Collaborative learning in conservatoire education: catalyst for innovation

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COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN TWO VOCAL CONSERVATOIRE COURSES [*]

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Abstract

The apprenticeship tradition in conservatoire education assumes that teachers' expertise is the main source for the development of future music professionals. However, the professional practice of vocalists is nearly completely based on collaboration, such as with other vocalists, instrumentalists, accompanists, orchestras, conductors, or stage directors. In this study experiences of students, alumni, and teachers of one conservatoire in the Netherlands with collaborative learning practices in two vocal conservatoire courses were examined using student questionnaires and teacher interviews. Despite the assumption that the collaborative environment of group lessons would represent the ideal situation for learning to collaborate, group lessons did not explicitly lead to the collaborative and professional skills needed for musical practice. The main explanation for this might be that evaluated group lessons in this study were not designed with a learning goal of collaborative learning and working. A purposeful design of lessons in which content and pedagogy are aimed at developing these skills would enhance a culture of collaboration including both students and teachers, and as such mirror professional practice.

Keywords: higher music education, professional practice, vocal course, collaborative learning

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Learning to play an instrument is rooted in the master-apprentice teaching model, with a focus on the particular discipline (see, e.g., Long, Creech et al., 2014; Long, Hallam et al., 2014). For more than a decade, research into the practice of that master-apprentice teaching model at conservatoires shows that the sole use of this teaching method in preparation for a career in the music profession has both positive and negative effects (see, e.g., Gembris & Langner, 2005; Lebler, 2007; Gaunt, 2008).

In the Netherlands, conservatoire curricula generally consist of a mixture of group work and individual tutoring (one-to-one tuition). It is common to have individual tutoring at the core of principal study, and small- and larger-scale groups in all other subjects. principal study is the main instrumental or vocal subject of a student. Students often stay with one principal study teacher for a period of four to six years. Due to the nature of this relationship, teachers often refer to "my students" and students to "my teacher". Within Principal study, individual tutoring might be effective in developing performing skills, but teaching from that single perspective does not sufficiently prepare students for the music profession. Smilde (2009) stated that various research projects have demonstrated that graduate conservatoire students encounter many problems when entering the labour market and that better preparation for the professional career is desirable.

In her article, Simones (2017) concluded that a wider range and sorts of instrumental and vocal pedagogy in higher music education is needed in order to deal with "a variety of learning contexts, artistic genres, musical goals and pedagogical approaches" (p. 9). Carey and Grant (2015) found that one-to-one teaching is highly valued within conservatoire education because of its close guidance and focus on individual needs of students, such as specific instrument-related issues or personal aspects that require confidentiality. A relatively small number of both teachers and students appreciated the benefits of non-one-to-one models of teaching and learning, such as group activities and team-teaching. Carey and Grant (2015) found in their study, that teachers, more than students appreciated a broader range of work forms including collaborative learning, as to provide a more complete learning environment.

Music practice requires a variety of professional skills such as entrepreneurial skills, collaboration, peer learning, and reflection. Renshaw (2001) stated that a change of cultural values is needed, which requires a change of attitude and policy at conservatoires, challenging them to educate performers, composers, teachers, and artistic

leaders who are able to create live, shared experiences, and make sense to audiences in different contexts. This would also mean that with changes in professional practice, the requirements of starting musicians have shifted from a main focus on performing skills to a broader focus on a range of professional skills, including collaboration with other musicians and stakeholders. Presumably such changes should have tremendous consequences for how musicians are educated, including instructional activities geared at the development of students' collaborative skills.

In transforming the master–apprentice model and in re-examining routes of learning, more focus on collaborative learning would open up possibilities to reach these goals (Renshaw, 2013). However, limited research has been done on how collaborative learning can be implemented in an efficient and effective way in higher music education. An example of how higher music education practice can change is the Centre of Excellence in Music Performance Education (CEMPE) in Norway. Within this centre, several included projects pursued to develop new knowledge on group tuition practices (Hanken, 2015b).

In the current study, we aimed to provide insight into how collaborative learning in terms of group lessons was implemented and evaluated in two different vocal courses (in which students participate with singing as principal study), in the classical and the jazz/pop departments of a conservatoire in the Netherlands.

