



Distance Learning Brings Unique Musically Enhanced Instruction to Students

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The educational landscape is changing. And, for some this change comes in the form of losing valuable instruction in music and the arts due to budget cuts and poor accessibility to qualified, teaching specialists. Yet, as more and more educators and their districts embrace distance learning and video collaboration solutions, some of those same educators are discovering unique and creative ways to put the arts back in our schools.

One such educator, [Amir Khosrowpour](#), teaching artist in the Distance Learning Program under the direction of Christianne Orto, Dean, [Distance Learning and Recording Arts](#) at the [Manhattan School of Music](#) (MSM), is challenging students in a whole new way. Amir and his teaching artist colleagues bring music to schools in rural and faraway places to enhance critical thinking skills and to also encourage the current student generation to embrace unfamiliar musical genres like classical music. Recently, the *Public Sector View* editorial team had the opportunity to chat with Amir about some of the unique and inspiring things going on at MSM. Continue reading below to see what Amir had to say about MSM and blending music into lessons like Math and Literature:



Public Sector View (PSV): *How has using VTC enhanced your own classroom instruction as a teaching artist? How frequently do other lessons involving distance learning and/or video conferencing find their way into your syllabus/curriculum?*

Amir Khosrowpour (AK): A large element of distance learning is taking and incorporating an interactive multi-media approach into traditional teaching. No longer is the teacher expected to be the sage on the stage but is rather

the guide on the side. As a result, teachers are now utilizing collaborative exercises that include VTC, short video clips, slide shows, as well as other hands-on activities. For me, bringing together traditional teaching methodology and video collaboration is a merging of two worlds. When it all comes together -the equipment is working and the students are engaged- it's like we are all really there together in the same room.

Most of our lessons and presentations are a one-time visit with the school; they aren't semester long courses. So for the students, when they connect with MSM teaching artists, they are truly getting a unique experience that breaks up the monotony of their day.

I recently gave five presentations at a school in Mexico City to students ranging from 6th grade through high school. For me, with such disparate age ranges, it is always interesting to see how student willingness to participate and engagement shifts and changes. These shifts make it even more important for us to plan a challenging yet engaging video teleconference session.

For example, I designed a presentation called "Musical Math," where I utilized music to give students more practice with fractions by relating the fractions to rhythm, adding fractions in 4-4 time.

But, the Mexico City students were more advanced. They needed something similar but with improper fractions. So, in 5-4 time, we used the music from *Mission Impossible* to show them how to add, subtract and multiply improper fractions with the dotted note. In these exercises, we establish a rhythm together then improvise a song based on whichever tune they come up with. Telling them they have to use, say 4 bars and 18 notes, we have them collaborate on a song then we compare it to a popular song- like the latest Taylor Swift or the "Imperial Death March" from Star Wars. And, they'll collaborate again in small groups.

These lessons are fun not only to develop and prepare as a teaching artist, but it also to teach. To see the excitement on student faces when they learn a new way to approach something challenging or when they recognize the rhythm of a song- that's what it's all about.

PSV: *What types of collaborative interactions have you had with other teachers and how do these collaboration enhance student learning?*

AK: Utilizing Art and Music as teaching tools can greatly enhance a student's critical thinking skills. And, we see this in the "Musical Math" sessions but also in the "Music and Literature" sessions, I've collaborated on with my colleague, Taisiya Pushkar. In these sessions, she took two poems- "The Erl King" and "The Sorcerer's Apprentice"- and assigned the poems to students ahead of time for reading and annotation. During the session, we talked about the poem and then progressed into how Schubert "paints" the text with his musical versions of "The Erl King" and "The Sorcerer's Apprentice." I

would play a few bars on the piano and ask them- “How do you think this music will look? What emotional states do you hear?”

The students love these types of activities.

Sometimes we work with the Harry Potter series in a similar way. We use the differences between the books and the films to discuss that as an artist, even when you are doing an adaptation, you are putting your own voice on the piece. These activities enhance critical thinking but also encourage independent thinking. To get students to not only think about how music can paint literature but also the choices that an artist makes. It is important for them to realize that – in art, in music- there is no wrong answer. It is merely an artistic choice; that’s huge.

This way of thinking gives you the freedom to be an artist. Our students need that.

PSV: *What benefits do you feel distance learning delivers to teaching artists and students participating in music programs? How has distance learning and the use of VTC been beneficial to your students and contributed to success at Manhattan School of Music?*

AK: I firmly believe being a musician is more than just showing up on stage and performing or instructing private students.

There is a community involvement aspect to it. And, I think that VTC is a part of that.

With VTC, we are going into communities that don’t otherwise have access to that type of education. There are many things musicians have to do to keep the art form alive, vibrant and relevant. We have an obligation to reach as many people as possible. Dean Orto adds, “We, in arts education, have a unique opportunity to leverage the investment schools have made in collaborative video technologies and bring the arts back into the classroom in a meaningful, interactive and relevant manner.”

For example, most students aren’t interested in classical music. For me, in designing these VTC lessons, I see it as a way to expose kids to classical music in a way that will encourage more interest in the genre but that will also get them thinking- “Hey, I can look at this this way and this way and this way.”

Ultimately, we hope that these connections will open student minds to new things- like Schubert- and will also enhance their independent and critical thinking, opening a window to new things.

PSV: *Music and arts programs are being cut and/or reduced across the country. How does using video and other distance learning solutions help combat this issue of budget and access?*

AK: Video collaboration certainly combats issues of access, especially for rural students. We’ve had connections with students in rural Texas, Pennsylvania, Alaska, Nebraska and South Dakota. We’ve also connected with students from Norway and

Mexico City. For these communities, it is about access and being able to expose their students to lessons that they may not have access to within their own schools. Additionally, these sessions represent a change from the typical school day. When I was a student myself, I always looked forward to when my school brought in a guest speaker, artist or magician in an assembly. In a way, these VTC sessions are the modern day assembly, breaking the routine of the school day and enhancing student engagement.

In my classes, I'm not teaching students how to play an instrument. What I do cannot and should not replace a traditional music teacher. What I do- through these video sessions- is sprinkle a little music love on their school for the day.

And, hopefully that will encourage them to take some of what I shared in the presentation home with them. So that when the monitor goes black, they take it with them and think about it the next time they listen to music or feel compelled to google Mozart.

The goal is to inspire, and I only have 45 minutes.

I hope that by having VTC as an option, schools are using it because they want more music in their students' lives- they want more of the arts in their schools.