

Let Technology Facilitate Your Objectives

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Today, there are software applications for just about everything, but to what extent do we allow music software to dictate how we teach? As soon as we install some app, we look for “what does it do” and “how can I make a lesson out of this”, but I fear we’re putting the cart before the horse. Instead, what about teaching musical concepts and using technology to facilitate the instruction instead of allowing technology to dictate what and how we teach?

Software developers typically design a program’s layout to be accessible and intuitive, but in doing so, there are bound to be certain biases toward the visibility of what are considered

“the more common” features. If the feature that is going to help you explain concepts of rhythm or harmony is somewhat buried in the program’s menus, the instructor may feel less inclined to teach those musical concepts right away; and so, technology

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dictates the use of instruction instead of instruction dictating the use of technology.

This phenomenon is not new. Even the conventions of traditional notation using staff paper can dictate how we’re going to teach. In composition exercises, if we don’t enjoy counting notes on ledger lines, we just stick to

writing notes on the staff. In the same way, it’s just as easy for software to confine us. If we want to teach some musical concept, but can’t find the technology to support it, the original idea gets dropped.

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Many teachers are terrified of teaching “technology lessons” because they don’t want to be in the situation where some 11-year old kid knows more than they do and let’s everyone in the class know about it. The reality is that YOU WANT THAT KID IN YOUR CLASS! That kid already knows the technology so, first, he’ll be the biggest, free-est tech support you’ll ever find—let him help out his peers and troubleshoot for you when things stop working. Second, and more importantly, since he already understands the technological side of

continued on page 9

Let Technology Facilitate Your Objectives... - continued from page 8

things, it helps you to conceptually explain to him the musical side of things which I guarantee he doesn't understand as well as you. Musical concepts, as you'll recall, are the sorts of things you went to college to learn about.

I have freshmen enter my undergraduate music technology classes, and, wow, some of them really know a particular piece of software well. It's very impressive and can almost be intimidating. However, when what we know of technology, in general, is not paired with some other discipline, the knowledge is abstract and we're left only understanding the "how" of a particular software product and never the "why". This is why there's no academic field just called "technology"; it's typically disciplines (computer science, algorithmic composition, physics, etc.) that explore a certain aspect of technology germane to their discipline. So when the developers release the new version of their software, the question of "what do I want to do with this software" is never asked, only "how is stuff done". As a result, the student's recording project may have balance issues in the ensemble, or his composition project may be inaccessible, non-idiomatic, or clichéd.

As TI:ME educators, part of why we exist is to advocate the use of technology to serve our objectives as music educator, and rightly so. You can't walk into a convenience store without seeing seven or eight computers being actively used for a specific intended outcome—why should the music classroom be any different? Technology truly can help facilitate our teaching objects. However, students don't just need teachers to show them new tech toys or cool software--they can find that on YouTube, at the NAMM Show, and in their local music store. What they need is for a trained music educator to help them make sense of the musical world around them—we believe the use of technology makes this process richer and more palatable. That's knowledge students can't find just anywhere. ●

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In This Issue:

Share Student Work with Dot.Tunes	3
New Commercial Member from Denmark	4
TI:ME National Conference Photos	6
Let Technology Facilitate Your Objectives	8
Chapter News Update	8
TI:ME/OMEA Conference Photos	10



Images from the 2010 TI:ME/OMEA Conference