3.1.1 COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN CONSERVATOIRE VOCAL TRAINING

As we can conclude from Luce's review of the literature (2001), before 2000 little research was conducted into collaborative learning in higher music education. And although several developments have taken place since, settings that allow for collaborative and student-centred learning are still in the minority (Younker, 2014). Renshaw (2013) summarized the key benefits of an environment of collaborative learning in higher music education as follows (p. 237):

- o Collaborative learning is central to transforming the master-apprentice transmission model of teaching, and to re-examining ways of learning in music education so that they reflect more closely the fundamentally collaborative nature of the art form itself.
- o Collaborative learning is critical to developing, deepening and transforming shared expertise and understanding.
- o Collaborative learning is a powerful means of liberating creativity, bridging social and cultural divides, and meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century in the arts, education and in the wider society.
- o Collaborative learning is a fundamental skill for contemporary practitioners in the arts.

Renshaw (2013) stressed that, in order to create possibilities for collaborative learning, some essential conditions are necessary, based on shared trust, in a safe environment in which the process of learning is not threatened by judgmental behaviour but in which a sense of community overrules. According to Renshaw (2013) shared trust, should not stay limited to certain groups but should be part of the entire organisation. Collaborative ways of learning have the ability to stimulate creativity and innovation because of the interaction between peers, and between teachers and peers alike. Leadership plays a main role here, establishing trust throughout the institution and creating an environment in which the capacity to work together can grow and flourish. With regard to a collaborative learning environment, institutions are challenged to reconsider their leadership style, and create space for connectedness, shared leadership, and responsibility, and thus develop themselves as organisations.

In her literature study, Christophersen (2013) reflected on the pre-conditions for collaborative learning, including the acculturation of students as genuine members of a participative community. It appears to be essential to such a community that members are respectful to the cultural formation in order to balance an open, inclusive, and democratic environment and at the same time acknowledge the presence of power and conflict.

A report on experiences in a pilot of the classical vocal course of the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague described experiences of a peer-learning environment in comparison with individual tutoring experiences (Van Zelm, 2013). The author concluded that, as a result of peer learning, students developed as collaborators rather than competitors. Peer learning was implemented from the very start in this course.

In their book chapter, Latukefu and Verenikina (2013) focussed on perspectives of a collaborative and socio-cultural learning singing environment as a route to the self-directed learning of students. Engeström's activity model (1999, 2001) was used as a tool for analysis. The design of the learning environment, at the University of Wollongong in Australia, included the encouragement of collaborative dialogue, reflection, peer learning, and assessment as an integral part of the course. They concluded that a social environment that is carefully structured by a teacher can encourage students to solve performance and technical problems through collaborative dialogue, and can help students to co-construct the understanding of quality in singing.

In another case study conducted at Guildhall School of Music & Drama, Zanner and Stabb (2013) found that vocal music is in most cases a collaborative art, although

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students in most conservatoire vocal training courses were instructed in one-to-one lessons. They claim that vocal music unites text and music, poet and composer, and that collaboration is needed, be it in large-scale complex theatrical works or in simple accompanied songs. In the described conservatoire education, group activities did take place, such as language classes, drama, ensemble singing, master classes, or repertoire study. However, these group activities were not designed as collaborative learning environments. Zanner and Stabb (2013) showed that co-teaching (in this case, by a drama teacher and a singing teacher) should precede co-learning so that teachers can be role models. In this case, co-teaching meant that both teachers introduced unconventional ideas, shared responsibility for the processes of teaching and learning, challenged each other to experiment, and openly questioned each other. Furthermore, they introduced the "ensemble approach", in which all students are actively involved and no student can merely be an observer. Students became more active listeners and perceptive performers who exchanged ideas instead of only performing. Zanner and Stabb (2013) concluded that sharing, exchanging, and communicating are important assets when choosing to be a performer, and a collaborative learning environment was found to align more with the art of performance.

In sum, the inclusion of collaborative learning in vocal principal study is understood to improve students' professional preparation. Collaborative learning requires students to perform particular tasks and activities that mirror vocal professional practice, and teachers should also model collaborative behaviour in their own teaching practice, as in co-teaching. The current study was aimed at discovering advantages and disadvantages of collaborative learning in vocal training in conservatoire education with regard to students' performance, their collaboration and interaction, and their professional preparation. We aimed to answer the following research question: How did both students and teachers perceive the development of professional competencies in a collaborative learning environment in vocal group lessons within classical and jazz/pop conservatoire departments?

