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Dialogue possibilities in guided autonomous music studies in class-teacher education in Finland

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Abstract

This study investigates the kinds of issues dialogical perspective can reveal among teacher students in different learning environments and how different learning environments talk to each other. This qualitative study is based on Burbules’ (1993) theory of dialogue. The research sample consists of teacher educators’ (authors) discussions with one student and with groups of students during and after music lessons as well as teacher students’ responses to a semi-structured questionnaire. This paper considers the recognized needs in the guiding process and addresses some critical incidents in that process as a model that teacher educators can apply to other subjects.

Keywords: Music; dialogue; different learning environments; class-teacher education; guiding process

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1. Introduction

This paper presents a study of class-teacher education in Finland focusing on music as one of the subjects that incoming class-teachers are supposed to be able to teach (Government Decree, 2004). In class-teacher education, students have to pass an aptitude test. Nonetheless, the test does not include any sections about different school subjects. Music is one of the subjects that require training in various skills. For example, the new national curriculum for basic education in Finland, “National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014” (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014), specifies the following skills for music education: singing, listening, playing instruments, composing or interpreting music using a means of expression (for example of voice, sports, pictures or technology). In written and spoken feedback, teacher students, even qualified class-teachers, have often expressed uncertainty, and even fear, about teaching music (Hietanen and Koiranen, 2014; Ruismäki and Tereska, 2008). Thus, how to motivate students who are afraid of learning and teaching music is a critical issue. There seems to be a need for intrinsic motivation (Corno, 2008). In order to enhance the intrinsic motivation of teacher students, it is essential to consider how teacher educators encourage their students to consider what they like about and deem significant in their own experiences with music (Reeve et al., 2008; Ryan and Deci, 2000). This leads teacher educators to address the principles of dialogue in reflective situations (Burbules, 1993; Valli, 1997).

This study is based on the observations and experiences of music teacher educators (the authors) who have taught class-teacher students for several years. Additionally, the authors have collected feedback through semi-structured questionnaires that were distributed after most of the music courses they taught. In this study, the main data was obtained from an interview conducted in June 2015 in which one fifth year teacher student revealed how he found meaningful material that he could use in order to learn how to play the piano. This case is described as an impulse and a reason to focus on the teacher educators’ guiding process from a dialogue approach. The way in which a teacher student becomes motivated to learn by finding meaningful material is seen as one of the basic needs and requirements in a class-teacher student’s music education path; for example, Ruismäki, Juvonen and Lehtonen (2012) wrote about a student who learned how to play the guitar through the Internet. In this current paper, some critical incidents in teacher educator guiding will be addressed based on the interview with one student as well as some previous feedback and the findings from prior research studies.

2. Hermeneutics, dialogue and reflection forming the theoretical framework

Contextual hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1997) is the methodological approach used in this research study because its starting point is the social space and the group’s account of studying music. While this approach is both practical and based in real-life experiences, it seeks to promote openness, which, according to Gadamer (1997), essentially belongs to people’s reciprocal relationships. Gadamer (1997, p. 361) refers to this open approach as the “highest type of hermeneutical experience”. The theoretical frame of reference for this research is based on Bruner’s (1996) cultural psychological approach. Bruner (1996) emphasizes the importance of speech in collaborative learning, and notes that the mind is not only naturally active, but tends to seek dialogue and discourse with other active minds. Barrett (2011) also suggests that, in music education, the mind and cognition cannot be separated from the culture, context, values, beliefs and culturally-mediated identity. She points out that, from a cultural psychological perspective, any event can be interpreted in many different ways, depending on the different cultural contexts in which it occurs. According to Barrett (2011), the cultural psychological approach to music education provides opportunities to more deeply examine music education practices in order to understand the role that culture plays in musical learning and thinking. Barrett (2011) describes the cultural psychological agenda as a means by which to illustrate the variety of ways in which cultural practices, meanings and human activities are interconnected and how they are strengthened and sustained by each other.

St. John (2006) suggests that, if the teaching agenda begins with the child’s perspective, that is, if the child’s interpretation of the teacher-defined task is honored, scaffolding will lead both the teacher and the student to a new place not yet known to either partner. We believe that the teaching agenda position taken by St. John (2006) is relevant when applied to music education in the class-teacher education with adult students. In other words, this unknown place would be a place somewhere between (Buber, 1970) the participants. Buber (1970) also notes that, in dialogue, equality between the participants is essential (see also Valli, 1997). Kent and Taylor (2002) state that...
dialogue recognizes the value of the “other”; it sees communication partners as equals (I–Thou) rather than as mere recipients of messages (I–It). In the dialogical approach, it is possible that the lesson is open to considering opposite views or different choices, even for students that challenge the teacher’s authority. Heikinheimo (2009) states that the social role of musical expression and the social awareness of performance construct expectations or tension, which in fact belong to these situations.

