



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Collaborative learning in conservatoire education: catalyst for innovation

Roemjantsew, T.

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SUMMARY

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN CONSERVATOIRE EDUCATION

1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Over the past approximately twenty years, both societal signals and the research literature have become more critical of conservatoire education. Music graduates need a range of generic and specific skills, and broad competences, including collaborative and reflective skills. These kinds of skills are still undervalued in conservatoires. Studies of collaborative learning in higher education show that attained learning outcomes include collaborative and teamwork skills, metacognitive skills, and a greater experience of agency and self-efficacy among students who participate in collaborative learning activities.

Since music practices encompass a wide range of situations requiring collaboration and teamwork, the implementation of collaborative learning would help to better prepare music students for their future professional practices. To date, however, relatively few institutions have implemented collaborative learning.

The aim of this thesis was, first, to investigate which approaches to collaborative learning are already present at the different conservatoires, and then to increase understanding of how collaborative learning can be implemented. In order to improve insights into collaborative learning in conservatoire education, the different perceptions, observations, and experiences of internal stakeholders (i.e., students, teachers, and leaders) were considered.

2. COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN CONSERVATOIRE EDUCATION

Chapter 2 reports on a qualitative systematic literature review conducted to evaluate empirical studies on collaborative learning. The focus was on the first cycle of music study (i.e., the Bachelor of Music) in different institutions around the world, mapping learning outcomes, learning activities, and learning approaches. Based on selection criteria and using search strategies in combined databases, peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2021 were screened. Of the 157 full articles reviewed, 22 met all criteria.

Inductive qualitative content analysis was used to code and categorize the text data from the selected studies. The categorization was done using a modified 3P model (Biggs, 2003), which allowed for a better presentation of factors associated with the three

stages in the learning process (characteristics of context and approach, the learning process itself, and the learning outcomes). A narrative synthesis was used to present the selected studies. The results of the analysis show that collaborative learning had a positive effect on cognitive and affective learning outcomes, and that these were strongly influenced by the learning context and learning activities. Active student participation and interaction with peers led to stronger and better developed metacognitive, collaborative and social skills.

Four different collaborative learning approaches were found, including (1) peer assessment, (2) teacher-guided instrumental group lessons, (3) participative music making, and (4) student-guided teamwork. In these collaborative learning approaches, students were found to develop metacognitive skills, such as critical, reflective, evaluative, assessment, communication, discussion, and feedback skills, as well as benchmarking themselves with their peers. Students engaged in self-reflection, developed more self-confidence, and took more responsibility for and control over their own learning. Reduced or absent teacher supervision led to increased teamwork, collaboration, social, communication, and feedback skills, and metacognitive skills such as reflective, critical, and evaluative skills.

It was found that collaborative learning within conservatoire education, in peer assessment activities, teacher-led group lessons, student ensembles, and teamwork, promote a positive, safe, student-centred environment, including knowledge sharing, the development of social, metacognitive, and professional skills, and a high sense of self-efficacy in students.

3. COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN TWO VOCAL COURSES

The study reported in Chapter 3 provides insights into students' and teachers' perceptions of the development of professional competences through collaborative learning in group vocal classes within classical and jazz/pop departments. The aim of the study was to gain more insight into the learning environment of group lessons and the experiences of participants as regards preparation for professional practice. Questionnaires were administered to 101 undergraduate and graduate students and alumni; 60 were returned, of which 34 were complete and valid. Nine vocal teachers were interviewed. To explore the advantages and disadvantages of group lessons as a form of collaborative learning in vocal lessons, quantitative and qualitative methodologies

were applied, including descriptive statistics of students' ratings of the relation between course and preparation for professional practice, and a thematic analysis of the interviews with teachers, presenting how well professional competences were addressed, and how the curricula of both courses were organised.

Notable differences were found between the two courses regarding students' experiences and perceptions. The results of the questionnaires showed that elements such as improvisation, reflection, and involvement in musical experimentation scored quite low in the classical course, and higher in the jazz/pop course. The classical course turned out to be repertoire-oriented, while the jazz/pop course emphasized improvisation and performance-related themes such as rhythm, text, breathing and concentration, meditation techniques, and stage presence. While all students considered group vocal lessons valuable, they would prefer to participate more in collaborative learning activities to support the development of broader professional competences, including the collaborative skills needed in future practices. The design of such group lessons should, therefore, include approaches and activities related to collaborative learning.

4. TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH

The study reported in Chapter 4 focused on the professional development of teachers and the improvement of educational practice through action research. Tailoring conservatoire education to the requirements of professional practice requires greater diversity in teaching and learning approaches, including collaborative learning. This entails a different approach to educational practice and requires different competences of teachers. Several studies have shown that teacher action research stimulates both professional development and improvement of their teaching practice. However, only a few studies were found that investigated teacher action research within conservatoire education.

The research reported in Chapter 4 includes action research by two teachers. A multiple case study was employed, including a cross-case analysis of the two individual cases, based on interviews with and reflection reports from the teachers. These teachers' action research included forms of (1) professional development, such as the study of pedagogical topics and the literature, self-reflection, and discussion with peers and (2) improvement of teaching practice, and integration of a variety of teaching and learning

strategies, such as collaborative learning approaches. Both action research projects were conducted in classes affected by regulations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to feelings of insecurity due to the COVID-19-related lockdown, teachers also reflected on positive outcomes, including the adoption of collaborative learning and blended learning approaches.

Through their participation in action research projects, teachers noticed significant changes in their attitudes to and perceptions of teaching and learning. They described how their understanding of what knowledge transfer is completely changed. They noticed that they had gone through a shift from teacher-centred to student-centred teaching, and that they better understood how their students actually learn.

5. CONSERVATOIRE LEADERS' OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS ON CURRICULUM REFORM

The aim of this study was to gain insight through empirical research into the role of Flemish and Dutch conservatoire leaders in curriculum development, and into their perceptions of the connection of their curriculum to professional practice. In the semi-structured interviews, a theory-driven format was used based on sensitizing concepts from the literature. Twelve leaders of conservatoires in Belgium (Flanders) and the Netherlands were interviewed. They were asked to reflect on professional practice, pedagogy, and teachers in relation to the implemented curriculum, and past and potential future curriculum reforms.

The conservatoire leaders had different perceptions of the professional practice. While not all of them had an idea of the professional practice of alumni, they mentioned teaching in music schools or private tutoring, and a variety of performance activities as possible work. Regarding pedagogy, leaders noted that the one-to-one model was ubiquitous in the principal study area, although there were some exceptions related to specific instruments (percussion, vocal study) or specific teachers who organised group lessons themselves. Leaders saw a slow shift from a teacher-centred to a more student-centred pedagogy. Teachers were perceived as very autonomous in their teaching practice, not very involved with the institution, and not connected to the world of the students. Conservatoire leaders did not see specific and explicit teaching methods and pedagogical approaches for educating students in instrumental and vocal studies in competences such as problem-solving skills, cooperative and communication skills, and a reflective attitude. The organisation of group lessons in which these competences could be

addressed was predominantly left to the teachers themselves. In general, conservatoire leaders regarded genuine changes in pedagogy as a task for the teachers themselves, while conservatoires generally consist of musicians who mainly have a high level of expertise in the field of performance.

6. GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Chapter 6 summarizes the four studies and returns to the research objectives of the thesis: exploration of (1) experiences with and perceptions of existing approaches to collaborative learning and (2) factors influencing the implementation of collaborative learning. The perspectives of students, teachers, and conservatoire leaders are discussed in relation to factors such as society, professional practice, and higher education policy, as well as in relation to current and possible future pedagogical approaches, learning activities, and learning outcomes.

This chapter provides a model to develop understanding of the connections and relationships between the factors mentioned and stakeholders, and applies this model to zoom in on stakeholders and the implementation of collaborative learning. Factors influencing the innovation in conservatoire education are discussed, providing insight into the different perspectives present in the institution. Implications for practice include recommendations for implementation of collaborative learning such as (1) setting overarching principles to guide the process of the implementation, (2) collecting examples of professional settings in which collaborative skills are needed, (3) reflecting on *how* students learn instead of *what* they learn, and (4) considering making connections to society through cross-discipline collaborations. Implications for teachers and for leaders include furthering their professional development, reflection on their roles and responsibilities, and supporting and participating in a learning community within the institution. Implications for students involve an increase in awareness of and agency over their own learning and development. Limitations of the research and implications for future research are considered. Within a student-centred learning environment and from an increased awareness of its values and benefits, collaborative learning can be a catalyst for change and innovation in conservatoire education.