3.2 METHODS

The project undertaken, led by teaching and researching staff of the Utrecht conservatoire (part of the Utrecht School of the Arts, The Netherlands) took place within music degree courses (Bachelor and Master of Music). It addressed the implementation of

vocal group lessons in the area of principal study. Besides a number of alumni, music undergraduate and graduate students currently enrolled in the principal study of singing, and their teachers were involved in the set-up of this study. The study was based on a total of 43 responses (questionnaires and interviews together). Designed instruments for this study consisted of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. A comparative and descriptive methodology, with repeated readings and triangulation across data sources, was used to analyse data.

3.2.1 PARTICIPANTS

A questionnaire was administered to 101 students, Bachelor and Master students as well as alumni. In total, 60 questionnaires were filled in, of which 34 questionnaires were complete and usable, consisting of a total of 27 undergraduate and postgraduate students from all six academic levels (Bachelor and Master courses) and seven alumni; 22 of the 34 respondents were female. All students participated voluntarily and had the opportunity to opt out at all times. We summarized the description of our sample in Table 3.1. In addition to the questionnaire, individual semi-structured interviews were administered to all nine teachers (six females); four from the classical course and five from the jazz/pop course.

TABLE 3.1

NUMBER OF PARTICIPATING STUDENTS AND DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION.

	Classical vocal course	Jazz/pop vocal course
Age range	20-38	18-34
Number of male students	7	5
Number of female students	10	12
Total number of respondents	17	17
Respondents per year		
Bachelor Year 1	0	2
Year 2	4	2
Year 3	5	3
Year 4	4	3
Master Year 1	3	0
Year 2	1	0
Alumni	0	7

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3.2.2 STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Of the 34 students who completed the first questionnaire, 21 students voluntarily completed a second questionnaire (in a last question of the first questionnaire, students were asked to indicate whether they would be willing to fill out a second questionnaire in order for the researchers to get additional and more detailed information). Of these 21 students, nine were from the classical course and twelve from the jazz/pop course. The first questionnaire was administered in class; the second was sent by email. All students had at least some experience with group work.

The first questionnaire included 14 items about students' evaluations of how well the collaborative environment of group lessons prepared them for the musical profession and the development of professional skills (see Table 3.2). Additionally, nine items were included to evaluate the interaction among and collaboration between students and teacher (see Table 3.4). All items were answered using a Likert-type scale with rating "1" as the lowest score and "10" as the highest score, asking respondents to indicate how they valued the element in question. For example, "With regard to the group lessons you took part in, how would you rate learning to take initiative in professional situations?" or "How do you rate the level of interaction between the teacher and yourself in the group lesson?"

The second student questionnaire with open questions asked students to indicate what, to their opinion they were missing, and what needed to be addressed more in vocal group lessons and why.

3.2.3 TEACHER INTERVIEWS

The teacher interviews were semi-structured using a checklist of topics, including content, design and organisation of group lessons, pedagogy, and learning goals (see Appendix E). The interviews were conducted either at the conservatoire, in a teaching room, or through Skype. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes. Interviews were conducted by the first two authors who were at the same time colleagues of the interviewed teachers. The structure of the interviews and the rather limited amount of time helped to keep the focus purely on the experiences with collaborative learning.

3.2.4 ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the quantitative data from the student questionnaires. The interviews were audio-recorded, and literally transcribed. The interviews were repeatedly read and coded for emerging themes.

3.3 FINDINGS

In order to answer the research question: How well are professional competencies addressed in a collaborative learning environment in both classical and jazz/pop vocal conservatoire courses? The findings are presented in two sections:

(a)   How well professional competencies were addressed;

(b)   How the curricula of both courses were organised.

3.3.1 PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES

The content of the courses was determined by the competencies (knowledge, skills, mind-sets, thought patterns, etc.) needed for preparation of professional musicians. The set of competencies is a combination of specific and generic qualities and skills involved in craftsmanship, creativity, and professional behaviour. In Table 3.2, the results of the student survey show that collaborative learning in the two courses is sufficient in the area of craftsmanship and creativity (items 1-7): 6.54 (SD 0.73) in the jazz/pop course and 6.68 (SD 1.35) in the classical course; and below sufficient in the area of professional skills (items 8-14): 5.85 (SD 0.59) in the jazz/pop course and 5.61 (SD 0.95) in the classical course. Major differences in scores between the two courses can be found in the elements of "improvisation", "reflection", and "musical experiments", with low scores showing that levels of these elements in the classical course are insufficient (average score of 4.33 (SD 0.42)), and higher scores for jazz/pop (average score of 6.52 (SD 0.09)).

