

# CREATING A TECHNOLOGY-ENHANCED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR A SHORT LEARNING PROGRAMME IN CHORAL CONDUCTING<sup>1</sup>

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This design-based research project involved the construction of a technology-enhanced learning environment (TELE) for a short learning programme (SLP) in choral conducting. The North-West University Choir Academy<sup>®</sup> offers a SLP in choral conducting, entitled *Introduction to choral conducting*. The SLP involves 48 hours contact sessions per year (eight sessions of six hours each). The contact sessions comprise practical and theoretical components related to choral conducting styles, vocal development of choristers, practical musicianship (music notation and aural) and performance practice.

The total number of hours allocated to the SLP is 120 hours, which implies that a participant is supposed to spend 72 educational hours outside of the formal classroom context. In these 72 hours participants are expected to develop knowledge and skills in both the theoretical and practical aspects of choral conducting. Upon completion of the SLP, participants are required to participate in a concert during which they conduct a choir's performance of three works. Due to the nature of choral conducting – a discipline that requires not only theoretical knowledge, but also applied and interpretative, as well as physical skills, it is absolutely necessary for the lecturer and the participant to engage as often as possible, whether face-to-face or by means of technology. Taking into account the need for synchronous and asynchronous teaching-learning opportunities, as well as a convergence of face-to-face and distance learning, the obvious teaching-and learning approach is blended learning.

The problem with which this research was concerned, is that the limited contact sessions in a SLP (48 hours per year) are simply not enough to facilitate the development of muscle memory needed for a conducting style that is beyond scrutiny or to allow for any significant study of the vast choir repertoire or other core aspects of choral conducting. Based on this problem the project posed the question of how can TELE can be used to facilitate the teaching and learning of core aspects of choral

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<sup>1</sup> A more comprehensive report is available in my participant's folder on the Google Drive.

conducting in a SLP. Therefore, the purpose of this intrinsic case study was to describe the strategies and multiple modalities that can be used in developing a technology-enhanced learning TELE for a short learning programme in choral conducting at the North-West University Choir Academy®.

The project followed the theory of design-based research (DBR). Wang and Hannafin (2005:6) describe DBR as

a systematic but flexible methodology aimed to improve educational practices through iterative analysis, design, development, and implementation, based on collaboration among researchers and practitioners in real-world settings, and leading to contextually-sensitive design principles and theories.

The project also drew on principles of blending with a purpose (Picciano (2009),<sup>2</sup> flipped classroom approach (Keengwe *et al.*, 2014) and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Qualitative methods of data collection included questionnaires and the close observation of teaching and learning experiences. The data was analysed by describing, classifying and interpreting specific codes, categories and well-anchored themes.

For this project, I collaborated with a focus group of 11 participants, as well as an IT specialist. The group of participants were representative of our multicultural and multilingual society, well as of various learning strategies and levels of experience and proficiency in music. 10 of the participants were located in Potchefstroom, while 1 lived approximately 200km away. I relied upon their insight and feedback, as well as observed their participation in activities to determine the effectiveness of the TELE.

I used eFundi (Sakai) as the learning management system (LMS) with which to manage the TELE. All the participants enrolled for the SLP automatically have access to this LMS. In designing the TELE, I used hypermedia, such as YouTube, social

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this project, the concept of blended learning is understood to refer to the manner in which pedagogical activities and outcomes inform the instructional approach (see Picciano, 2009:11). This model of blended learning is known as *blending with purpose* and designates a multimodal model suggested by Picciano (2009). The model allows for the linguistic and non-linguistic presentation of learning content, the social and emotional support of participants, the cogitation of participants' knowledge and insight, the incorporation of reflection, collaborative learning and the synthesis, evaluation and assessment of learning (see Picciano, 2009:12, 13).

messaging applications such as Whatsapp and Facebook, voice over internet protocol such as Skype and Adobe Connect, as well as software such as PowToon Studio, Hot Potatoes and Quiznet to create and design teaching and learning material, manage the TELE.

Before the first contact session on Monday, 1 February 2016 I created a short animation video, using PowToon Studio. In this video I welcomed the participants and explained the method of delivery and how to access the LMS. I e-mailed the video to each participant as an MP4 file. In response to a questionnaire that participants completed on 8 February 2016 participants indicated that they were impressed with the style and content of the video. They felt that it assisted them in understanding how to engage with the LMS and also what the outcomes of the module are.

Participants enjoyed doing smaller online assignments, such as cross word puzzles and quizzes – activities that were easily accessible by simply clicking on hyperlinks. They also contributed to the teaching-learning experience by making videos of, for example, the auditioning process for new choristers and uploading them as unlisted videos on YouTube. Participants did not hesitate to make suggestions on how to improve the teaching-learning experience and I embraced their suggestions, making small adjustments so that the whole experience became more seamless.

Participants were encouraged to continue discussions about specific topics and also share information outside of the formal classroom context by participating in forum discussions on the LMS. I could access the discussions, participate and also assess participants' insight. This forum also provides excellent opportunity for peer-assessment.

The TELE also provided an opportunity to facilitate participants' academic writing skills. They were given clear guidelines and step-by-step instructions on the requirements for a good introduction to a research essay. They were given multiple opportunities to submit their attempts via the LMS, after which I would provide comments and suggestions. They could then revise and resubmit. Eventually I allocated a mark that was recorded in the gradebook on the LMS.

As was my intention in designing the TELE, I tried to incorporate as much of the theoretical work on the LMS. I wanted to use the face-to-face contact sessions to facilitate the development of conducting styles and the participants' application of pedagogical principles during choir rehearsals. I also arranged for one 'blocked' session of 4 hours on Saturday, 15 April 2016, during which we worked intensively on the above-mentioned aspects.

Each participant was required to teach the 'choir' (consisting of the participants) one song, using suitable pedagogical principles, developing the group's vocal technique and – most especially – using suitable somatic conducting gestures in order to facilitate successful entrances, phrasing, dynamic differences and the ending of phrases. All the music scores were posted on the LMS. Participants made use of YouTube videos to familiarize themselves with the music. They also used the Whatsapp group, created especially for the group, to post voice notes of the different voice parts so that the choir could learn the music before coming to rehearsals. Participants had several opportunities to work with the choir during rehearsals while I was present to provide feedback and suggestions. Participants also used the opportunity to share ideas and help each other.

Eventually the students arranged for the choir to perform at two old-age homes where each participant had the opportunity to conduct the choir. These performances confirm that music is part of the social contexts of a society. Furthermore, these performances served as the summative assessment opportunity of the practical component of the programme. The fact that it was regarded as a concert, rather than an exam, really made it more enjoyable and less stressful for the students.

Upon completion of this project, I am more convinced than ever before that collaborative learning and student-involvement in the teaching-learning environment are of the utmost importance. I am also convinced that coral conducting, as other performance-based disciplines, does rely heavily on a face-to-face, synchronous teaching and learning environment. However, it quite possible to create a successful TELE for choral conducting, provided that one plans well and thinks creatively while designing it. This face-to-face, synchronous teaching and learning combined with the use of technology and a learning management system that is beyond scrutiny makes

blended learning that has a purpose and a situation of a flipped classroom totally possible.

### **List of sources**

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