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The music department without walls: Lessons from Marshall McLuhan

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ABSTRACT

In the technological age, the print-based culture of the previous century and the current practice of the bureaucratization of higher education (HE) influence how we manage physical spaces, curricula, and teaching and learning. This article presents possible future scenarios for music in HE in the context of the classroom without walls, based on McLuhan's (1964) predictions for the future of education in the technological age. The research provides an analysis of relevant academic texts and is followed by a discussion that explores thinking differently, strategically, and creatively about possible future scenarios for music departments. The findings suggest that music departments redefine their core business to craft a different future.

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Introduction

The application of the audit model in HE leads to constrained financial resources. This, together with traditional approaches to curriculum and student recruitment, and low student enrolments, has impinged on the functioning of music departments. Music departments at tertiary institutions are not able to compete with better-resourced schools and the private sector, which have more funds to meet the changing needs of music education. Music departments therefore need to operate differently to remain relevant.

The main research question that this article addresses is: "What can music departments in HE learn from McLuhan?" To answer this question, I present Marshall McLuhan's predictions for the future of education and the influence of electronic technologies. Moreover, I also draw on academic literature on the audit model prevalent in HE. I then present a scenario of a generic HE music department in South Africa. Finally, I draw on McLuhan's theories on the future of education in the technological age to present a future scenario for a music department without walls.

McLuhan and education: The classroom without walls

60 years ago, the media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964) predicted that once communication media changed from a print-based culture to electronic communication, technologies would completely change education. However, the resilience of the old, institutionalized ways of doing have persevered so that in the 21st century, the practices of the past prevail. This holds true worldwide for music departments that were founded on the conservatoire model, where the images on the wall matched the repertory performed and the canon of the history taught, which were of the male composers of Europe from the Middle Ages to the present (Nettl, 1995: 11-23). While institutions globally, including those in South Africa, have embraced technological advances, they have also adopted the bureaucratization of HE (Ginsberg, 2011), as well as the audit model. The audit model is a utilitarian, profit model that focuses on one tenet of democracy, which is the contribution an individual will make in a society.

McLuhan and Leonard (1967) predicted new roles in the technological age for teachers and learners, which are reflected in current curricula, and are inclusive of teachers and learners engaging in lifelong learning; learners being occupied with problem-solving activities, working in groups, and curricula being integrated into multidisciplinary learning areas. They also stated that there would be

a shift from the teacher-led classroom, where the teacher instructs the learners, to one where the teacher facilitates learning, and the learners engage in discovery and research. This approach is made possible because the level of information available digitally is so high, with the internet being the most powerful learning platform. This means that the teacher in the classroom and the traditional textbook are not the primary sources of information. Also, McLuhan and Leonard (1967) forecast that education would not be so much about learning facts but about training the senses and perceptions. In this new education system, McLuhan and Leonard (1967: 25) predicted that the traditional classroom would be replaced by the internet. That is, a global "classroom without walls". In such a classroom there would be no need to rely on administrative systems to track students and their learning, because it would all be recorded online. Furthermore, they go on to state that the places of learning as physical spaces of buildings can only exist if they change fast enough to keep up with the pace of the changing world in society. Nevertheless, McLuhan (1970) contends that people never recognize their own environment. He says that "anything of which one is conscious is 'rear-view mirror'", (1970: 2) because the actual environment is invisible and non-perceptible to us. This results in organizations not knowing what their business is. Similarly, music departments do not adequately adapt to change, and past practices prevail. New genres and new technologies are not central to practice. We still think in terms of physical spaces provided by the university for teaching and learning and performances. The possibilities of online teaching and learning are not fully explored. In the section that follows, McLuhan's predictions for the future of education are explored in the context of music departments in the current HE context of burgeoning administration, staffing, curricula, space and resources, online learning and time-based qualifications.

The audit model and the mega-university

The adoption of the audit model benefits administration and not the core business of the university, which is teaching and learning and research. Ironically, instead of the advanced technology enabling us to expand our horizons as envisaged by McLuhan, the bureaucracy needed to manage the mega-university hamstrings us.

