

STUDENT TEACHERS' NEEDS IN BLENDED PIANO STUDIES FOR CLINIC STYLE FACE-TO-FACE GUIDANCE



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Abstract

In recent years, technological development has remarkably widened possibilities for students' autonomous learning. This paper reports the findings of a study based on primary school student teachers' piano studies as a part of their compulsory music studies in one Finnish university. The student teachers' piano studies at the university in question, are organized using blended learning possibilities, which enable the students to study autonomously online, but which allows for some individual face-to-face guiding as well. During the academic year 2016-2017, one part of the face-to-face support was offered as a 'clinic' by one of the authors who was also the lecturer for groups of about 10 students. These same students studied piano every other week with another author/lecturer who used the community of inquiry as a framework (Enbuska, Tuisku & Hietanen, 2018, in print) to organize the learning for the students. The clinic was conducted in the lecturer's office for the students who were studying piano playing in small training rooms and who wanted to ask some special questions to clarify their own needs. In present study, the students were asked if they had utilized the clinic and if they found it beneficial besides the other blended learning opportunities. The findings revealed that students found it important to discuss piano playing in the clinic with the lecturer. However, many students wanted the lecturer to come and meet the students and answer their questions while they were training in small groups in the training rooms. The students' disclosed needs about the content focused on clarifying the music concepts at the beginning of the studies, and clearer connections with the online studying possibilities as well as with pedagogical applications for them as future teachers.

Keywords: Student teachers, individual needs for face-to-face support, online piano studies, piano studies as a tool in teaching music

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1. Introduction

Music as a subject has been widely acknowledged as one of the most challenging subjects to teach by non-specialist primary school teachers (Hallam et al., 2009; Hash, 2010; Holden & Button, 2006; Thorn & Brasche, 2015; de Vries, 2013). On the other hand, studying music has always required plenty of autonomous studying, mainly practicing skills and knowledge in instruments, between the music contact lessons (Brooks & Uptis, 2015). Recent developments in technology have improved students' possibilities to progress during their autonomous, self-regulated studying periods in music as well as in other contents (see e.g. Asarta & Schmidt, 2017; Enbuska, Hietanen, & Tuisku, 2016; Enbuska, Rimppi, Hietanen, Tuisku, Ruokonen, & Ruismäki, 2018; Klopper & Weir, 2015; Tuisku & Ruokonen, 2017; Zhu, Wing & Yates, 2016). The technological support which has been exploited, for example, by using various e-learning environments, internet, and video-materials, and connected with face-to-face guiding and peer learning characterizes a blended learning environment (Crawford & Jenkins, 2015; Enbuska, Tuisku, & Hietanen, in press, Graham, 2006; Hietanen, Ruokonen, Ruismäki, & Enbuska, 2016; Hietanen & Ruismäki, 2017; Reese, Bicheler & Robinson, 2016; Ruokonen & Ruismäki, 2016; Tuisku & Ruokonen, 2017; Türel, 2016; Zhu, Wing & Yates, 2016). Blended learning environments have been used, developed and examined extensively, for example in Finnish primary school teacher education (Enbuska, Hietanen, & Tuisku, 2016, Enbuska, Rimppi, Hietanen, Tuisku, Ruokonen, & Ruismäki, 2018; Hietanen, Ruokonen, Ruismäki, & Enbuska, 2016; Ruokonen & Ruismäki, 2016; Tuisku & Ruokonen, 2017), and is the context in the present study, too. However, considering the many primary school student teachers' obvious lack of musical knowledge and skills found in previous studies (Anttila, 2010; Hallam, Burnard, Robertson, Saleh, Davies, Rogers, & Kokatsaki, 2009; Holden & Button, 2006; Thorn & Brasche, 2015; de Vries, 2013) and diversity in various students' capabilities to benefit from self-regulated learning (Zhu, Wing & Yates, 2016), it seems necessary to identify the essential elements in primary school student teachers' compulsory piano studies which require face-to-face guidance.

