

REPORT

The Online Conference for Music Therapy (OCMT): Demonstrating best practices for virtual conferences, education and training

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ABSTRACT

This report highlights the Online Conference for Music Therapy (OCMT) and assesses the impact of the global pandemic COVID-19 on the education and training of music therapy students, as well as music therapy and music and medicine conferences. Virtual conferences and the future of conferences in general are overviewed, while best practices for virtual conferences are shared and connected to the OCMT exemplar. With considerable uncertainty regarding the long-term impact of the pandemic on face-to-face conferences and instruction, it does seem timely for a review or study of the feasibility of teaching music therapy courses online versus in class. With each online conference new knowledge is gained and best practices will continue to evolve. Given COVID-19, it is timely that the profession addresses the benefits and challenges of remote learning and telehealth practices for music therapy training. The music therapy community is fortunate to have the experience and practices of the OCMT to inform their virtual events during this pandemic.

KEYWORDS

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This brief report highlights the Online Conference for Music Therapy (OCMT) and offers discussion on the impact of COVID-19 on conferences, education and training in the present reality and future. Best practices for virtual conferences are shared and connected to the OCMT exemplar.

SETTING THE STAGE: ONLINE CONFERENCE FOR MUSIC THERAPY (OCMT) REFLECTIONS

Each winter since 2011, I have looked forward to attending and presenting at the Online Conference for Music Therapy (OCMT). It is a virtual conference where music therapists and music and

healthcare practitioners from the eight global regions of the world are invited to present, learn and interact. While the conference is a live 24-hour event, each presentation is recorded and subsequently available to conference attendees for one month post-conference as part of their registration fee. This allows participants to attend live presentations that are congruent with their time zone, and watch additional presentations at their leisure. Some presentations are also archived with the permission of the presenter and kept on the OCMT website for individuals to purchase anytime during the year for a small fee. Further, attendees can register to earn Continuing Education Credits CMTE Credits, which are applicable for music therapists holding the Music Therapist Board Certified Credential (CBMT). For other attendees, Continuing Education credits are determined and issued on an individual basis. Organisers offer two options for the amount of credits to be earned based on the number of presentations an individual chooses to attend and/or “watch a recording of.”

Each OCMT has featured two keynote speakers as well as an additional 14-16 presentations lasting 45-60 minutes with an opportunity for questions. The conference is held the first weekend of February each year, and an open call for presenters is put out in the spring the year prior to the conference. Presentation submissions are sent out for anonymous peer review and submissions must include an abstract, description of the presentation, learning objectives and a list of the relevant Certification Board for Music Therapists Domains that will be covered in the talk. Presenters are notified of the status of their submission in the early fall, giving them ample time to work on their presentations and become comfortable with the technological aspects if they are new to the online presentation platform.

During the live presentations, the OCMT board and volunteers support presenters as well as attendees and encourage interaction via the chat feature in the online platform, or through quick polls during the presentations. Further, the OCMT does a lot of social media leading up to the conference, during and after the event. Presenters have their own OCMT Facebook group to dialogue, and the OCMT team creates an encouraging and positive format to interact.

Online Conference for Music Therapy is a not-for-profit organisation that is overseen by the OCMT Board of Directors and the conference organising committee volunteers who prepare the annual conference event as well as additional symposia where CMTE Credits can be earned. The mission of the OCMT is to provide professional music therapy learning opportunities that are affordable and applicable to music therapy students, professionals and music and health-oriented individuals. I concur the fees for the online event are reasonable and accessible. Further, OCMT offers scholarships and a simple application process. They are truly striving to be inclusive and to reach as many individuals as possible with these learning opportunities.

My OCMT experiences

For the past nine years (since the conference began) I have attended and presented a paper at the conference. Each year as a presenter, I was supported by the OCMT team with respect to the technological aspects in preparing my presentation. The OCMT team offers online training for presenters well in advance of the conference, and they provide valuable feedback in assisting presenters to finalise their presentations. As a long-standing OCMT presenter, I have felt exceptionally well supported and prepared to present with the OCMT officers; and that the process

has been simple. I have promoted the event each year to the students I teach as well as my music therapy colleagues, and I have only heard positive comments regarding their participation.

I am honoured to be selected as one of the two keynote speakers for the 10th Anniversary of the OCMT in February 2021. If you have not yet attended an OCMT conference, I encourage you to do so, and also to consider presenting your work. This is a valuable learning opportunity music therapists and music and medicine practitioners have each year to become knowledgeable about music therapy and music and health practices around the world. A number of presenters often include the voices of the service users via various methods such as case examples, video and/or research qualitative comments. For more information about the OCMT, please visit <https://onlineconferenceformusictherapy.com/>

THE IMMEDIATE IMPACT OF THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC ON EDUCATION

