interviews it is evident that the tutors saw themselves as professionals delivering quality online tuition. This notion of the high quality, professional status of the tutors is mentioned frequently, as exemplified by the comments below.

- [I]t's the quality of our tuition, there's nothing else out there like it. (Kate, interview, 27 May 2011)
- I think people who do this particular course are assured of a very high standard of teacher. (Ben, interview, 22 June 2011)

The type of online teaching provided by the OAIM is seen as distinct from other Internet sources due to its focus on high quality teaching and calibre of tutors. Tim describes it as “uncharted territory” (Tim, interview, 30 June 2011), where the OAIM stands out as an online environment with continuous high-quality teaching as opposed to the one-off nature of a lot of online learning. The leadership style of the tutors is described in very positive terms within the participant logs, which include adjectives such as “knowledgeable,” “assured,” “nice,” “engaging,” “patient” and “encouraging.” The logs indicate a link to strong tutor leadership that demonstrates both expertise and a warm, welcoming manner.

Kate holds a dual role as coordinator and tutor within the OAIM. Because the website is an emerging initiative, Kate values the importance of building an online community through long-term subscribers and developing relationships between tutors and learners. As noted below, she claims that this is achieved through the tutors' teaching approaches, through which students are encouraged to find their own playing style or musical identity.

[W]e've been trying to mimic a one-on-one class so you feel like sitting there with your tutor. Amidst the repetition and the mimicry there's room for talk on technique and style, encouraging the student to experiment with different things and develop their own style. (Kate, interview, 27 May 2011)

Here, Kate is also referring to the importance of the chat forums to encourage relationship building and “room for talk.”

In the video tutorials, tutors often alternate between playing and conversationally addressing the students. Kate feels this is missing in other websites with “no discourse from the tutors” (Kate, interview, 27 May 2011). Similarly, Tim sees this as important to the students and echoes Kate’s sentiments in the comment, “I chat away to the camera saying that’s great, that’s great. They like the personality coming through, you know the bit of chat” (Tim, interview, 30 June 2011). Through the chat forums, dialogue between the learners themselves is also encouraged to build a social network of practice online. However, all of the interviewees commented on the slow development of this engagement while recognizing the time needed to build relationships.

Relationship-building is evidenced in the online chat forums. In the following excerpt, we see a specific example of an interaction between one learner and tutor:

- John: I learned “The Sporting Pitchfork” from an American whistle player and producer Bill Ochs, a really great guy. Do you know him? My all time favorite recorded version of this tune is the one Micheal O Raghallaigh played on his CD “Inside Out”
- Kate: I don’t know Bill Ochs - but I am familiar with Micheal O Raghallaigh’s playing - love it!...Just got back from Drumshanbo, Leitrim where there is a great festival - the area is full of great flute players. Was such a pleasure! Any good festivals in Palm Springs?

(Retrieved from the OAIM website, 28 June 2011)

The language used in the online forums, including genre-specific terminology, conveys a shared affinity for the musical genre and its traditions. References to well-known recordings, teachers and performers are prominent throughout the forums, echoing Wenger’s theory that “shared repertoire” is built between participants to cultivate a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). The extract above demonstrates a sharing of knowledge as well as an attempt to make connections through known musicians and geographical places (over such wide physical distances as Drumshanbo to Palm Springs, USA). Here is an attempt to evoke a sense of belonging through association with Irish traditional music performers and festivals.

The inclusive atmosphere is commented on in the participant logs, which help foster relationships between users. For example, Irvine writes, “It meets a need and seems like a friendly place” (Irvine, Participant log 1, 12 May 2011). Members experience a heightened sense of enjoyment when they are in “a friendly place” where they feel welcome, included and essentially part of a community with an inclusive atmosphere. This facilitates relationship-building between the learners and tutors, as well as between the learners themselves, despite never meeting face to face. For example, Andy reveals, “Love starting one of Kate’s videos. When the only instruction you’ve had is by book, a warm, engaging instructor is a vast improvement - makes me want to practise” (Andy, Participant log 1, 1 May 2011). Here, in addition to an overall sense of belonging, the feeling of forming a relationship specifically with the tutor is important to musical progression.