HE institutions function as bureaucratic corporate organizations (Readings, 1996; Kivinen, 2002; Peters, 2010; Rolfe, 2013; Kallio, Kallio & Blomberg, 2019; Maassen & Stensaker, 2019; Husain, 2022). Writing elsewhere, de Villiers (2019) cites Ginsberg (2011), who explains that the burgeoning bureaucracy has resulted in the shrinking of permanent academic staff. This situation is similar in South Africa, where there has been an increase in the reliance on temporary staff, while at the same

time student enrolments at universities has increased by 60 percent and academic staff by only 20 percent (Council on HE (CHE), 2016).

This burgeoning administration is further evident in the management structure of South African universities, where the management usually consists of a council that manages the university, and which is chaired by the chancellor. The senate is comprised of all full professors, and middle management. The vice-chancellor, as principal of the university, is supported by an ever-increasing number of deputy vice-chancellors, to whom the executive deans of faculties report. They are, in turn, supported by deputy deans. All the layers of top management also have personal assistants, secretaries, and receptionists. Faculties also consist of departments, loosely grouped into schools, each with their own director, and each department has a head as well as programme leaders who oversee academic programmes, and each department has a secretary and receptionist. All managers receive an allowance, based on the number of staff they manage. The salary bill for management leads to less funds being available for teaching and learning, and for technological innovations and technical support.

Academic staff are affected by the audit model as they are required to be actively engaged in teaching and learning, conduct research, or produce creative outputs and be involved in the community (Abidin, 2020). This is also true for universities in South Africa. With more funds being allocated to administration than to academic departments, there is greater reliance on contract academic staff, and failure to fill vacant academic posts (Readings, 1996; CHE, 2016; Husain, 2022). Filling of posts and retaining academic posts lost due to natural attrition are matched to subsidy generated from teaching and learning. A drop in student enrolment over time can lead to posts not being filled when they become vacant. Posts can also be repurposed and moved to other departments in the faculty. Added to this, the motivation for the introduction of new academic posts needs to, inter alia, show increased student enrolment. New posts are usually introduced because of innovative practices and/ or new programmes, which are often dependent on younger, contract staff who may not necessarily have postgraduate qualifications, but who are more conversant with the latest trends in the music industry, school-based skills, and World Music performance skills. When posts are not filled, either as replacements or as repurposed posts, departments lose expertise in niche areas, which leads to reduced offerings and a loss of subsidy, earned from research or creative outputs, which can also affect the reputational standing of the university.

In addition, curricula are affected, because introducing a new programme or innovative practice is a laborious bureaucratic process that requires the completion of forms, consultations with stakeholders, and approval from internal committees before it serves at the national accrediting bodies. Requirements for the introduction of new programmes include qualified staff, and resources such as space, equipment, and library materials. To enable innovation, department or school management need to make strategic appointments when vacancies arise, such as appointing staff who are versatile and able to teach diverse modules at undergraduate level. It is possible that a music department that follows a conservatoire model, with low and declining student numbers, could have some permanent staff and contract lecturers who innovate, produce subsidy from teaching and learning, while their colleagues, with low teaching loads, are able to pursue research and performing interests.

Furthermore, the allocation and use of physical spaces are determined by the audit model. Music departments in South Africa have low student numbers, compared to other departments in the humanities. They also have declining student numbers, and many universities still follow the traditional conservatoire model. To increase student numbers, some universities engage in community engagement projects in low socio-economic communities.[1] These engagements afford possibilities for research and simultaneously address the disparity of access to quality music education, and provide opportunities for performance in ensembles, usually the orchestra and operatic ensembles, and for future enrolment in higher education. These practices, while admirable, in so far as they provide access to learners, perpetuate music practices from the past and point to the resilience of institutionalized traditions.