As I am writing this report, the world is experiencing a global pandemic (COVID-19), and I am now framing my online OCMT conference experiences in the broader professional and interdisciplinary context. In less than one week in March 2020, many of my music therapy educator colleagues around the globe had to move their classroom delivery of music therapy courses to online platforms in order to complete the winter 2020 academic term. While moving online was necessary, student access to the internet and online platforms is something to be considered moving forward. Not all students have access to high-speed internet or even a computer that is dedicated for their own use as opposed to the use of several family members meaning there could be challenges in students attending synchronous lectures and accessing their online work and assignments. Other students may not feel comfortable turning their web cameras on to invite others into their home spaces. Further, the needs of the learner have to be considered and educators need to ensure that learning includes developing and enforcing accessibility standards. What has appeared to present one of the largest challenges is the practical aspect of music therapy training. With many placement and internship sites not allowing students to provide therapy during the quarantine, how do students continue learning, and stay motivated? Many training programmes created continuing education learning opportunities for their students to keep them engaged. For example, viewing clinical videos, or their supervisors providing online therapy and commenting, among other self-study activities. If the pandemic continues for several months or even a year with social distancing restrictions, there will be an issue in securing a sufficient number of placement sites and supervisors when the social distancing rules are eased and both new and current students. Consultation is occurring and dialogue will continue with certification boards in terms of how many of the required internship or placement hours can include other activities. Will there be consideration for a reduction in the number of direct client contact hours? And if so, does this put pre-professionals at a disadvantage compared to other cohorts? There are a lot of questions for educators, and several groups have assembled themselves over social media and begun the process of sharing resources and collaborating, for example the Philadelphia Area Schools Coalition of Clinical Coordinators in the USA.

THE IMMEDIATE IMPACT OF THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC ON CONFERENCES

Planned in-person music therapy and music and medicine conferences moved to online platforms. For several of these, I was involved in helping transition or support the reworking of the events; and it seemed the learning curve was steep and rapid. In some ways, moving conferences online enabled many individuals to attend conferences they would not have been able to, given financial and other limitations such as time away from work. Board members of OCMT reached out to help music therapy colleagues globally in re-envisioning their conferences for online platforms and to share their learning and knowledge; truly demonstrating their commitment to their not-for-profit organisation.

When looking at disciplines, some areas of study and focus are more readily deliverable over the internet. Music and music therapy provide challenges in online delivery. For example, with respect to sound delays when trying to create music together, or with the energy that is felt when one is performing and sharing music in the same physical space. Ethical challenges also surface as some online platforms have become hacked or the therapist or student therapist does not have a space in their home that is free from disruption from other family members potentially entering. How can a presenter feel secure to share a clinical video online? Do they worry that someone is recording that clinical video and will post it online? While it is possible for individuals to record a video during a live conference, it is easier to control.

VIRTUAL CONFERENCES AND THE FUTURE

Virtual conferences have become the 'new normal' and it begs the question about what will happen moving forward post-COVID-19 with respect to conference delivery modes. Guta (2020) confirms what many of us realise about the benefits of virtual conferences: no travel costs, lower registration fees, reduced environmental footprint and even investing more into speakers. Further, with the economic impact faced by many individuals, it may make it impossible to be able to travel to in-person conferences in the next few years. So, will conference organisers move completely online, alternate one year in person with one year online, or will hybrid conferences be the new norm? PM Live (2020) notes:

Overall it is in everybody's interest - venues, cities, organisers, exhibitors, companies, airlines and delegates to get the exhibitions and events industry back to the pre Covid-19 levels of activity. After an extended period of isolation, there will certainly be an appetite for it. (para 18)

While I agree that there will be an increase in the desire to socialise and meet colleagues in person, PM Live's motivation for this statement comes from the framework of supporting the economy and takes into account the considerable financial hit that was taken in the hospitality industry. Mara (2020) asserts

While I don't predict that in-person events will be replaced entirely after COVID-19, I do believe event organizers will figure out ways the digital aspects can complement in-person events. I predict a steep rise in hybrid events where parts of the event take place in person, and others are delivered digitally. (para 9)

Already nine years ago, Pullan (2011) noted that there was a dramatic increase in virtual meetings. Interestingly, Pullan stated these as reasons for the increase: “Volcanic ash clouds over Europe in Spring 2010; The fear of epidemics, such as swine flu; and the need to cut travel to reduce costs in an uncertain economic climate, with ever-higher petrol prices” (para 6). This dramatic increase in virtual meetings was not witnessed or present in music therapy conference platform changes. Planned music therapy conferences went ahead as scheduled in person. I myself was stranded in an airport for two days in Europe due to the volcanic ash. I had just presented at an international conference and was slated to return home to repack for a national conference. Due to the delay, I went straight from the international event to the home country congress.