This current research study is based on the findings of group learning experiences at a university; as such, it aims to investigate music learning in class-teacher education in group learning situations. In our experience of class-teacher education, a music lesson is a multi-dimensional process in which, in the best cases, the different readiness of the students may support the individual learner; however, in the worst cases, it may discourage the individual learner (Enbuska, 2014; Hietanen and Koiranen, 2014). Therefore, safe and supportive interaction between teachers and students is a prerequisite for a successful learning process. Rather than using a cognitive starting point, this research is based on the Russian literary scholar, Michael Bahtin’s (1981), idea that people live in other people’s words. Bahtin (1981, p. 280) emphasizes that “Every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates”. He notes that each statement is the answer to the preceding discourse, so that even a question that breaks the silence is the answer to the previous answer. (Bahtin, 1981).

Dialogue refers to a “communicative give and take”, wherein both parties relinquish control over the outcome of the discussion (Kent and Taylor, 1998, p.325). Paquette, Sommerfeldt, and Kent (2015) stress that relinquishing control does not mean that parties in a dialogue must agree with one another. Rather, those in a dialogue should respect differences and listen to the concerns of others. According to Burbules (1993), dialogue is about pedagogical communicative relations as far as it occurs in the pedagogical environment. More specifically, according to Marková et al. (2007), dialogue can also be understood as a symbolic interaction between two or more individuals who are mutually present. This face-to-face interaction between people refers to spoken language and/or physical communication. The interaction may also occur using a variety of artefacts, such as written messages (Marková et al., 2007). Thus, dialogue theory constitutes an important starting point for this study because it aims to understand music learning in class-teacher education taking into account the social space in which that learning occurs.

Burbules (1993) defines four types of dialogue: dialogue as conversation, dialogue as inquiry, dialogue as debate and dialogue as instruction. He states that an inclusive-divergent dialogue, dialogue as conversation, has two characteristics: a generally cooperative, tolerant spirit and a direction toward mutual understanding. The understanding refers to a fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 1997), the basis for intersubjective understanding. Burbules (1993) emphasizes that understanding and misunderstanding always occur together. Every misunderstanding results from something that is understood. Partners in the model of dialogue as conversation proceed interactively and cooperatively toward shared understanding (Burbules, 1993). According to Burbules (1993), the model of dialogue as inquiry seeks to answer a specific question, resolve a specific problem or reconcile a specific dispute. The dialogue as inquiry aims to produce an outcome agreeable to all. One form of this kind of dialogue involves problem solving. In the form of a debate, critical-divergent dialogue involves sharply questioning and embodies a skeptical spirit; it does not necessarily aim to find a common understanding about the subject matter. In the model of dialogue as instruction, the use of questions and other statements moves the discussion toward a definitive conclusion (Burbules, 1993).

Burbules (1993) has adopted Gadamer’s (1997) view of dialogue as a game because that is a strong metaphor for the process that is characteristic of dialogue. The process of dialogue is always re-created, and it is driven by an atmosphere of discovery and invention. Participation in the dialogue, including the agreement of open and uncertain interpersonal activity that is oriented towards teaching and learning, and the process that is characteristic of dialogue may be a result of the open outcome (Burbules, 1993).

Heath et al. (2006) identify the challenges that dialogue practitioners encounter. One of the challenges is the tension between being open to alternative outcomes and being goal-oriented. They propose that dialogue is a relational process that might result in a relational resolution that develops when the practitioners understand each other’s emotions, values, interests and positions (Heath et al., 2006).
3. Methodological solutions and data collection

This data-based study conducted by three music educators (teacher educators/authors) at the University of Lapland is based on a constructive approach that supports the teacher student processes that enables them to teach music in comprehensive schools. The constructive approach as a research method is widely known as an innovative problem solving method that can be used to produce new understanding that differs from anything that has existed before (Kasanen, Lukka, and Siitonen, 1993; Labro and Tuomela, 2003).

Data collection for this study began with a recorded interview in which one fifth year teacher student, named Harry (a pseudonym), was interviewed by two of the teacher educators (authors) in a music class in June 2015. The focus of the interview was to identify the material and the self-determined way in which Harry had searched for and identified methods to facilitate his music learning in contact lessons. The constructive approach comes through modelling an innovative, unknown way to guide teacher students and support their music education path (Kasanen et al., 1993; Labro and Tuomela, 2003).

The interview was analysed using theory-guided content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). That theory arises from the theories of dialogue as a perspective in teaching and learning situations (Burbules, 1993) as well as theories about different types of reflection (Valli, 1997). The research question was formulated based on prior research studies and the teacher educators’ (the authors) previous experiences, observations and research. The formulated research question is:

- What kinds of issues can dialogical perspective reveal among teacher students in different learning environments and how can different learning environments talk to each other in the students’ music education path?