Attempts at innovation are the introduction at some institutions of more African-focused curricula, jazz, and contemporary commercial music. However, these genres are rarely presented in community engagement teaching programmes. Additionally, institutions have also introduced diverse non-orchestral music instruments such as drumkit, steelpan, and marimba. These instruments, as well as more contemporary genres, require different performance spaces and technology. The efficacy of these innovations is challenging in a music department that has a concert hall, or auditorium, rooms for one-on-one teaching, lecture rooms with bolted-down desks, practice rooms with a piano, and limited space for ensemble performances. Many department buildings resemble an office block, with one or two larger spaces for performances. In an audit model, the

[1] http: //humanities.nwu.ac.za/music/musikhane; https://www0.sun.ac.za/music/activities/unit-for-community-music/; https://www.musicinafrica.net/directory/mangaung-string-programme

programmes or instruments do not determine the budget or the resources. Instead, securing funds for building maintenance, renovations, and new spaces need to be justified against income earned from subsidy. Alternately, departments need to source external funds.

Besides the limitation of space, which in turn impinges on innovation, the application of the audit model also results in practices in some institutions where departments are expected to hire the space from the university and then they pay the rent through their use of the space, based on subsidies generated from their teaching and learning, research, and also third-stream income, which is earned from donations, consulting, and continuing education courses, such as summer and winter schools and ticket sales at concerts. The audit model also factors in the maintenance of the spaces and insurance. Some departments must forgo exclusive use of space. Spaces designed for music then become multi-purpose, multi-use, and shared spaces. Auditors use a generic model developed for theoretical modules with large student numbers, to appraise use of space, with no consideration for the unique nature of each discipline, such as music and its performance and assessment practices.

Furthermore, Schwartz (2013) shares McLuhan's (1970) perspective on education in a technological age. Schwartz (2013: 4) refers to universities as being stuck in the 19th century, where academics "handcraft bespoke courses, deliver them to students and assess their learning." McLuhan (1970) referred to this practice as a print-based model. In today's society, everyone has access to online resources and the lecturer in the lecture hall does not hold the keys to all knowledge (Schwartz, 2013; Wolfe & Andrews, 2014). Wolfe and Andrews (2014) suggest that universities adopt different roles to those they had in the past. They state that universities should become curators and certifiers of knowledge.

Although universities have embraced online learning, the World Wide Web and its resources are still managed as if it were a print-based system. The audit model perpetuates this, and even in the time of a worldwide lockdown and the introduction of emergency online teaching and learning, academics felt compelled to follow this outdated practice of providing bespoke courses. While online resources are ubiquitous, the recent worldwide lockdown revealed that instead of utilizing the rich resources available to them, academics developed their own resources (Perry & Edwards, 2019; Yoke, Hasan, Hashim & Yahyauddin, 2019; Johnson, 2020; Shreaves, Ching, Uribe-Florez & Trespalaciois, 2020; Biasutti, Phillipe & Schiavio, 2021), or the various challenges faced by online learning (Ozer & Ustun, 2020; Simamora, 2020; Lorenzo & Carter, 2021; Huang, Richter, Kleickmann

& Richter, 2022; Shaw & Mayo, 2022; Ho, Sa'adi, He & Hoon, 2023), including teachers who found it to be time-consuming and stressful (Shreaves *et al*., 2020; Biasutti *et al*., 2021).

