Epping Forest College: Making it in the music industry with NUMU

Summary

Epping Forest College have introduced NUMU, a collaborative platform for music, to a group of their Level 2 Music students. The students use NUMU to share their compositions and productions, to peer review and comment on each other's work, and to self-reflect, and set targets using their bloglog.

This has benefited them enormously, as the platform has given the course more vocational relevance. Students have learnt how to promote themselves and their musical product online, work collaboratively, and review each others' work constructively. The learners are now more engaged, enthused and challenged through using NUMU.
About

Based in Loughton, Essex, approximately 2,500 learners study at Epping Forest College each year. Students are able to complete A-Levels, vocational courses and apprenticeships in a variety of subjects from ICT to Brickwork, and from Performing Arts to Business Studies.

The challenge

Before Epping Forest College introduced NUMU, students used exercise books instead of online blogs to self-reflect on their musical compositions and productions.

“Especially with Level 2 students, these books would get lost, chewed up by their dogs and go wandering. They would also get very messy when the learners were given handwritten feedback.” Bill Clarke, Level 2 Music Course Leader

Students also found it difficult to find the time to write in their logbooks during rehearsals.

The department was keen to introduce NUMU as they believed it could be the ideal tool to make the course more vocational, and could empower the students to act and think more like professional musicians out in the industry. In the real world prospective managers and agents want to see and hear artists’ online musical and visual product.

With the new specification for BTEC Music for Level 2 in 2013-14 there is a lot more scope for students to be marked on the quality of their online presence. So, Bill urged students to think about how best to present themselves to potential employers.

The students are assessed 50% on their musical performances and 50% on the written work, including reflection of their live performances. In this part of their Level 2 Unit 11 (Reflection of the rehearsal process) assessment they need to identify their musical techniques, as well as describe and explain them for pass, merit, and distinction criteria.

The department thought NUMU would be a massive improvement to their old logbooks, as any blog can be edited at any time, from anywhere and everywhere via their computers, tablets or even mobile phones. They also thought it could be the ideal tool for learners to record feedback received and self-review.

The activity

Bill first started trialling NUMU at his first PGCE placement at a school in 2010. They had a Musical Futures Transition project in place with Year 9 students.
When he joined Epping Forest College in 2011-12, he first introduced NUMU to his line manager and fellow teachers, and asked them if they thought they could use it in the music department.

"I was new to delivering the BTEC qualification and as it was vocational based I explained that using NUMU could be quite useful for students to replicate the real world experience of promoting their music online." Bill Clarke, Level 2 Music Course Leader

Kieran Faulkner-Mahon, Course Leader Level 3 Music, was very impressed and approached Head of e-Learning and Innovation, Vikki Liogier to ask if the college could get a free account for NUMU.

During the 2012-13 academic year the college introduced NUMU as a pilot project and set up the NUMU platform as a record label, with the BTEC Level 2 students as the artists.

"I named it Epping Forest Records, which added to the vocational aspect, and made the students more enthusiastic about it." Bill Clarke, Level 2 Music Course Leader
Straight away, the Music Tech students had to create a funk composition, export it as an mp3 file, and then upload it to NUMU. Everyone in the class could then listen to it, peer assess and give constructive feedback through NUMU.

The Music Tech students recorded the Performance students performing songs, these were uploaded giving further opportunities for peer assessment.

Term 2 was when the bloglog really took off. NUMU was initially focused on peer assessing different pieces of audio, however in term 2, its use was broadened by encouraging students to use the bloglog instead of log books.

That was when the students started to access NUMU at their own time and pace using their tablets, smartphones and computers, through the NUMU app.

Besides building individual professional portfolios, reflecting through NUMU was also embedded into the delivery of the BTEC programme mapped to specific dates so that students were clear on the deadlines by which the bloglog needed to be completed.

Thanks to dedicated classtime slots for students to complete their bloglog, Bill was able to provide on the spot feedback and guidance through coaching.

“Since then, they’ve been able to log-on very easily to use NUMU. A couple of my most conscientious students complete their bloglogs on the way home, or at home, so they don’t need to use the classroom time, and can instead get on with other work.” Bill Clarke, Level 2 Music Course Leader

The outcomes

As a result of using NUMU, the students have benefited in a number of ways.

- **They are more engaged** - as they are working with a social networking, Facebook style, blogging platform which they are used to;
- **Accessibility has increased** - as students can now access their work at home, or via their mobile devices;
- **It gives them a personalized and differentiated approach to learning** – they can work on NUMU at their own pace, anywhere and any time;
- **Increased collaborative learning** – they have to help each other through blogging and commenting on each other’s work;
- **Increased interpersonal skills** – they’ve learnt how to give feedback to other students in a tactical way. They have to be constructive in their criticism;
- **They are stretched and challenged** - because they have to self-reflect, and they know that others will listen and peer review their music, they want to work harder to create a better product.
“As a result of the use of NUMU, students now have an increased awareness of how the music industry works. Through creating Epping Forest Records and working through some of the units with the tutors, they understand more about how a record label works.” Bill Clarke, Level 2 Music Course Leader

As they are a ‘signed’ artist on the Epping Forest College record label they have to work by the contract that they’ve been signed to. Bill has taken the rules outlined in the student journal and the code of conduct, as well as incorporating industry standard copyright laws for students to research as part of their coursework.