In both courses, teachers discussed and agreed on the content of the course prior to the start of lessons. Major differences in content between the two courses are that the classical course is mainly repertoire orientated and the jazz/pop course has a more thematic orientation. In the classical course, teaching a group lesson was done by one teacher, where other teachers of the faculty would make an effort to be present in the room as listeners. In Table 3.3, differences between the two courses with respect to the design and implementation of the curriculum are summarized, based on the interviews with teachers.

TABLE 3.2

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF STUDENTS' RATINGS OF THE RELATION BETWEEN COURSE AND PREPARATION FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE.

Rated items		Classical vocal course	Jazz/pop vocal course
		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
1.	Vocal/Technical Skills	5.87 (1.78)	5.37 (1.67)
2.	Style Interpretation	7.56 (2.25)	6.89 (0.9)
3.	Text Interpretation	6.87 (2.55)	7.56 (0.98)
4.	Improvisation	4.0 (2.42)	6.5 (1.15)
5.	Creativity	7.0 (2.48)	7.11 (0.96)
6.	Stage presentation	7.69 (1.78)	6.44 (1.5)
7.	Ensemble playing	7.75 (1.81)	5.94 (1.51)
Total mean of elements 1-7		*6.68 (1.35)*	*6.54 (0.73)*
8.	Collaboration	6.88 (1.92)	5.65 (1.58)
9.	Reflection	4.8 (2.91)	6.61 (1.5)
10.	Musical research	5.6 (2.67)	5.94 (1.83)
11.	Musical experiments	4.2 (2.88)	6.44 (1.29)
12.	Professional communication	5.78 (2.64)	4.78 (1.26)
13.	Flexibility	6.64 (2.76)	5.78 (1.66)
14.	Taking initiative	5.4 (2.38)	5.78 (1.89)
Total mean of elements 8-14		5.61 (0.95)	5.85 (0.59)

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TABLE 3.3

DIFFERENCES FOUND BETWEEN THE TWO COURSES.

Classical vocal course	Jazz/pop vocal course
Group lesson functions mainly as a stage	Group lesson functions mainly as an instrument for exploration
Since the group is large (±30), students are sitting in the audience, except the one being taught	Since the group is small (6-8), all students are actively involved
Master class form	More an experimental form
Out of respect for each other, teachers maintain strict boundaries in giving and allowing feedback	Teachers stimulate students to give feedback, in a safe environment
Content of group lessons mainly determined by musical styles and repertoire	Content mainly determined by themes and work forms
Teachers approach students mainly as future performers	Teachers approach students also as future teachers
Little appeal to self-guidance of students	Explicit appeal to self-guidance of students
Not all teachers share the same opinion on structure and content	Teachers share differences in opinion on structure and content
Extra time-investment from the school: large number of hours available, with several teachers present in the group lessons	No extra time-investment from the school; teachers themselves reallocated some of their individual teaching time to group lessons

Classical Vocal Course. Key elements of the classical vocal course were repertoire, interpretation, and technique. However, teachers were cautious about working on technique with students other than their own. Learning to perform for an audience was a central goal of the group lesson. Teachers taught different styles and repertoires. Teachers indicated that all students benefited from the broad experience and knowledge of repertoire of the entire faculty. One teacher explained in the interview:

> Each one of us teaches from his or her own expertise. One teacher knows a lot about Mozart and the German repertoire, another teacher knows more about ensemble singing, one colleague is specialized in Scandinavian music, and I do the Italian and Russian repertoire. So, each one of us contributes a different aspect and that is very enriching. Our expertise all together is the major strength of the group lesson that thus can have a variation in themes and topics.

Yet students indicated that there was too little ensemble playing and that they were not prepared well enough for professional practice. In the second questionnaire, students indicated:

> We are not prepared to be ensemble singers. There is only a focus on solo singing.

> We do not learn at all how to prepare for professional practice. And I do not only mean preparing for something like an audition, but also how to study parts, recitatives or complete opera roles.

