

Once a week, students log-on to Zoom for their music class. Instead of rushing across campus, instrument in hand, hoping to make it to class on time, the only commute they now have to make is onto their computer. When class begins, students practice their scales and perfect the piece they're working on. Yet, everyone's microphone is muted except for the teacher's, and only a few students have their cameras on.

That's what a music class looks like during the Covid-19 pandemic. Classes from the grade school level to college level have been forced to adapt to health guidelines, and students and teachers are learning to share their love for music in online and socially-distanced formats.

Some music classes, like Anna Holbrook's kindergarten through eighth-grade music classes at the [Cathedral of Saint Raymond Grade School](#) in Joliet, Ill., have been able to continue to meet in-person during the pandemic. "We've been lucky to have most students be able to meet in-person this semester, which has been nice during such a weird time," Holbrook said. However, others, like Richard Moore's junior-college level classes at [Joliet Junior College](#) (JJC), have only been able to meet through an online format.

Whether music class during the pandemic is online or in-person, Moore said something is missing from music courses this semester. "Nothing replaces that face-to-face interaction and feeling that energy," Moore said.

Moore is currently teaching over 10 music courses at JJC this semester, including classroom-based courses such as Theory of Music and Evolution of Jazz, along with individual music lessons such as Applied Clarinet, Flute, and Saxophone. JJC [mandated](#) that all of their courses for the Fall 2020 semester, as well as the upcoming Spring 2021 semester, only meet online, Moore said. He added that the college does not allow professors to require synchronous meetings for all classes, however, Moore said he holds weekly Zoom meetings for each of his classes that he expects his students to attend.

Moore said his curriculum has mostly stayed the same despite the switch to an online format. However, he said it is often difficult for him to gauge students' engagement in their weekly Zoom meetings and the class in general. "You show up to a Zoom meeting and nobody wants to have their camera on and everybody's muted," he said. "Sometimes I feel like I'm just talking to the computer screen."

Despite the challenges he has faced in evaluating engagement in his synchronous classroom meetings, Moore said he feels his students have been managing their workload well. "The students seem to be doing good work," he said. "They're reaching out to me via email, and the weekly synchronous sessions, even though everybody isn't always there, have been productive."

Hagan Lange, a freshman studying music at JJC and a student in two of Moore's music classes, said sometimes it has been challenging to stay completely focused during the synchronous Zoom meetings for his music classes. "You have to really apply yourself and want to learn what they're teaching," Lange said. "It's easy to get distracted, but I'd say I'm more engaged in my Zoom music classes than other subjects."

Lange said he has been staying up-to-date with his assignments for his music classes and appreciates that Moore posts their weekly Zoom meetings online so he can look back on them when he is doing assignments. "If I'm ever confused or feel like I missed something in the Zoom

meeting, I look back on the recordings,” Lange said. “You can’t really do that with in-person classes, so that’s one thing I do like about the online format.”

Moore said the challenge of gauging engagement hasn’t been an issue in his one-on-one music lessons though. In fact, he said there have been benefits to teaching an instrument in a distanced format since it allows students to take ownership of their musical discovery. “I find that a lot of the students are learning how to practice on their own and how to work through material on their own,” Moore said. “There’s almost a demand for a little bit more self-sufficiency because I can’t be in the room playing along with them.”

Holbrook has found similar benefits in the Zoom music classes she teaches to the few students at St. Raymond that chose a fully online format. “The Zoom meetings allow me to really give a lot of individual attention and not worry about correcting behavioral problems,” she said.

Moore said he has found other unexpected benefits from online learning, both for himself and his students. He said the fully online format has allowed him to codify his entire curriculum, assignments, and coursework. He has digitized all of his material, which he said will be beneficial in the future if he ever chooses to teach a hybrid or fully online course.

Moore also said he plans to implement some of this year’s online resources into courses in the future, such as making all of this year’s recorded Zoom meetings available to future students. “Going forward, if a student misses a class, I already have a video lecture recorded,” Moore said. “I could still do the face-to-face meeting, but then there’s also a supplemental video of me talking through the textbook or talking through the homework.”

Holbrook also said she plans to incorporate some of the new curriculum into her future grade school music classes. “There’s things I would definitely like to continue with like some of the dancing and movement stuff that we didn’t do as much of before,” she said. “I think you can learn from this situation and apply it when things go back to normal.”

Moore said the flexibility of the online model has been beneficial for students, especially those who have jobs. Lange, who works as a multi-platinum music producer, said he appreciates online learning because it has given him more time to focus on his career. “Having class all day drained a lot of my energy and held me back from my full potential in music,” he said. “Online learning has let me do things on my own schedule and feel less stressed about school.”

Although there have been unexpected benefits of online learning, Moore said nothing can replace the collaborative experience of an in-person music class. He said as a musician and a teacher of music, he has an innate drive to collaborate with others and share his love for music, which cannot be replicated in an online format. “I’ve been doing this a long time, and I love to give that energy to the students,” he said. “They could listen to the YouTube clip, or they could look through the material, but to experience it along with somebody who is experienced is a different thing.”

Lange expressed a similar feeling toward the lack of shared energy in online music classes. “I know all my classmates and I love music, but you can’t really tell when we’re all just tiny boxes on Zoom,” he said.

Holbrook said even when music classes do meet in-person during the pandemic, there is still something missing, especially because of the ban St. Raymond put on singing and the use of

wind instruments in all of its in-person music classes. "It's definitely not the same by any means, but we're making do," Holbrook said.

Mary Ann O'Shea, assistant director of health services at Fordham University, explained that there is a [greater risk](#) posed by singing and playing wind instruments than there is doing basic actions like breathing and talking. "The virus spreads a lot more easily in a poorly-ventilated, indoor environment, so I would recommend only holding music classes outside or in a well-ventilated area right now," O'Shea said.

Holbrook also said the ban on singing has greatly impacted not only her teaching method but also could have long-term effects for her students' music skills. "For a general elementary music curriculum, developing that ear training for children that age is super important so they can sing the right pitches and get an idea of how notes relate to each other," she said.

Holbrook said she has shifted her focus to rhythm-based and listening-based music activities, such as dancing and chanting, in place of singing. She also said she has focused more on music history than she did last year, which was her first year teaching at St. Raymond.

The transition to these new activities has not been as difficult as one might expect, Holbrook said. "There's a lot of similarities," she said. "Some songs I used last year, I can just cut the singing out and just speak them so it becomes a chant."

In place of wind-instruments like recorders, Holbrook said she has been teaching her older students (fourth-eighth grade) other instruments like the ukulele and the glockenspiel.

While Holbrook said it hasn't been too challenging to adapt her curriculum to fit Covid guidelines, classroom management has presented more of a problem now than it has in the past. "I miss not having to police kids as much," she said. "You have all the things you had to correct them on before, but now you also have to correct them on things that under normal conditions when there's not a global pandemic, you wouldn't have to."

She said it's difficult not only to watch students while their desks are six feet apart, it's also challenging to teach music from a distance and give students individual feedback. "For music specifically, you need to be up close to have people see what fingering you're doing for ukulele or other instruments," Holbrook said.

While both Moore and Holbrook said Covid-19 hasn't necessarily been music to their ears, school music classes have adapted to the new normal and are learning to play on in socially distanced and online formats.