2. Problem statement

In primary school student teachers' music studies, there are pressures of faculty budgets at the universities (Anttila 2010; Hietanen, et al., 2016; Hietanen & Ruismäki, 2017; Thorn & Brasche, 2015), but the need for more flexibility for students' diverse needs is clear as well (Hietanen & Ruismäki, 2017; Holden & Button, 2006; Thorn & Brasche, 2015; Tuisku & Ruokonen, 2017). It is widely acknowledged, that even the student teachers' lack of skills in music should and could be developed as some kind of tools to teach music (Hietanen &

Ruismäki, 2017; Holden & Button, 2006; Thorn & Brasche, 2015). At the University of Lapland, one such skill is playing the piano (Enbuska et al., 2016; Hietanen & Ruismäki, 2017). Playing the piano involves simultaneously playing both the tunes and chords, which is not only necessary especially when teaching songs, but when guiding the music group as well.

This study focuses on the organization of the learning environment in piano studies and the studying process itself. The focus in the content to be learnt is both on increasing the students' musical skills and knowledge, and the competence in teaching music as teachers in the future (Lehmann, Sloboda, & Woody, 2007). With the case of primary school teacher education, during the two recent academic years (2015-16 and 2016-17) a blended music learning environment was developed pointing out various possibilities for students' to study piano playing online autonomously, either individually or in small groups (Enbuska et al., 2016; in press). The number of the contact lessons has diminished remarkably (Hietanen & Ruismäki, 2017). Thus, it is essential to uncover knowledge integral to teaching music at primary school level, which the student teachers do not seem to achieve only by studying the online material or other autonomous ways as via internet or negotiating with peers (Brooks & Uptis, 2015; Enbuska et al., 2016; in press). It is apparent here that face-to-face guidance is vital for these student teachers to fully grasp the content of the coursework.

3. Purpose of the study

The quality in online piano courses (in Rockway, an online learning software for music) is high and lessons are easy to repeat whenever and as many times as needed. As a result of the remarkable improvement of online courses and materials, the question has arisen about the place of face-to-face guidance in teaching: if it is needed at all, and what the content and form of this support should be. Brooks and Uptis (2015) found that for both teachers and their students, web-based portfolios helped the students' during their autonomous studying periods, because the students needed the guidance as they learnt to set goals, monitor, and reflect on their progress (see also Uptis, Boese, & Abrami, 2017). The current study considers primary school student teachers' experiences about their piano studies in a Finnish university. The purpose of the study is to get essential information directly from the students to enable the music lecturers to improve the organization of piano studies so that the primary school student teachers' diverse needs are better fulfilled, taking into consideration that these student teachers will be generalists in various school subjects.

4. Research question

Based on the previous studies which have been referred to in the current paper, the following research question was formulated:

What needs do primary school student teachers have in individual clinic style piano lessons besides other blended piano learning possibilities?

5. Research design

5.1. Methodological approach

The approach in this study is qualitative and constructive, which allows for an open-ended evaluation of the data and space with a view to unexpected results (Kasanen, Lukka, & Siitonen, 1993). Through the course feedback, formulated as a set of questions including both structured and open questions, the researchers were able to identify what the student teachers highlighted as their needs about the personal face-to-face piano lessons, in addition to the other piano studying possibilities. It needs to be mentioned here that this being an initial exploratory study, no verified research instrument was used. Teaching a larger group of 20 student teachers instead of 2-3 students simultaneously was implemented due to the diminished faculty budget (see also Enbuska et al., 2018). In organizing both the learning environment for the larger group (the studied context, which was enacted parallel with the environment described in another paper in this issue (Enbuska, Hietanen, and Tuisku, in press) and formulating the questions in the course feedback, the researchers utilized the data in this study as well as the findings in other previous studies. The blended learning environment settings in piano studies at the university in question, has been developed for several years (Enbuska et al., in press; Hietanen et al., 2016). The questions in the course feedback were generated based on the student teachers' often recognized heterogeneity in their musical skills and knowledge (Brook & Uptis, 2015; Hallam et al., 2009; Hietanen et al., 2016; Holden & Button, 2006; Thorn & Brasche, 2015; DeVries, 2013) and focused on student teachers' observed needs for face-to-face guidance besides online and other blended learning environment possibilities (Brook & Uptis, 2015; Enbuska et al., 2018; Hietanen et al., 2016; Uptis et al., 2017).

