Personal Narrative and Practical Application of Technology:
Guiding Undergraduate Music and Audio Students Towards an Entrepreneurial Career Search

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Abstract

Undergraduate music and audio majors nearing graduation prepare a formal presentation of their cumulatively acquired performance and technical skills through a recital, a capstone project, internship or a comprehensive electronic portfolio. Although these presentations display an important facet of the student's artistic and creative abilities, tailoring the prospective employment dossier to include video diaries, relevant web-based content and affordable delivery supplements the traditional resume and permits students to control their own individualized narrative.

Instructors supervise undergraduate capstone courses and must balance learning objectives to realize a tangible product while guiding students towards presentation best practices, career research, and networking skills. Realizing these technical, artistic and communication goals proves daunting because of time constraints and institutions lacking an arts-centered Career Services department.

This paper considers a proportional focus on the inventive use of new media tools to create an identifiable story, thus giving prospective employers complete insight into the student's ability, creative interests and communication skills. Additionally, this paper suggests curricular materials designed to improve student research skills for developing multiple employment pathways after graduation.

Keywords: digital storytelling, DST, e-portfolio, capstone, narrative, audio education, career services, Web 2.0, entrepreneurship, communication, demo reel

Introduction

The demonstration recording or demo reel highlights the aspiring audio engineer's strongest mixing and production abilities in a tightly edited compilation of music, production and sound design samples. The reel, along with a strong resume and a growing personal network, gives soon-to-be graduates an opportunity to secure entry-level work after finishing their studies. Students enrolled in undergraduate audio and music production degrees generally spend their last semester assembling, organizing, editing and polishing the strongest three to five minutes of their studio or lab-based projects to impress hiring managers. Likewise, students often participate in mixing contests and critique sessions with industry practitioners through professional societies.[1]

Faculty tasked with guiding audio students towards independent, non-traditional career pathways face increasing pressure from institutions and regulating bodies to make sure that graduates have balanced skill sets across a diverse range of areas.[2] Furthermore, aligning industry perspectives with undergraduate audio student exit outcomes varies widely across institutions.[3]

Meaningful capstone curricula must address the audio, media and entertainment industries' shifting employment trends through a balanced focus on technical skills, entrepreneurship, digital storytelling, e-portfolio construction, and personal narrative. Although

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the demo reel, resume, and cover letter help audio students in their career search, these items are not enough without imaginative customization that demonstrates the student's ability to learn and communicate. A competitive and uncertain job market demands that audio students master the technical aspects of music production. Additionally, students must show insight into their own learning and reflection patterns while promoting those skills through the Internet.

In the following paragraphs, I frame undergraduate music majors primarily within the context of technology, media, and production-centered degree programs. Indeed, music performance, education, composition and business majors interconnect on many levels, however, an exhaustive review of arts-centered career pathways expands beyond this paper's scope. I place the electronic portfolio (e-portfolio) in a wider setting; one that connects digital storytelling and narrative with innovative career research extending past the demo reel and resume used to find work in the entertainment industry. Moreover, I argue that a reflective dossier enhances the expectant graduate's career search and gives the applicant control over their entrepreneurial development in an over-saturated and competitive market.

This paper begins with an overview of communication and entrepreneurial skills needed in the audio industry. Second, this paper explores the electronic portfolio's broader influence in music and audio education and how digital storytelling and web optimization techniques enhance undergraduate career research. Finally, this paper offers some pedagogical considerations of course and leadership development that anticipates future scholarship exploring audio education, independent entrepreneurship, and career services.

Communication, Entrepreneurship, and Audio Education

Much of the audio student's undergraduate career emphasizes tactile learning competencies with technology and lab-based modules. Current research suggests that case studies serve a useful purpose in supporting audio course content by modeling industry trends and pairing them with traditional classroom material.[4] Audio students working collaboratively as team members must communicate with industry professionals and artists by first understanding their creative approaches and entrepreneurial tendencies.[5] Imparting the notion of proper communication for undergraduate students, particularly in recording session environments, should model professional and ethical standards in related industries.[6]

Entertainment and media-based production companies, tasked with rapid expansion and growth, use specialized freelance workers to complete a major project while managers simultaneously plan for the next major venture once the first job nears completion.[7] Ferriani, Cattani, and Baden-Fuller argue there exists little scholarship exploring the cycle of reinvention in the creative arts professions, both from an entrepreneurial perspective and from an administrative standpoint.[8] This reinvention cycle exposes both the uncertainty and the allure of media arts vocations. Expectant audio graduates must prepare for a shifting and often seasonal work schedule. As such, tailoring their dossier while using new media tools to connect with like-minded professionals are essential skills to nurture and refine in the capstone course.