The analysis examined the reasons and impulses that led the interviewed student (Harry) to search for his own material despite the fact that the teacher educators offered suitable material for everyone. Additionally, it was essential to determine why the student used material that was only available on the Internet.

3.1. Description of the data: case Harry

In the beginning of the class-teacher studies, one teacher educator (an author) began to teach Harry how to play the piano using material provided by the teacher, which he, as an expert, thought would be well suited for sight-reading studies, and which he thought would provide a strong foundation for learning how to play the piano. However, Harry indicated that he was unable to learn with the material the teacher had prepared, which was based on the teacher educator’s pedagogical solutions. Harry partly resorted to visiting an Internet environment because he had been familiar with that type of environment since his early childhood. Harry was and still is interested in the game music. After feeling that the teacher educator’s material was unfamiliar and not suitable, Harry searched the Internet to see if he could find some material that he already knew and that he liked. He found a musical piece called “Morrowind”, composed by Jeremy Soule. “Morrowind” is used as the background music for the game Skyrim. Harry then looked to see if there was a video posted on the Internet of a pianist playing “Morrowind”. The video he found was shot from above and it showed how the pianist played that song. Harry wrote about how that music was played in the video and he independently studied how to play the song on the piano. The teacher educator converted Harry’s notion about how to play “Morrowind” into the standard notation, which enabled Harry to study it in that way as well.

3. Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this study is to explore more ways to benefit different learning environments in music studies in class-teacher education and facilitate students’ meaningful ways to embrace music matters. This study asks what kind of issues dialogical perspective can reveal among teacher students in different learning environments and how different learning environments will talk to each other in students’ music education paths? Different learning
environments may create challenges in the implementation of a dialogical perspective. According to Burbules (1993) dialogic activity in the pedagogical environment requires the rule of participation, the rule of commitment, and the rule of reciprocity. The rule of participation means that participation in a communicative relationship must be voluntary and open for all participants, and everybody must be able to participate actively. According to the rule of commitment in the communicative relation must be allowed the free-flowing conversation, which can be ongoing and expand to other areas, and even to areas, which can be difficult and contentious areas.

For the dialogical approach of this research, the rule of reciprocity creates challenges as well, in particular, the notion of the expert’s role. The teacher is an expert who has no need to hide her or his musical knowledge and skills. The rules of dialogue proposed by Burbules (1993) must be taken into account in the planning and implementation of teaching, so that the guiding perspective as limiting students' personal contribution on their music education paths is not emphasized too much (see Valli, 1997). Participation cannot be entirely voluntary, because the students have to study music contents set in the curriculum, in order to be able to teach music at schools (Government Decree, 2004). Students find peer's expertise and often rely on an expert, even without critical reflection (see Enbuska 2014; Valli, 1997). In general, students' possibilities to benefit different learning environments are continuously widening. Despite the challenges associated with the above-mentioned dialogue approach, we believe that the approach will enable a safe and reliable learning environment. Learning is not necessarily linear, but may be accompanied by progress or regress as well. This dynamic process creates challenges for pedagogical solutions. The teacher must have, so to speak “eye for the game.” She or he must be able to read the social game of the group to resolve conflicting situations, so that the game could go on favorably of each individual's point of view. In addition, it is integral to enable students’ own schedules as a way to allow their own “voices”. This leads teacher educators both actively emphasizing all kinds of learning environments and learning situations equal and organising learning tasks in e-environment by themselves as well. In the model of guidance the purpose of the teacher educators has to be to accept all kinds of learning environments and all kinds of music as a material to learn music as a phenomenon and a subject to be taught at schools.

As a conclusion, the information obtained from the interview used as a basis for the model of teacher educators’ guidance, is further going to be exploited in the semi-structure questionnaire, which is intended for first year students. The next phase is going to be a presentation of opportunities for students when presenting them different learning environments and their use. On the third phase, students are given the tasks that they have to train and learn. The tasks have to include only little pieces of music knowledge that students are able to apply when using their own materials as well. Finally, teachers and students discuss accordance with the principles of the dialogic approach about students' studying processes and what they have learnt. The aim is to encourage and guide students to search and exploit different learning environments where every student could find a suitable approach to music learning. In the above described model, it has to be noticed the continuum where evaluations, reflections and corrections are continuous. The dialogue is full-time and present in every phase of the investigation. This model is based on a little data, but the educators (the authors) have based the conclusions on their experiences, observations and researches for several years. The study was carried out in music, but the core idea by using dialogue as a perspective in connecting different learning environments are able to apply in other subjects as well.

References


