V.J. Manzo, Assistant Professor, Humanities & Arts
2014-15 Coleman Fellow

If you ask V.J. Manzo what he is, he will probably answer that he is a musician first and an educator second. He lives, breathes, eats, and sleeps music. As a composer, technologist and, yes, a performing musician, Manzo has a deep, abiding interest in the power of music to transform and improve people’s lives in ways far beyond simply making and listening to it.

As a Coleman Fellow, Manzo also looks at music and the means to make it as an entrepreneurial endeavor in the sense that musicians are always looking for ways to monetize what they do. “Musicians in general are entrepreneurial,” observes Manzo. “They’re always looking for ways to turn their skill and craft into money – whether it’s gigging, being a recording musician, providing lessons, or being a consultant. There are so many ways musicians can pursue their passion and make a buck.”

As a result, Manzo has been pursuing the use of technology to help support and facilitate musicianship, including developing a number of innovations to encourage the pursuit and production of music. “I’m always looking at ways to devise new technological instruments that can help people compose and perform. I’m also looking at different types of games and interactive systems that help educate people in different aspects of musicianship.”

Manzo’s entrepreneurial approach to music has led him beyond academia to establish several companies and music-related projects. These include Clear Blue Media, a multimedia developer and distributor, and a non-profit venture distributed by CBM called EAMIR, an open source project that develops free apps for teachers and individuals to help them produce music without the physical and technical limitations found in the performance of traditional acoustic instruments.

“All these ventures are focused on getting people who might not otherwise play music to play music,” said Manzo. “So we’re developing accessible instruments that are geared toward non-musicians to get them in the action and get them creating chords, creating scales, and hopefully learning something about music in the process.”

Back in the classroom, Manzo has introduced a variety of entrepreneurial aspects into his Humanities capstone course that explores music in multimedia and gaming environments. He enables students to explore various aspects of this area of entertainment – from writing and producing the music, to delving into the computer science behind it, to looking at developing new game concepts and how to incorporate their interests into launching their own start-ups.

Despite being in a field – music -- that many consider to be “impractical”, Manzo has some very practical advice for students interested on launching their own careers. “The best thing you can do is to ‘be around.’ Be around people, be involved in things, even if you’re not getting paid for it,”

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offered Manzo. “A lot of my success came from just agreeing to be involved in things. Everyone has skills and interests – go volunteer to give a talk at a middle school or senior center. Do a free presentation of what you do best. Get involved. Don’t limit yourself to just getting paid – it’s more important to be actively engaged in things. Take risks. Acquire a little debt. Be brave. Getting involved in areas outside your direct interests gets you in touch with different people and that can pay off big in the end.”