5.2. Participants and data collection

The data was collected after several face-to-face piano lessons were implemented among the first-year student teachers numbering 90 who were grouped into five subgroups for the entire program of studies for that academic year. Negotiating with the lecturer at the clinic was optional for the students during their piano playing training in the small training rooms.

According to previous research (Hietanen et al., 2016; Tuisku & Ruokonen, 2017; Upitis et al., 2017) the heterogeneity in the students' previous skills and knowledge would affect their abilities to benefit from various autonomous instrument studying possibilities. With this in mind, the clinic style guidance was offered, and questions about music as a hobby, and the students' experiences and self-assessment about the organized clinic guidance were asked as part of the course feedback. Before answering the feedback, the student teachers had been offered the opportunity to use all other possibilities in the organized blended learning environment in piano studies. Finally, 22 student teachers gave permission to use their course feedback as the data.

The questions in the feedback were as follows:

1. To what extent have you practiced music as a hobby?
2. To what extent have you studied music before?
3. Have you utilized the 'clinic' individual face-to-face guidance?
4. How did you benefit from the clinic guidance in your music skills and knowledge?
5. How did you benefit from the clinic guidance in your capabilities to teach music?

The response scale for questions 1 and 2 were based on assessing the extent as in: 'not any', 'just a little', 'to some extent', 'moderately', and 'a lot'. The response to the question 3 was 'yes' or 'no'. Questions 4 and 5 were open ended asking for short descriptions about each student teacher's experience about usefulness of the clinic sessions.

5.3. Context of the Study

At the University of Lapland, the compulsory piano studies are organized during the primary school student teachers' first academic year. The main purpose of the piano studies is to provide student teachers with a music teaching tool including both musical skills and knowledge and the competence in teaching music in the future. In the beginning of the autumn semester of 2016, the students were mainly guided to practice their playing through using the e-learning possibilities as internet and various materials and videos available online in the Optima-environment and Rockway-environment (see Enbuska et al., 2016, 2018; Hietanen et al., 2016; Hietanen & Ruismäki, 2017). In both Optima and Rockway, theoretical information about music was provided with videos showing how to play piano. At the end of the autumn and during the beginning of the spring, in addition to online possibilities, some face-to-face sessions were organized by two lecturers. During the contact lessons, the subgroup of about 20 student teachers were guided by two music lecturers in two separate groups. Each contact lesson took 90 minutes. One smaller subgroup of about 10 students were in the computer keyboard class practicing piano playing using computers and keyboards. A lecturer was in the

class guiding them by providing some common instructions and tasks and supporting the students in their situational needs (Enbuska et al., in press). Noticing the previous findings about the students' needs for individual face-to-face guiding, too (see Enbuska et al., 2018), the other lecturer had a clinic in her office with the other 10 student teachers, who were autonomously practicing in small training rooms by pianos in randomly formulated groups of 2-3 student teachers. The purpose of the clinic was to offer a space for students' individual support between the lecturer and a student. The lecturer facilitating the clinic sometimes visited the student groups in their training rooms as well. The present study is aimed at investigating the efficacy of the clinic in providing individual face to face guidance for student teachers who are learning piano.

5.4. Analysis

The analysis was based on data-based content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). Due to the limited number of participants numbering 22 student teachers, the responses to the structured questions were only analysed as frequencies. The students' responses to the open ended questions regarding the benefits of the clinic were qualitatively assessed to generate themes. First, the information shared in the open questions were arranged into categories as data-based. Finally, the themes were evaluated based on the literature presented in the current paper.

6. Findings

The piano studies were organized in the current format for first time in the academic year 2016-2017. Previously, the student teachers had been taught more individually and traditionally; one pair by one lecturer. The lessons had mainly been face-to-face but the students had also been encouraged to utilize various e-learning possibilities (see Enbuska et al., 2016, 2018 Hietanen & Ruismäki, 2017). During the year 2016-2017, despite the information given to the students at the first common theoretical lesson, the new organization of the piano studies was found to be difficult for both the lecturers and the students to adopt. As one student teacher mentioned, the information about the entire organization of the piano studies should have been clearer:

In the beginning, it should be clearly pointed out, that a certain lecturer is offering a support as a clinic style – and not as a common teaching with common contents. Then it would have been easier even before the contact lesson to formulate the questions according to own needs (Student teacher 1704).

