

The Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

Final Report - 2023

A Discovery of Adaptive Instruments

Diane Kolin

What is this research about?

Disability is rarely considered in music education today. This project proposed to include more accessibility conversations in the classroom, with children from several age groups. Students of the Community Music Schools of Toronto-Jane Finch discovered adaptive instruments and voice in a series of workshops engaging the researcher, the teachers and the students.

What you need to know:

A project about disability in music education involves conversations with the students, the teachers, the direction of the school, the parents, and the different partners who contributed to the project. All these elements brought together made the project successful.

What did the researcher do?

Prior to the work with the students, a discussion was held with the direction of the school to determine what groups would be included (age, instruments, schedules). The teachers were contacted, and meetings were organized to agree on the dates of the workshops, the activities planned, and the role of the participants.

The workshops consisted of three discovery sessions, three action sessions, and a final performance to present a work in relation with what was learned during the workshops. All sessions took place between February and May 2023.

The first discovery workshop introduced voice students between 11 and 13 years old to Braille Music scores, and American Sign Language (ASL) Music Teaching. The researcher prepared the Braille scores reading session of the Disney Tune "A whole new world" from *Aladdin* in partnership with the Canadian National Institute for the Blinds (CNIB), and an ASL Music performer, Gaitrie Persaud, who was invited specially for the occasion, taught the students the lyrics of "The Greatest" by Sia in ASL.

The second discovery workshop engaged with a group of musical beginning students between 6 and 9 years old, to explore the use of new technologies in adapted music, with the aim of using

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an instrument without physically touching it, or with minimal mobility use. Three instruments were explored: a rhythmic music box developed by Yamaha called the Tenori-On, that can replace a drum set by creating musical patterns on a digital keyboard; a Theremin, which can be used without physical touch by moving a hand in front of an antenna to create music with sound waves; and a multi-instrument called AUMI (Adaptive Use Musical Instruments), a free software installed on an iPad that is played by facial or body recognition without touching the screen.

The third discovery workshop consisted of an exercise of rethinking the use of traditional instruments in a non-traditional way. Offered to a group of jam session students between 12 and 14 years old, this session proposed to play the drums or the piano with feet, to play the guitar with only one arm, and to imagine how to play other kinds of instruments with a lack of body part. Students could also try a musical cuff placed on the hand of the participants and interacting with the movements of the user thanks to musical patterns programmed on a special interface.

An action session was planned for each of the discovery workshops: the voice students learned to sing the entire “The Greatest” song in ASL Music, the musical beginning group composed a piece on the Tenori-On, and the jam session group improvised on the instruments explored during the discovery session.

The result of the students’ work during the workshop was presented at the final recital of the year, at York University in June 2023. Two groups were featured: the voice students performed their song in ASL Music, and the musical beginning students played their Tenori-On composition.

The workshops were presented at five conferences and one academic lecture between March and June 2023:

- Public academic lecture: Oral comprehensive examination, York University: “Accessibility in music education: tools and techniques for music educators” (Toronto, Ontario)
- Conference: York University Experiential Education (EE) Symposium (Toronto, Ontario)
- Conference: York University Graduate Music Students Colloquium – Forward Motion (Toronto, Ontario)
- Conference: 3rd Biennial Disability Studies & Music Education Symposium (DSandME ’23) (London, Ontario)
- Conference: Music and Health Conference: Knowledge Exchange, Mobilization, and Translation (Ottawa, Ontario)
- Conference: Children, Youth and Performance Conference (Toronto, Ontario).

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Final Report - 2023

What did the researcher find?

This project triggered a lot of discussions. In the classroom, both students and teachers actively participated in the activities and gave very positive feedback on their experience. The discovery sessions contained a Q&A period for students to ask questions to the guests and the researcher (who is in a wheelchair) or about the equipment or instruments used. An active conversation about the possibilities of performing with limited mobility or lacking members of the body led to the watching of videos of professional musicians with diverse disabilities. Organizers of a special video program of the music school called CMST Talk invited the researcher and some suggested guests to talk more about accessibility in the music world; the video is available on their YouTube channel. After the recital, parents and staff members asked questions about the process, and whether the workshops will happen the following year. Overall, the project was successful and could be expanded.

How can you use this research?

CMST might want to renew the experience, either with small or larger groups of students. Adaptive instruments and voice workshops can be programmed in any music school. The researcher can be contacted for a conversation about specific settings and participants. The CMST Talk episode can be seen here: <https://youtu.be/TrLnplvySJM>.

About the researcher

Diane Kolin is a PhD candidate in Musicology in the Music department at York University. Her diverse research interests include Critical Disability Studies, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Franz Liszt, and her dissertation focuses on professional musicians, composers, and music specialists with disabilities. She is the editor in chief of the Journal of the French Beethoven Society. The study of Beethoven's deafness and her personal history led to her research in disability and music. She is a professional member of RAMPD (Recording Artists and Music Professionals with Disabilities) and the Recording Academy. She is also a voice teacher and a singer who advocates for more accessibility in orchestras, choirs, and music education.

Keywords

Music, school, youth workshops, music students, voice, choir, disability, accessibility, new technology, adaptive instruments, transformed instruments, ASL, American Sign Language, Braille, AUMI.

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About the Helen Carswell Chair

[The Helen Carswell Chair in Community-Engaged Research in the Arts](#) is a partnership between York University's [School of Arts, Media, Performance and Design](#) and [Community Music Schools of Toronto](#). This partnership is dedicated to community cultural development in the underserved neighbourhoods of Toronto. We facilitate and conduct rigorous academic research which explores the benefits of community music programs and the links between music and learning. The goal of our work is to significantly benefit children from high-risk neighbourhoods and to fortify community music programs globally through publications and knowledge mobilization. We especially seek to engage and help drive new knowledge and practice to community-based groups serving children in the Jane and Finch community.