The “home-grown” nature of the OAIM also contributes to relationship building within the community. This stems from the personal, family reasons for the website’s inception. As Kate relates in an interview, the OAIM was set up as a family lifestyle venture; Kate and her partner are the management team who launched the site and continue to develop it. Personal relationships with other Irish traditional musicians determine not only the OAIM tutor involvement but also the style of teaching, which is both musical and social. These “complementary contributions” (Wenger, 1998) draw upon multiple forms of competence to build a community of practice as well as the sense of “collaborative knowledge building” (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1991) revealed in the previous section.

The interactions and discourses of such an online community are important to the building of relationships within the OAIM. The pedagogical style of the OAIM tutors, despite teaching to a camera, very much centre on a casual, dialogic approach. This is not uncommon in traditional approaches of learning Irish traditional music in a pub or another social setting. This attention to verbal discussion or “bit of chat,” coupled with the promotion of dialogue

between the learners through the online forums, facilitates a social network of practice and sense of belonging online (for a detailed discussion on this aspect of the study see Kenny, 2013).

Conclusion

Individual and collective insights triangulate from the various data sets of observations of practice, interviews and participant logs to illuminate significant emerging themes and practices in relation to the processes of teaching and learning within the OAIM. The main findings can be summarized as follows.

Pedagogy of e-learning

Pedagogical approaches to e-learning within the OAIM remain cognizant of the genre and culture of Irish traditional music. Oral transmission, as well as a keen focus on dialogue (through the chat forums, Facebook posts and cyber session), assist in the adaptation of traditional teaching methods for a new, online environment. The provision of high quality tuition is also a strong feature of the e-learning system and is seen as crucial to the development of the online community.

Shared practice

The online music community explored represents learning as a community of practice where members gain agency in their learning through participation. The OAIM is shaped by its teachers and learners, revealing a development of shared practice through collaborative

knowledge building. Teacher–learner relationships essentially enable engagement, and develop shared practices such as collaborative knowledge building, reflective processes, group responsibility and feedback.

Roles and relationships

The impact of roles and relationships emerges as central to the OAIM’s teaching and learning processes. This is seen from the personal investment and tutor support given, to the development of online dialogical interactions. Through the teaching style, chat forums, cyber session and Facebook page, the OAIM creates a teaching and learning environment that is casual and friendly and which facilitates dialogue. Relationships are built through musical and social practice where members can feel a sense of community and belonging.

The research findings provide key perspectives in relation to online music teaching and learning contexts. The OAIM represents an emerging approach to Irish traditional music teaching and learning that broadens access globally and facilitates the building of a worldwide online music community. The participation in this community within a socio-cultural framework can be viewed, then, as “a way of learning—of both absorbing and being absorbed in—the ‘culture of practice’” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 95). The fact that this music community meets in cyberspace extends the medium for immersion into “musical worlds” and the development of communities of practice to an emerging form of music participation. The findings highlight the importance of extending online learning opportunities where relationships and participation are promoted, genre-specific characteristics are maintained, and structured pedagogical approaches are employed, to build such communities. Continued research into other online music communities is imperative to

build on the knowledge base in this field and realize the full potential of this fast-growing environment for music teaching, learning and participation.

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Notes

1. A “cyber session” typically refers to any form of collaborative Internet usage. In this instance, the term is used to denote a traditional Irish music session that is streamed live over cyberspace.
2. These genres or different types of Irish traditional tunes all have varying time signatures and specific features associated with them. All of the modes have accompanying dances in hard or soft shoes except for the slow air, which is not traditionally danced to.
3. Live streaming is a method of broadcasting live over the Internet. It usually involves a content delivery network to distribute and deliver the content as it is recording.
4. LiveTrad (www.livetrاد.com) is a website dedicated to the live web streaming of traditional Irish music sessions, concerts and festival events. It is partly funded through the Irish Arts Council and tourism agencies as well as corporate sponsors.

Author biography

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