> It happens regularly that students do not know their repertoire when coming to the group lesson. They are never held responsible for that, which keeps the culture of bad preparation going. Something could be said without being too harsh, and keeping an open atmosphere. This also applies to the student pianists who come to the lessons: they do not take accompaniment seriously and do not study their repertoire for the group lessons, which is very frustrating for the singers.

Related to the last remark, teachers highly valued cooperation with a pianist and underlined the importance of the availability of good accompanists, but because of the attitude of the student pianists, who seemed to mainly focus on their piano solo repertoire, accompaniment was usually provided by a professional vocal coach.

Jazz/pop Vocal Course. In the jazz/pop vocal course, topics related to performance, interpretation, and vocal and physical techniques were covered: aspects such as breathing and concentration, meditation techniques, dealing with text, specific repertoire, and stage presentation (if applicable, handbooks were used, like *Effortless mastery* (Werner, 1996) or *Song writing without boundaries* (Pattison, 2011)). One teacher reported that she used the group lesson as an addition to regular lessons, indicating:

> To be honest, what I cover in the group lessons includes mostly topics that I missed in my own education, to name a few: improvisation, blues, rhythm changes, the process of studying and learning, and circle-songs.

Aspects of ensemble playing included circle songs, accompanying each other, and close harmony. Improvisations, song writing, and writing solo-improvisations were also part of the lessons. About improvisation and collaborative learning, one teacher mentioned:

> Dealing with improvisation in a group setting can be valuable because it can help students not to be shy in learning to trust each other, and dare to take a vulnerable position.

From the answers in the second questionnaire, it seems students would appreciate more attention to style and text interpretation, presentation, and creativity. Improvisation was also mentioned, and specifically the peer-learning aspect of it. One student stated that it should be addressed more thoroughly:

> In my opinion, individual technical aspects do not need to get much attention in the group lesson. Text-interpretation and presentation have been covered, and are generally

aspects that can be judged by peers. Style-interpretation could be given more attention, as could improvisation. Especially how you learn this, and how to get inspiration from others. It has been covered, but with too little focus.

Another student also stressed the need for a stronger focus on ensemble and singing in a band:

Ensemble could be given more attention in the group lesson. Especially because it is often difficult for vocalists to find their position within a band.

More students would like to have stronger emphasis on all of the aspects of professional preparation:

All aspects mentioned are important in group lessons, but I would like to mention especially the musical experiments. Discovering by oneself and being stimulated in this would lead to beautiful moments and better insights into oneself and into music. It seems to be a very important process.

Professional preparation, flexibility, and taking initiative are aspects that turned out to be very important in my professional practice. I think those aspects form too small a part of the programme in general. (...) Musical experiment and research should be part of the general study programme. Probably it is too much for a group lesson to completely cover these. But students could be stimulated more, though.

3.3.2 ORGANISATION OF THE CURRICULUM

The group lessons in the two courses differed in musical content, design and organisation, and learning goals. The group lessons in both the classical and the jazz/pop course were organised each week, parallel to individual principal study lessons. In the classical course, group lessons were organised as master class-like environments, with one student on stage and a larger group of students observing; in the jazz/pop course, small-group learning included reflection, collaboration, active participation, and peer interaction. In both courses, teacher roles alternated, including the roles of guiding, coaching, and facilitating.

In Table 3.4, the results of the student survey show that the level of interaction within the group settings (items 1-6) is evaluated as satisfactory in both the jazz/pop course (M= 7.26; SD= 0.28) and the classical course (M= 7.39; SD= 0.35). Other elements of the design of the course such as preparing and contributing materials, collaborative educational work forms, and feedback and peer learning received lower evaluation scores for the jazz/pop course (M= 6.5; SD= 0.29), as well as the classical

course (M=5.97; SD= 1.19), with a remarkably low average score of 4.62 for feedback and peer learning in the classical course.

Classical Vocal Course. In the classical vocal course, group lessons of two hours were organised each week, with a rotating system of teachers, repertoires, and topics. One teacher invited the other principal study teachers to participate in group lessons, which were designed and organised by a group of four teachers and a management assistant. Teachers received extra hours for teaching group lessons in addition to their individual principal study lessons. Group lessons were organised according to repertoire: different styles and repertoires were divided over various time frames within the academic year. In the group lesson, the number of students varied from only a few to about thirty. A student mentioned the following about student participation:

> There are many singers who show up to the lesson exclusively when they have to sing. I find that insulting toward other colleagues and teachers. Yet, they are never sanctioned in any way. This is not fair to the other participants.