The students are benefiting from getting vocational knowledge and experience of the music industry. They have to tag the other writers/performers/producers involved in the performed songs and recordings. They must acknowledge who was involved, as in the real recording industry they would receive royalties for their contributions.

“NUMU is a great collaborative tool for students that not only meets the music industry standards but also enables the users to publish their work globally. NUMU facilitates personalisation and access so it meets the needs of individual students, encouraging each one to build a sense of ownership of their NUMU profile. Broadening exposure and collecting feedback from their peers, in turn, pushes them to continually improve their production, raising expectations of their own performance and ability.” Vikki Liogier, Head of e-Learning and Innovation
Other members of staff have also benefited from using NUMU.

“I can access NUMU on the train on the way home, it’s perfect. It’s so accessible, which is just brilliant.” Bill Clarke, Level 2 Music Course Leader

In the role of ‘publisher’, Bill can go into artists’ pages and leave comments at the bottom to give feedback, and it’s saved for when they next log into NUMU.

Students have given their feedback on the benefits of NUMU:

“NUMU is really good, I’m able to play and record my music, and get other people to listen to it. Teachers can listen to my music to see how far I’ve progressed over the year.

“We can use the NUMU app on our phone, so it’s really mobile, and I can access and change work on my phone.” Farid, Music student

“We use the bloglogs to write and keep track of what we’ve been doing in the rehearsal studio. That really helps as we can review what we’ve already done on our phones.

“It’s a good little network to stay connected, and to get to know each other’s music and work.” George, Music student

“The feedback helps us to improve our work.” Andrew, Music student

Music students giving their feedback on NUMU
The impact

There have been massive efficiency and time savings using NUMU. It has been much easier than using the logbooks as Bill no longer has to chase up students for their lost books. He’s also been able to access everyone’s work at any time.

Previously there wouldn’t have been a collaborative side to the written peer feedback within the music courses, as students wouldn’t have been able to give feedback to each others’ work through their exercise books.

“It’s had an inspirational impact as students can look and listen to each others’ work through NUMU and find inspiration. Therefore you have this reciprocal exchange of inspiration and ideas between the students.” Vikki Liogier, Head of e-Learning and Innovation

NUMU has improved inclusion and accessibility, as students with dyslexia and dyspraxia much prefer the visual, blogging, social networking style of NUMU over writing their self-reflection in logbooks.
Kim Begley, Performing Arts Section Leader, commented on the impact of embedding NUMU in the pedagogic delivery.

“Prior to the students using NUMU to produce reflective log books they were simply not as engaged. The use of NUMU has involved all learners and suited their differentiated needs. NUMU promotes sharing of good practice and allows students to take ownership of the creative process. We shall be rolling NUMU out across other units on Level 2 and introducing it on Level 3 in September 2014.”

Epping Forest College has witnessed a real learner engagement shift thanks to the introduction of NUMU to enhance the Music Level 2 curriculum delivery.

“The students produce much better work as a result. They’re going to have much more pride in their work as they will want people to download their music as they would buy tracks on iTunes.” Bill Clarke, Level 2 Music Course Leader

The college are currently building a new music technology studio and also have plans to start their own college radio station, where they will then be able to begin playing students’ compositions on the radio. With this and the introduction of NUMU, Bill hopes that the class will be more like a record label, meeting expectations of the real recording industry.

“Music and Music Technology is a very successful and expanding part of the curriculum offer at Epping Forest College. The NUMU pilot has had a positive impact on learner satisfaction and retention, and it has supported students to achieve on aspects of the coursework which they find challenging. There is a clear plan to develop its use across other units and courses in the department.” Phil Hall, Head of Creative Industries

As this was a pilot project the college is now looking at introducing NUMU to all its 50 music students, and are examining opportunities to introduce NUMU to performing arts subjects as they are all closely intertwined. Video will be used as well as audio recordings to enable a broader cross-curricular function.

**The lessons learned**

- The class did experience a few technical problems with NUMU, which have since been fixed by the company. A couple of times when students were editing their bloglogs they switched between tabs in Internet Explorer, and when they’d returned back to their blog their work had disappeared.

- Bill suggests using NUMU through Google Chrome, as you can use a spell checker and can extend the writing space for the blog. As otherwise it’s quite a narrow entry on other browsers.

- But all in all, Bill explains that most of NUMU is self-explanatory and easy to use.
Useful links

NUMU website
NUMU frequently asked questions
Bill Clarke – NUMU in a Nutshell video
NUMU Pilot at EFC video

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