Seven of the informants (32%) had responded ‘to some extent’ or ‘just a little’ to music as a hobby, three students (14%) responded ‘moderately’ and the remaining two informants (9%) selected the option ‘a lot’. Ten student teachers (45%) responded that they did not have any previous music studies; in addition to the compulsory courses in general education, one student (5%) had studied music ‘a lot’, six informants (27%) ‘to some extent’, and five students (23%) ‘just a little’. It seems that most of the informants had minimal knowledge and skills before formal music studies at the university.

According to previous findings (Brooks & Upitis, 2015), it is obvious, that in music studies, face-to-face guidance is needed besides online possibilities. 20 informants (91%) mentioned that they benefitted from the clinic guidance at least to some extent, for learning musical knowledge and skills. As for increasing their music teaching capabilities - which is the main target in the primary school student teachers’ music studies (see e.g. Hietanen & Ruismäki, 2017) – three students (14%) benefitted from the clinic guidance ‘moderately’, 13 students (59%) ‘to some extent’, four students (18%) ‘just a little’, with two informants (9%) responding ‘not at all’.

Concerning the structured questions, because of the limited number of informants, the answers to the open questions were not analyzed in depth. However, there are some indicative results, which confirm that as in the Canadian case of the conservatoire music studies (Brook & Upitis, 2015), in the current Finnish case, carried out at the university and general teacher education level, it is apparent that among those students without much previous music studies, the face-to-face guidance is required on top of the online autonomous studying possibilities. Some of the informants answered that the contact lessons in general help them to understand music better than autonomous studying, and they would have liked more contact lessons than that being offered. However, the students highlighted the benefits they got through the clinic in understanding the musical concepts better and understanding the relationship between music theory and practice. In addition, some of the students mentioned that it is essential to get the answers to their questions.

During the contact lessons, the theory and practice in music, have come nearer each other (Student Teacher 1708).

During the clinic, I have understood the triads – I have gotten answers to my own questions (Student Teacher 1711).

The lecturer at the clinic, has taught the details suitable just for my phase, especially creative playing (Student Teacher 1717).

Some of the students highlighted that while studying with a couple of peers in the training rooms, they wanted the lecturer to come and ask what kind of help the student teachers need, which in many cases may be a common issue among the entire group of the students in the room. However, some of the students appreciate the possibility to negotiate their own musical progress and challenges just with the lecturer. In the following quotations, there are some examples of this:

We should have a place for studying between the lecturer and only one student, but mostly I have noticed that with the peers, many problems have been solved (Student Teacher 1712).

Some students without any musical background would like to have private piano lessons, and more contact lessons (Student Teacher 1709).

The lecturer should gather around and visit the training rooms: many students may need to ask the same question – and for example I am not getting oppressed if the others listen to my questions (Student Teacher 1711).

Many students were found to need a couple of face-to-face lessons first focusing on the essential concepts, which could help students to understand online materials. However, some student teachers mentioned that the clinic sessions helped them to understand how to teach the musical aspects they had understood. The following quotations are examples of this:

The lecturer encouraged me in the future to develop the pupils' skills in singing by my creative piano playing (Student Teacher 1717).

Through studying and understanding the triads, I have achieved some knowledge about how to start to teach them to my pupils in the future (Student Teacher 1711).

Additionally, some students highlighted that the face to face sessions did help them to negotiate the way to better study music as they also got essential advice about how to self-regulate their autonomous studying. Only one student teacher stated that she preferred studying with the peers than being guided by the lecturer. Nonetheless, we have to highlight that the student teacher in question had had practised music as a hobby for several years and had studied music before the university courses.

7. Conclusion

The online courses are a viable possibility in primary school student teachers' instrument studies. However, most of the students have really weak theoretical basis in music and only a little experience in playing, if any. These facts have led the music educators to offer various online support to enable more effective autonomous studying periods (see Hietanen & Ruismäki, 2017; Klopper & Weir, 2015; Tuisku & Ruokonen, 2017; Upitis et al., 2017). Due to students' diversity in their previous knowledge and skills, and in engagement and motivation to study music (see Asarta & Schmidt, 2017; Hietanen & Ruismäki, 2017; Zhu et al., 2016), the lecturers have to carefully sequence the face-to-face and online teaching situations as well as the contents and forms of guidance (see Graham, 2006).