VIRTUAL CONFERENCE BEST PRACTICES

So, what are important considerations in hosting virtual conferences? As I read the literature on best practices for virtual conferences, it is apparent that the OCMT have been demonstrating these since their inception and I have written about them above. Important considerations for hosting international online conferences include: the amount of screen time participants are logged on, synchronicity vs asynchronicity, time zones, live question-and-answer periods, and virtual networking and socialising. A balance of synchronous versus asynchronous presentations is essential, and many conferences offer this, with all presentations remaining on a conference website for a period post-conference, enabling attendees to view at their leisure. Adding this component also helps accommodate individuals in varying time zones and those with learning disabilities. Flaherty (2020) acknowledges that synchronous instruction does not often provide provisions for those individuals with special learning needs. It is also important to consider the voices of the service users and their conference participation opportunities as well as ensuring access for individuals with disabilities.

Keeping participants engaged is also vital to ensuring satisfaction, and providing a monitored live question-and-answer period and chat feature are essential tools. A great feature I used in my OCMT presentations was audience polls. This gives the audience a chance to share their voice/opinion, and also for the speakers to learn a bit about their attendees in order to further customise their talk. A concept I had not considered before the virtual conferences I attended this spring was a virtual networking time. As we all know, networking is often a key selling feature for in-person events, and it does deserve a place in the virtual world. How to make this happen virtually is slightly more challenging as people are not walking around a conference venue nor do they have the ability to approach a speaker they listened to with some further questions. Some ideas that come to mind are to have breakout groups where individuals can sign up in advance to network with a group about a designated topic. And, of course, entertainment which is something we as music therapists and musicians have an advantage of in terms of including in our events. For example, being able to feature the musician participants, and also to create virtual musical compositions, such as a virtual choir of selected participants.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Certainly, there is a lot to think about and a lot of uncertainty in how the globe will move forward in terms of in-person versus virtual events, teaching, therapy and much more. With respect to clinical training, it does seem timely for a review or study of the feasibility of teaching music therapy courses online versus in class, and a number of questions come to mind for discussion and research. Is there an implication / need for a profession-wide review of the amount or types of courses in music therapy education and training that can be taught remotely? Is it timely, given COVID-19, that the profession addresses this now as more professionals learn about the challenges and benefits of remote training? What cultural considerations need to be taken into account when moving courses and/or programmes online? With respect to ensuring pre-professionals are prepared for working with their clients given curriculum changes and clinical placement opportunities whose responsibility is to monitor that process? (i.e. the professional association or certification bodies or individual intuitions offering training).

With each online conference, new knowledge is gained and best practices will continue to evolve. The music therapy community is fortunate to have the experience and practices of the OCMT to inform their virtual events during this pandemic. While I greatly desire to see my colleagues soon at an in-person conference, it has been rewarding to connect with many individuals I would not have seen at these events but who have been able to participate virtually.

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Ελληνική περίληψη | Greek abstract

Το Διαδικτυακό Συνέδριο Μουσικοθεραπείας (OCMT): Παραθέτοντας καλές πρακτικές για εξ αποστάσεως συνέδρια, εκπαίδευση και κατάρτιση

Amy Clements-Cortés

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η παρούσα αναφορά επικεντρώνεται στο Διαδικτυακό Συνέδριο Μουσικοθεραπείας [Online Conference for Music Therapy, OCMT] και κάνει μια εκτίμηση του αντίκτυπου της πανδημίας COVID-19 στην εκπαίδευση και κατάρτιση φοιτητών μουσικοθεραπείας, καθώς και στη διεξαγωγή

συνεδρίων στα πεδία της μουσικοθεραπείας και της μουσικής και ιατρικής. Γίνεται μία συνοπτική αναφορά στα εξ αποστάσεως συνέδρια και τα συνέδρια του μέλλοντος γενικότερα, ενώ επισημαίνονται οι καλές πρακτικές των εξ αποστάσεως συνεδρίων σύμφωνα με το υπόδειγμα του OCMT. Με έντονη αβεβαιότητα ως προς τον μακροπρόθεσμο αντίκτυπο της πανδημίας στη διεξαγωγή των δια ζώσης διασκέψεων και διδασκαλιών, η επισκόπηση ή μελέτη της σκοπιμότητας των εξ αποστάσεως μαθημάτων μουσικοθεραπείας έναντι των δια ζώσης μαθημάτων είναι επίκαιρη. Σε κάθε διαδικτυακό συνέδριο αποκτάται νέα γνώση και οι καλές πρακτικές εξακολουθούν να αναπτύσσονται. Δεδομένου του COVID-19, είναι η κατάλληλη στιγμή για το επάγγελμα να εντοπίσει τα οφέλη και τις προκλήσεις της εξ αποστάσεως μάθησης και των πρακτικών τηλε-υγείας στην εκπαίδευση της μουσικοθεραπείας. Η κοινότητα της μουσικοθεραπείας έχει το προνόμιο να έχει την εμπειρία και τις πρακτικές του OCMT για να ενημερώσει τις εξ αποστάσεως δράσεις της κατά τη διάρκεια της πανδημίας.

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ

εκπαίδευση και κατάρτιση, εξ αποστάσεως συνέδρια, μουσικοθεραπεία, πανδημία, καλές πρακτικές, OCMT