Ferriani, Cattani, and Baden-Fuller contend that although centralized location has advantages when accessing the vast web of informal networking opportunities, many costs arise because of the cultivation, maintenance and enhancement of those relationships; furthermore, creative directors are likely to use freelancers with whom they know.[9] Aspiring audio engineers lacking access to a professional network must convey their talents and narrative to the influential actors within the community. Moreover, audio students in remote areas must actively research the networks they wish to attract after graduation.

Bonin-Rodriguez links the "artist producer" with the non-profit sector's belief structure, where artists without concern for profits demonstrably cultivate important social networks that change the way the entertainment industry measures entrepreneurial standards.[10] The bigger concern is one of semantics and self-identification; where artists must embrace traditional business acumen while maintaining and enhancing their own creative identity, despite the limiting historical connotation of entrepreneurship in modern artistic practice.[11]

There are complex processes when defining creative entrepreneurship; such that success in any free enterprise cannot be measured by one metric. Rather, creative entrepreneurship encapsulates the artist's resources, their network and willingness to face the inherent risks associated with achieving a profit.[12] Pedagogically, teachers must guide their students to investigate the arts-centered entrepreneurship model from diverse perspectives, not from an isolated place; at the same time instructors should lead students towards their own conception of creative income generation.[13]

The bigger issue at hand concerns how capstone courses balance portfolio preparation, developing career research skills, acquiring practical experience through service projects or internships, and guiding audio students towards realistic and measurable postgraduate ambitions. Thorley notes that industry participation in audio-related courses is mercurial as no such institutional standard vets professional qualifications.[14] Although a great majority of audio engineers have the technical insight to comment on student work, they often lack familiarity with educational best practices and cannot pledge much time to collaborate with students on a long-term basis.[15]

Teacher-practitioners with relevant industry credentials do provide an important link between the professional audio network and the classroom. Toulson advises that practitioner case studies give students a close look at the inner workings of professional audio activities closed off to the general public, thus linking industry experience with strong pedagogical framework.[16] Considering these trends, higher education institutions and professional advisory committees must wisely nurture their collaborative working relationship to prioritize student needs and fulfill learning objectives.

The Capstone Course

Orrell explains that curricular development in capstone and practicum courses must include four key elements including a), interdepartmental collaboration among faculty, staff and administration, b), expansion of student internship and placement opportunities to gain professional experience, c), professional development for staff tasked with overseeing these efforts and d), partnering with industry to make sure students receive a significant learning experience with appropriate organizations.[17]

Arts-focused undergraduate programs place greater emphasis on electronic portfolios to aid the music student's transition from institution to career pathway.[18] Tolmie's design and implementation of a career preparation course called "My Life as a Musician", required once a year for composition, performance and music technology majors at Queensland Conservatory, explores broad areas including: writing skills, psychology, intellectual property law, business management, and basic recording techniques.[19] Through her own extensive literature review, Tolmie concedes although Australian undergraduate music industry courses integrate core business skills into selected modules, many strands overlook long-term career planning.[20]

Tolmie surmises that undergraduate music majors place more emphasis on their specific degree plans, choosing not to familiarize themselves with industry trends before graduation.[21] Orrell notes that five major themes enhance graduate employment prospects when emphasized on the program level, including management, teaching and supervision, assessment, legal and ethical matters and collaborative partnerships.[22] Ultimately, a comprehensive portfolio-preparation or capstone course must balance core aspects of business, communication, and basic media production to offer audio students many opportunities for reflection on their maturation as engineers, producers and entrepreneurs.

Digital Storytelling and E-Portfolios

Digital storytelling (DST), mixes creative writing with computer technology and multimedia tools to communicate stories.[23] For twenty years, DST has shared commonalities with traditional writing about perspective and topic choice meanwhile encouraging writers of all ages to merge audiovisual elements into their work.[24] Freidus and Hlubinka suggest the mastery of DST inspires people to communicate across platforms, giving the student renewed outlook on their creative activities.[25]

Malita and Martin note that digital storytelling serves the same purpose as traditional writing methods do, which is to connect deeply with the audience's emotions and to convey an important message.[26] Requiring students to use the media to connect their storyline inspires them to expressively create multisensory content which resonates with their target networks differently; thus suggesting that students script the narrative so it has a logical flow and communicates the story in a short period.[27]

DST ranges from simple to extravagant, particularly when using multimedia production tools; however, pedagogically instructors must foster student creativity and analytical thinking through revision and assessment.[28] Malita and Martin propose that student learners associate meaning with their creative storytelling process; DST engages students' analytical and creative mind and their stories often place them in social and cultural networks.[29] Freidus and Hlubinka observe that DST, combined with attentive scripting and thoughtful craftsmanship, empowers students to revise their narrative while actively reflecting on their learning.[30]

Just as DST projects offer a forum for writers to express their views in modern ways, the Internet heightens the storyteller's collaborative reach through online communities and social networks. Malita and Martin indicate that millennials steeped in Web 2.0 culture engage in an extensive online written and social communication exchange fueled by information saturation, readily available technology, personal and collective give-and-take of ideas.[31]

How students conceptualize the audiovisual content, both abstractly and concretely, challenges them to find assets that show their truth and personal narrative.[32] Additionally, how they edit, assemble and manipulate the media says a lot about who they are, and how they express their own self-perception based on the media included or omitted.[33] The story unfolds and evolves as the student gains insight into their own learning.