This study focused on the clinic piano lessons as a part of piano blended learning environment in the primary school teacher education program at a Finnish university. There are several limitations of this research. One was that asking the face-to-face support from the lecturer was not compulsory, and the number of respondents was limited; only 22 student teachers of 90 students (24%) participated the research. However, to some extent, the findings concur with the previous research in this area, and can be considered indicative in developing the music blended learning environment in primary school teacher education.

Zhu et al. (2016) found students' self-control, application of self-regulation strategies, and engagement in blended learning environment important to their learning outcomes. According to the results in the current study, the students with low previous interests (music was not a hobby), skills and knowledge in music, found it difficult to engage in regular self-studying without some contact lessons at the beginning of piano studies focusing on the integral music concepts. However, several students mentioned that they achieved even some pedagogical knowledge through understanding some basis for music as a subject during the clinic. This result confirms the previous findings, that even minimal skills and knowledge in music may be used as a tool in music teaching (Hietanen & Ruismäki, 2017; Holden & Button, 2006; Thorn & Brasche, 2015). Nonetheless, as Asarta and Schmidt (2017) point out, prompt identification of the low-achieving students is necessary to enable them to get the support they need to be able to become self-regulated students as soon as possible. The clinic sessions seemed to have helped some students to self-regulate their piano studies better compared to studying through only online and peer learning possibilities.

Regarding the organization of the clinic sessions, many students focused on the scheduling of the clinic and other face-to-face sessions in the entire period of the compulsory piano studies. This academic year, the piano studies started with one common face-to-face theoretical lesson, and then with a two month of period of autonomous study with online

material and guidance, which included the possibility for students to record their work and get feedback from the other lecturer online. However, the student teachers emphasized the need for some face-to-face piano lessons at the beginning of the piano studies (which are the first compulsory music studies in the primary school teacher education program at the University in question) to clarify the essential concepts before the onset of the autonomous studying period. The basis for music theory both in written and spoken form were provided in the online materials, but the beginners especially found the material inadequate. The student teachers' self-regulated peer learning situations seemed to have been important in clarifying the necessary theoretical issues (see also Crawford & Jenkins, 2015). In the future, some kind of electronic portfolio should be included for the student teachers to reflect on their challenges and progress in music studies (Brook & Uptis, 2015; Uptis et al., 2017) which could help the lecturers to identify student teachers' various needs earlier. Nevertheless, in the academic year 2016-2017, the need for face to face lessons in piano studies was found to be obvious at the beginning of the music studies. In line with that, the online guidance conducted during the first two months, could be developed into an electronic portfolio.

8. Implications

The present study confirms the findings from Uptis, Boese, and Abrami (2017), that the more advanced students benefit more from digital tools than the beginners. In their study, the age of the students was remarkably telling; the younger students were not sufficiently proficient with digital technologies and therefore did not benefit as much from the digital tool (Uptis et al., 2017, p. 2553). The current study shows that despite the age of the students, the previous skills and knowledge affected their learning in blended learning environments. When investigating blended learning environments at the university level, it seems essential without any presumptions to allow even the adult students to be treated as beginners as well. We want to emphasize that even at the university level, the adult students may encounter some coursework in which they do not have sufficient previous skills and knowledge to be able to study mainly autonomously using e-materials or internet.

As in current case, the student teachers were for example required to get familiar with plenty of new concepts, where they needed face-to-face guidance. However, they appeared to be satisfied to get the information in a clinic style session, despite the fact that, in the organized blended piano learning environment, they had several other ways to study and learn, too. As the students emphasized, in teacher education, it is also essential to be able to participate in face-to-face discussions about how to teach, meaning the pedagogical guidance and support. In general, even at the university level, we as the lecturers cannot diminish the value and

importance of face-to-face guidance, but instead the focus should be on various ways to organize it effectively. Despite the wide and fast technological development, we educators in higher education, should carefully design, integrate, especially schedule face-to-face guidance sessions in blended learning environments and continue studying various options, especially with regard to students' experiences about the ways to blend different elements and their learning outcomes in the future.

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