Moreover, Schwartz (2013) calls for universities to abandon the concept of duration for degrees, and instead adopt mastery-based learning, allowing students to work at their own pace, master measurable outcomes, and extend the academic year. Universities in South Africa, like their Australian counterparts, have adopted qualification models based on time, with credits and notional hours. Each course and module in these courses have learning outcomes, course outlines, and assessment guidelines. In such a system, a 10-credit module has 100 notional hours. In South Africa, one year of academic study has 120 credits, which equals 1200 notional hours; that includes time spent in lectures, reading, preparing for class, studying, and writing exams. The academic year is divided into two semesters, with students enrolling for 60 credits in each semester. The academic year is, furthermore, carefully planned around assessment and throughput of students. For example, in 2022, for semester one, in one iteration of the tertiary timetable, it was possible that 66 days were allocated for teaching and learning, which includes formative assessment. At the end of the first term, there were 10 days for recess, and at the end of the lecture period, there were five days for study, followed by 18 days for exams, another recess of 20 days and re-exams for 5 days, before the second semester began. The first semester thus had 66 days for learning and 58 days for either recess or exams. In theory, there are 600 notional hours for the first semester. However, at the level of formative assessment such as assignments, it is widespread practice to approximate the time students spend on assignments and lecture preparation. We therefore pay lip service to this aspect of the audit model. For a music department, there would be even fewer days scheduled for teaching and learning as, traditionally, practical exams commence one week before the university exams; this leads to Music having eight weeks' teaching time per semester. It is impossible to have the mandatory 10 hours of contact lecture time, with one-hour lectures per week, for a 10-credit module, in an eight-week semester. If one factors in public holidays, university holidays, days lost to student protest, there is even less time for face-to-face teaching and learning.

This time-based model also affects the use of space, which is competed for and vigorously contested during the teaching cycles. For some parts of the day, those spaces are unutilised for almost an equal length of time. The peak-use times are usually from nine in the morning until two in the afternoon. The reluctance to extend the academic day, due to shuttle schedules, safety issues, and so forth, can lead to requests to build more buildings, and to hire external spaces. All the spaces require insurance, cleaning, and maintenance, which adds to the cost of owning the real estate.

In South Africa, the CHE Report (2013) states, inter alia, that in this time-based module students typically take longer to complete a qualification, with some students not completing a qualification. The established practice to address the lack of student success is supplemental education in the form of tutorials in the first year of study, and the introduction of extended degree programmes. Students who require supplemental instruction in their first year of study may need this for the duration of their qualification, or alternative solutions could be found.

The classroom without walls

From the previous discussion, it is apparent that when using the audit model to measure music departments, they will potentially fall short. The reasons are manifold. Enrolment is low in music departments, which means that workloads may be too low; class sizes are too small for the exclusive use venues that are allocated; venues and equipment are too expensive to manage and maintain; the salary bill may be too high, as departments may employ a professor, who was promoted based on performance, and with dwindling numbers may now only teach an instrument to two students, while the growth areas require session or contract lecturers to teach in studios such as contemporary voice, drumkit, steelpan, and marimba. These non-orchestral instruments and genres also require other types of equipment such as amplification, as well as different types of rehearsal and performance spaces.

In classical music, the music score, that is, the printed page, is important, and being true to the composer's intention is most important. Classical musicians therefore spend time developing technical and literacy skills to perform at a high level. It is also this dependence on a print-based education that places us in the past, perpetuating 19th century models, while in the world outside of the music department or conservatoire, all genres of music utilize technology and practice creativity. Perhaps, as McLuhan stated, we are not sure of our core business. We are driven by the printed score and all our efforts, such as community engagements, are to maintain the relevance of the printed score. The resilience of the importance of the printed score and the kind of careers that it supports, such as teacher, choral conductor, performer, and archivist, do have a place in the world, but what about all the other possibilities? What other role could a music department have besides perpetuating practices in which the printed score is central?

Perhaps we should start with identifying the role of music departments? Are we the apex of music making in society? Do we consider the symphony orchestra to be the apex of music making? Should

we be exploring the potential of technology and sound? Or exploring other genres and creating hybrid genres? How can we harness technology in our practice? What is the role of the music department? Are music departments the home of the orchestra? Or are music departments the home of music?

Using the perspective that music departments are the home of music, I will continue my discussion on the music department without walls, focusing on online learning and potential students; space and communities of practice; and the role of academics.