The power of the portfolio itself starts with the preparation. Successful portfolio formulation demands that the student reflect on what they have learned, their strengths, and to assemble a comprehensive catalog of their acquired knowledge while emphasizing continuous growth.[34] Tolmie's inclusion of reflective videos by peer student groups describing their portfolios and views on the music industry is a useful example of digital narrative, designed to increase "buy-in" from enrolled students participating in small groups throughout the course.[35]

Curricular Design and Future Considerations

In addition to instructor-led case-study materials used in audio courses, teachers may ask students to develop a multimedia-based reflective practice for debriefing purposes.[36] In most upper-level audio courses, students must document their microphone choices and placement during a recording session for archival purposes. With their cell phone or webcam, they detail the session activities while highlighting their particular role. Coupled with a simple voice over narration, still images and simple graphics, now the student has an interactive multimedia journal entry verifying their part in the project. The contents of the portfolio vary based on the student's career goals. As such, instructors may guide students to interview experts in their chosen field for job shadowing purposes and encourage them to develop a simple business plan and logo using multimedia tools.[37]

Perhaps the greatest thing about using Web 2.0 to design E-Portfolios is that students customize the way they promote and distribute content to prospective employers. With pragmatic research, students cultivate multiple pathways for their career search and use SEO tools, templates, and keywords to narrow down their audience focus.[38] Posting their works-in-progress encourages peer review throughout the capstone course.[39]

Portions of the capstone course should include discussions and lab exercises dedicated to keyword searches, search engine optimization, and exploration of web-building software with embedded players.[40] Hosting portfolio sites varies across institutions. Some instructors may find it best to encourage their students to use third-party websites for hosting, domain name registration, and teaching streaming media concepts.[41]

Beyond the narrative and portfolio contents, educators must guide students to consider the implications of their digital stories and how they choose to market themselves on the Internet.[42] Furthermore, teachers must guide students to choose the right networks, and lead students through proper protocols in how to promote their portfolio.[43]

As audio education, entrepreneurship, arts administration, and human resources management research converge, future scholarship must contemplate how employers view such assets in the applicant's dossier. Institutions thinking about a curricular revision of audio portfolio preparation and capstone courses must reflect on how DST gives students the chance to customize their own cover letter, learning techniques, product knowledge, and personality. Fortunately, including new media tools for such learning is both cost-effective and ready to use.

DST should not replace traditional materials. Audio faculty working collaboratively with Career Services departments could mutually benefit from professional development training that explores the merits of DST. Should faculty, administrators, and students be receptive to these techniques, institutions should build a set of best practices outlining ways to merge DST into existing lesson plans. Thoughtful reflective practice, both from instructors and students, is beneficial for growth and lifelong learning. Once the persons choose to join the technology into their writing and communication activities, the result enhances their digital literacy and increases the expectant graduate's future career prospects.

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11. Ibid. 9.

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13. Ibid. 9-15. Bonin-Rodriguez notes the isolation creative artists feel in reconciling their idealistic vision of art for social change with societal drive for commercial success and further asserts that artists' reticence with the traditional entrepreneurial perspective has more to do with commercialism's potential to overshadow the broader influence of creativity as a deeply personalized practice on receptive audiences.

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27.   Freidus and Hlubinka, "Digital Storytelling for Reflective," 24. I frame digital storytelling in the context of attracting interest from relevant networks. In this case, aspiring audio engineers film themselves in recording sessions, reviewing products they use regularly, blogging, interviewing experts, and similar activities. For job-search purposes, the student may record a video cover letter as well.

28.   Malita and Martin, "Digital Storytelling as Web," 3061.

29.   Ibid. 3061.

30.   Freidus and Hlubinka, "Digital Storytelling for Reflective," 26.

31.   Malita and Martin, "Digital Storytelling as Web," 3060.

32.   Ibid. 3061.

33.   Ibid. 3061.

34.   Malita and Martin, "Digital Storytelling as Web," 3062.

35.   Diana Tolmie, "Designing a Tertiary Music Institution Course," 146.

36.   Toulson, "Creation of Media…"

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