The teachers decided to organise the lessons for three different groups: (1) a group of starters, including preparatory class and first-year bachelor's students, (2) a junior group of second- and third-year bachelor's students, and (3) a senior group of fourth-year bachelor's and master's students. A professional vocal coach was available throughout the lessons, and at least two other teachers of the faculty were present and observed the lessons. Teachers indicated that students seemed to feel less safe in a group lesson and behave more carefully; some were more passive than in individual lessons. Despite that, the teachers valued the group dynamics highly; as one teacher stated in the interview:

> Group dynamics do matter: a major learning process takes place in students when they are among students. (...) The support they all give each other is of incredible importance, everything starts from there.

On the other hand, another teacher mentioned:

> We think educating singers brings about a certain intimacy for which a group situation is not always suitable.

TABLE 3.4

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF STUDENTS' RATINGS OF THE COURSE ELEMENTS.

		Classical vocal course *Mean (SD)*	*Jazz/pop vocal course* *Mean (SD)*
1.	Interaction: own involvement	7.81 (1.42)	7.5 (0.71)
2.	Between teacher and respondent	7.8 (1.01)	7.5 (0.86)
3.	Quantitative (moments of contact) between teacher and students (as a group)	6.93 (2.02)	7.44 (0.78)
4.	Qualitative (impact) between teacher and students (as a group)	7.28 (1.64)	7.28 (0.96)
5.	Quantitative interaction between students and respondent	7.14 (1.95)	7.0 (0.84)
6.	Qualitative interaction between students and respondent	7.36 (1.74)	6.83 (1.04)
	Total mean of elements 1-6	*7.39 (0.35)*	*7.26 (0.28)*
7.	Preparing and contributing materials	6.44 (1.55)	6.17 (1.46)
8.	Collaborative educational work forms	6.85 (1.91)	6.67 (1.33)
9.	Feedback and peer learning	4.62 (2.6)	6.67 (1.41)
	Total mean of elements 7-9	*5.97 (1.19)*	*6.5 (0.29)*

In group lessons of the classical course, feedback seemed to be a delicate issue. The following teacher reported a quite clear opinion about what feedback entails and who should provide feedback:

> I am always very careful with feedback, because it is the opinion of one person. I do not believe this will work in a group lesson, because only professionals should be giving feedback in professional situations. A student cannot give feedback to another student because they are still developing. Students can be very vulnerable in the lessons, and therefore I am very careful about this. Group lessons are about learning to perform, it is not a performance in itself. To give feedback in this context would not be correct.

On the other hand, students would like to be more involved in providing feedback, as the following student quotation indicates:

> Feedback should be given more attention! If the students present are asked to give feedback in an orderly way, they will be involved in the learning process; they will remain attentive and learn more. At the moment it is more an exercise in sitting for those who are

not actively singing; therefore, attention and presence are generally low, which is a pity because the concept of having group lessons is good.

Jazz/pop Vocal Course. In the jazz/pop vocal course, the aim of group lessons was to have thematically-structured education with four different year groups of students: (1) preparatory class and year one; (2) year-two students; (3) year-three students; and (4) year-four students and master's students. A year plan of themes or topics was used, with a new theme or topic addressed every six weeks; this was agreed upon and shared between the four teachers, who rotated teaching the themes. Every sixth week, students prepared a presentation. The group lesson formed part of principal study, and in order to facilitate group lessons teachers gave up fifteen minutes of their weekly hour of individual teaching time. Group lessons with six students lasted ninety minutes and took place every week. Teachers were free to teach according to their own beliefs, style, and preferences.

Collaboration between the teachers is regarded as a positive spinoff of the group lessons, as is the fact that all teachers worked with all students. In this set-up, students experienced a diversity of topics and themes, and a diversity of working forms, such as one-to-group, peer-to-peer, and specific group activities. Teachers reported that it is important to take responsibility for feelings of safety within the group and to support a sense of community, as the statement of a teacher shows:

> Safety is the first priority within the group, and therefore I sometimes get the impression that students do better in the group, take more risks, feel that they are supported. The feeling of communal development can be sensed within the group. The conditions for a safe community are: trust, responsibility, participation, keeping things in perspective, mistakes are fine, nothing is foolish, everyone is equal and has his or her qualities, an open attitude... that kind of thing.