Online learning and potential students

The pool of potential music students who can enrol for the Bachelor of Music degree is small, as only over 1000 learners sit for the music exam in grade 12 (Department of Education (DoE), 2020). Most of these learners pursue other qualifications. However, there are over 500 000 grade 12 learners each year. There is also the whole of society, which includes people wishing to pursue lifelong learning opportunities, in the form of short courses, those wishing to be accredited, and then there are the independent musicians who need specific skills such as microphone technique.

Online teaching resources are ubiquitous. There are millions of resources to teach one to play any music instrument, to improvise, and to compose. This is true for all genres and styles of music. Additionally, the community, including music teachers, uses software, such as iRealPro, that provides chord charts or lead sheets for singers, for composition and performance. Other software available for singers is OnSong, that has the functionality to change a song into a different key or style and to add different instrumentation accompaniment.

Our students and graduates, as well as the wider society, perform on TikTok, YouTube, have music on Spotify, have their own websites, music labels, and blogs, and record in home studios. These contemporary genres are also part of a billion-rand industry. Most of the skills these people use for their online presence were not part of our curricula. For our students and graduates, the music department was the space where they socialized and networked for collaborations and honed their skills on their respective instruments. Music departments could expand the courses they present or establish an online presence themselves, with staff creating their own sites or blogs, where they discuss music, such as jazz, and teach how to play and improvise South African jazz standards and popular music. These would be accessible to everyone, including our students. We can also

determine what would be useful skills and knowledge for musicians in the digital age and present courses for the wider community.

Furthermore, we can offer instrumental lessons and master classes online, which can be monetized and/or behind a paywall. Music departments can also utilize existing online resources in other ways. For the theoretical modules such as music history, music theory, improvisation, and composition, departments could set the learning outcomes and students could use any resources available to them, engage with self-assessment, face-to-face and online consultations with academics, and write the final assessment which is set by the department. We would then be certifiers of knowledge and skills.

An additional bonus of online learning is that there are fewer constraints with respect to the number of credits and how they can be fitted into face-to-face lectures. Online learning gives students the freedom to enrol for extra-curricular and co-curricular courses, thus expanding their skillset. Students can be awarded digital badges in recognition of micro credentials. These digital badges can also be alternate pathways to completing modules or qualifications (de Villiers, 2018).

Online repositories for music education lessons and resources are extensive . Democracies have similar curricula and music education students can tap into these resources to discuss, critique, and help them develop uniquely South African resources.

Spaces and communities of practice

Burnard (2012) discusses the intersection of the different genres and fields of music, which are inclusive of technology, industries, commerce, fields of cultural production, and social spaces. All these fields imply careers in music. The audit model impinges on our ability to update our equipment, so it becomes more feasible to collaborate with external stakeholders and utilize external spaces such as schools, clubs, churches, theatres, and concert halls to practise and to perform. These external communities also provide opportunities for our students to work alongside professionals and immerse themselves in industry practice, including the symphony orchestra.

The role of academics

Implicit in the previous discussions is that academics need to reflect on what music is. They should have an online presence and utilize online resources for teaching and learning. Academics should be the leaders in their fields, whether performance, teaching, or research, and should be given the space to hone their skills and create new knowledge so that music departments can be the apex of studying music. Added to this, academics working in the field of music need to be more in touch with the global society in which they find themselves. What it means to be an academic in music may also change, in so far as higher degrees may not be the only criterion, but high levels of competence may also be considered.

Final reflections

In this article, the author has presented McLuhan's predictions for the future of education and the influence of technologies. Research in education in the past 20 years show the influence of the audit model in HE. In addition to this, music departments have perpetuated practices from previous centuries when education was based on literacy and logic and not on creativity. The audit model impinges on innovative practice. Additionally, when we are not sure of our core business in music, we continue to repeat past institutionalized practices in an attempt to survive. It is only when we reconsider and reimagine our core business to be the home of music, which is inclusive of all musics, that we can begin to craft a different future, that is, a music department without walls.

Finally, the author hopes that this paper serves as a catalyst for further discussion of how we can reimagine music departments in a technological society.

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