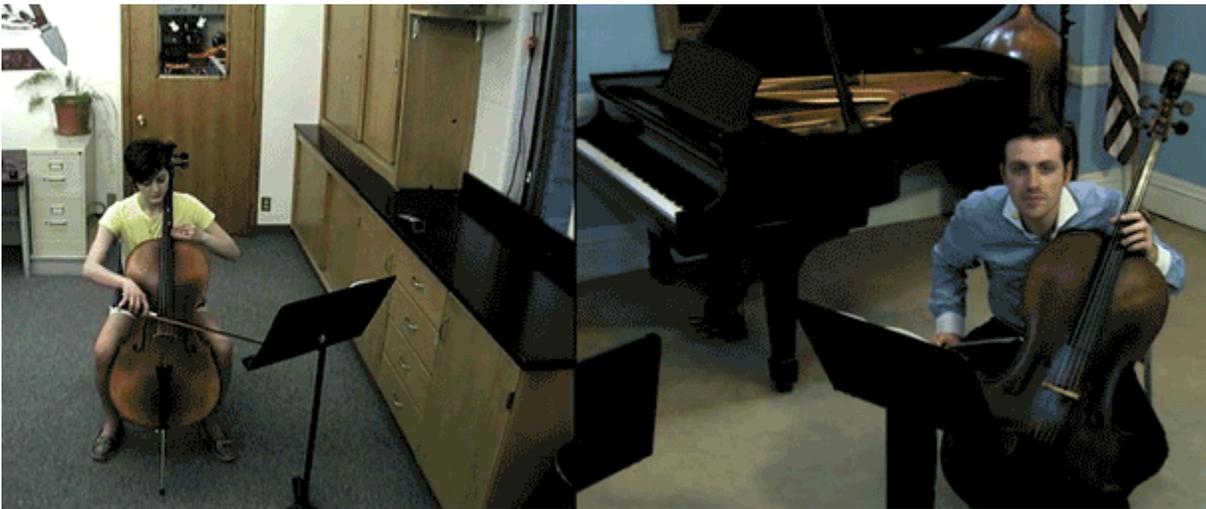


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Innovations

The technology that helps band kids in rural Nebraska unlock their potential

By Matt McFarland | November 15, 2013 at 8:54 am



A student in Neligh, Neb., left, and an instructor in New York connect via online video conferencing. (Courtesy of Gordon Roethemeyer)

For music students in rural areas it can be near impossible to get access to specialized teaching. Low-density areas are unlikely to have teachers nearby who are experts in every possible instrument a student might focus on. Nebraska has moved to solve that problem with a video conferencing program that links its students with instructors at the Manhattan School of Music in New York.

“Often one teacher in the whole school is the music department. This allows them to bring in outside expertise that really helps the program,” said Gordon Roethemeyer, the distance education director at the Nebraska education service units coordinating council.

In Neligh, Neb. — population 1,550 — band and chorus teacher Nate Metschke had a student make the all-state band this fall for the first time in his 12 years at Neligh-Oakdale, a K-12 school of 402 students. The clarinet player benefited from the weekly 50-minute sessions that began this year with an instructor who is about 1,400 miles away.



Sophomore Kelsey Green receives a clarinet lesson from an instructor in New York. (Courtesy of Nate Metschke)

“She reached the point where she’s ready to be taught by someone who is a clarinet player, not just a regular band teacher,” Metschke said. “There are certain techniques she can learn on lessons that she can’t learn from me.”

This fall, 11 of the band members at Kearney High School in Kearney, Neb., made the all-state band, which is twice the number that director of bands Nathan LeFerber has seen in previous years. He credits the personalized instruction distance learning provides.

“We have a student who is playing oboe. We don’t have an oboe teacher in town,” LeFerber said. “For her to be able to take these lessons is great. She’s improved by leaps and bounds.”

The students in Nebraska and instructors in New York connect on video conferencing machines made by [Polycom](#). They are built with an omnidirectional microphone, which cuts out background noise. The high sound quality is essential for instructors and students to be aware of dynamics and pitch. Popular video conferencing software, such as Google Hangouts and Skype can’t offer the same sound quality.

Instructors can also zoom in with an HD camera attached to the cart. That gives them an up close look at a student’s technique.

“We’re able to leverage 21st-century technology to keep music alive. This is a phenomenal way to do it, and the folks in Nebraska get it,” said Christianne Orto, the dean of distance learning and recording arts at the Manhattan School of Music.

The school’s largest partner is Nebraska. What started with two classes in the 2009-10 is expected to include 1,800 individual sessions this school year, Orto said.



(Courtesy of Gordon Roethemeyer)

Eleven schools in Nebraska are taking part in the music lessons. A total of 575 distance learning classes are taught in the state with foreign languages accounting for the largest chunk at 24 percent. Roethemeyer calls the musical instruction classes a perfect fit for distance learning, and expects them to become more popular.

The classes are the outgrowth of 2006 state legislation which gave schools better equipment for distance learning. The machines from Polycom — which can be wheeled from room to room — generally cost about \$15,000. Schools also receive \$1,000 per class to cover the cost of instruction with the Manhattan School of Music. The money is drawn from the state lottery, and the legislation financing it extends through the 2014-15 school year.



Kearney High School students Jordyn Anderson, left, and Bethany Shaw demonstrate the video conferencing software. (Courtesy of Nathan LeFeber)