Students indicated that group lessons are useful because they provide an opportunity to work on elements as a group, such as ensemble singing, improvisation and presentation. Yet, the balance between feedback and those other elements could be better, according to one student:

> Group lessons are very useful because (1) you are together with a group, and therefore you can do things you cannot do in an individual lesson, and (2) you learn from each other, also by giving feedback. But at present it is mainly the latter that gets attention, so there could be a better balance between (1) and (2).

Teachers seem to recognize this focus on providing feedback and learning from each other. Remarks about the group lesson from the teacher interviews are, for example: "it is more about group than individual issues and development", "mistakes are necessary", "trust and safeness are created and secured", "it's a lab in which there are no failures". One teacher mentioned the following in the interview:

> The lessons are like sharing sessions: students show their pedagogical qualities. They also dare to speak openly and share their opinions. It takes place in an open structure with common trust.

3.4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to provide insights into how well professional competencies were addressed in the collaborative learning environments of both classical and jazz/pop vocal courses of the Utrecht conservatoire. More specifically, we aimed to answer the research question by examining how the curriculum of the two collaborative courses was implemented, organised and evaluated. The analysis of the findings leads to the conclusion that the value of group lessons was generally rated quite high by most students, but the level of how well professional competencies were addressed, was evaluated rather low by students in both classical and jazz/pop courses.

A possible explanation for this finding is that in the group lesson design, development of professional competencies besides craftsmanship, was not a specific goal, and regarded crucial in group lesson preparation. Furthermore, from the second student questionnaire we concluded that students had little or no awareness of the teachers' intentions with the group lessons. Additionally, from the second student questionnaire it became also clear that an environment demanding more active participation, would be appreciated. Overall, the findings suggest that a major difference between the classical course and the jazz/pop course existed in the teachers' approach both in nature and in culture of a collaborative environment.

As we saw, teachers in the classical course are more focussed on a traditional master-apprentice setting, in which group lessons do not get the entire function of a collaborative environment, since students are not regarded equal to their master (teacher) both in interaction and in contribution, whereas in the jazz/pop course there was space for an equal contribution of students in the lessons, although according to the students the balance had shifted too much to giving feedback and peer-learning.

Latukefu and Verenikina (2013) underlined that in a carefully constructed collaborative and social-cultural learning environment, students are able to use collaborative dialogue to co-construct understanding of the various elements involved in professional singing. They herewith imply that greater awareness and responsibility on the part of the teachers, as designers of learning environments, is a prerequisite to collaborative dialogue between students, and between teachers and students. In addition, Zanner and Stab (2013) concluded that when co-teaching is initiated by the teachers, their awareness of being role models for students with regard to collaboration and dialogue, played a more important factor in the design of the course.

3.4.1 A COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION

The collaborative environment of group lessons seemed to be appreciated by both students and teachers, although changes in the design of the collaborative setting are recommended in order to have students benefit more from such a collaborative environment for professional preparation. Both teachers and students could be more aware of the need to learn to collaborate and reflect. Furthermore, awareness on the part of the management of the institution would help in providing stimulating pre-conditions in order to establish a collaborative environment (see, e.g., Renshaw, 2013; Christophersen 2013).

The design of pre-conditions and the inclusion of teacher professional development and a shared pedagogy would help to build a culture in which collaborative learning can be further developed and established. A future design of group lessons should serve the goal of creating a learning environment that has a collaborative nature, with elements as reflective skills, peer learning, and active participation of all students involved. In developing a more structured collaborative learning environment, the findings of the current study suggest the importance of:

(1)   Teacher professional development with sharing experiences, feedback, peer-learning, and reflection among teachers;

(2)   Developing a shared pedagogy between teachers such that a collaborative environment is aimed for;

(3)   Teacher professional development with practical guidelines how to work with groups and how to understand group dynamics.

The music profession is continuously developing and hence education of music professionals cannot lag behind. Design and development of learning communities and collaborative environments need full attention and cannot be realized without leadership that enhances shared trust, connectedness, and responsibility, sustaining a culture in which both professionals and the organisation itself have possibilities for growth and development. Conservatoires in which collaborative practice is embedded are necessary in the preparation of future musicians who can connect their professional practice to society and various communities within that society.

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