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## Project-Based Learning at University: Teaching Experiences of Lecturers

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### Abstract

One of the methods, which directs pedagogical technologies towards interactive learning, embraces preparation and presentation of projects. The contribution of project-based learning to (self-)development of learners' general and subject competencies has been widely acknowledged. However, seeking to develop student's (as future teacher's of music) competency of project activities, it is necessary to apply strategies and methods of project-based learning as one of the most essential means of (self-)education in higher education institutions. The article presents the attitude of lecturers from Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences towards problems and possibilities of application of paradigm of project-based learning in the process of music education studies.

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*Keywords:* Project-based learning, study strategy, music education studies, lecturer;

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### 1. Introduction

One of the imperatives of the XXI century in Lithuania is implementation of a paradigm focused on a student. (*The National Strategy of Education for 2013–2022*, 2012). Learning in a higher education institution is defined as a process of active understanding and building up of meanings and skills, what fully complies with the essential idea of project-based learning (PBL). According to Bitinas (2006, p. 171), teacher's professional activity embraces development of educational project and its practical implementation. Therefore, abilities of project activity is one of

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the key features of pre-service teacher's professional competency. According to Graziene (2012, p. 42), in the beginning of the 21st century, PBL is perceived as a learning method, as a philosophy or didactic conception and as coherence of knowledge construction and research approach. The overview of research (Roessingh, Chambers, 2011) revealed that increasing application of the PBL in the educational practice also resulted in changes to the scope of research (areas and methodology). The research showed that application of project-based teaching improves the quality of teaching and learning and contributes to cognitive development of higher level involving students into solving of complicated and innovative problem solutions, teaches them complicated processes and procedures such as planning and communication, promotes authentic research and self-directed learning (Pietila, Virkkula, 2011). From the perspective of Lithuania, the introduction of the project-based learning into the study (study subject) programme has been in its initial stage (Balkevicius et al., 2013; Lasauskiene, 2013; Targamadze, Graziene, 2012).

### *1.1. Problem statement*

Peculiarities of lecturers' personal experiences in project-based teaching at university have not been evaluated to a wider extent yet and remain the problem of the research.

### *1.2. Purpose of study*

The purpose of study is to analyse lecturers' personal experience in teaching identifying the strengths and weaknesses of project-based learning.

## **2. Methods**

### *2.1. Participants*

The sample of experts consisted of 9 lecturers teaching in the study programme of music education implemented in Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences. All the participants in the research are holders of Master's degree and 7 out of them are doctors of Educational Science. Lecturers' teaching experience at university varies: from 10 to 28 years.

### *2.2. Data collection*

Focus group discussion (Marshall, Rossman, 2011; Babbie, 2010) was used as a method, which may embrace a bigger number of informants' responses and reflect as broad as possible range of attitudes to advantages and disadvantages of PBL in a higher education institution. The article analyses the considerations of the research participants, with regard to the following questions formulated by the researchers: "*What positive aspects of applying the project-based learning, as a study strategy or method, in the study programme of music education do you see?*", "*Describe the situation, when you applied a certain method of project-based learning and experienced success or failure, positive or negative feelings*". Discussion lasted 2 hours and 15 minutes and it was held June 2014.

### *2.3. Data analysis*

The qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) enabled the definition of the ways that lecturers treat a successful case of project-based teaching practice, determination of the ways of their reasoning and understanding, positive or negative feelings revealed. The analysis is aimed at determination of meaning units (categories, sub-categories) in the text (Silverman, 2011).

## **3. Results**

Having conducted the analysis of lecturers' answers to the questions of discussions, 6 qualitative categories were distinguished, which can be subdivided into two groups (themes) – positive and negative teaching experience of lecturers (see Table 1).

Table 1. Project-based teaching experiences of lecturers

Theme: areas of positive experience		Theme: areas of negative experience	
Category	Sub-category	Category	Sub-category
Development of students' competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of students' self-dependence</li> <li>• Responsibility for the expected project result</li> <li>• Development of social competency of students</li> </ul>	Lack of students' competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unrealised and unperceived roles of students in a project team</li> <li>• Lack of students' social competency</li> <li>• Lack of students' leadership competency</li> </ul>
Collaboration between a lecturer and a student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coaching of lecturer</li> <li>• Satisfaction with students' involvement into project activities</li> </ul>	Lack of dialogue with students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unrealised role of students completing task assigned by a lecturer</li> <li>• Unrealised responsibility of a teacher for initiating dialogue with students</li> </ul>
Lecturer's professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of meaningful tasks to students</li> <li>• Lecturer's satisfaction with improvement and creation while teaching with students</li> </ul>	Lack of lecturer's competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of lecturer's managerial competency</li> <li>• Lack of lecturer's didactic competency</li> </ul>

### 3.1. Expression of lecturers' attitude towards project-based learning

The lecturers provided a variety of responses to the question "What positive aspects of using the PBL as a study strategy and method in the study programme of music education do you see?": "*<...>it allows to individualise learning*"; "*creates favourable conditions for initiative*"; "*motivation to learn is enhanced*"; "*students are open to new ideas, new experience*"; "*enables students to experience freedom of creation*"; "*helps to assume responsibility for own activities*"; "*self-dependence of students is strengthened*". From the lecturers' perspective, during PBL general and subject-specific competencies are successfully developed, holistic nature of music teaching/learning is ensured: "*application of the method enables students to apply theoretical knowledge and skills in their practice*"; "*links theoretical studies with practical application*"; "*<...> new ideas of music education, which are acceptable and attractive to the majority of teachers*".

The lecturers pointed out challenges encountered while introducing PBL into the study programme of music education: "*insufficient preparation of students*", "*lack of time*", "*lack of lecturers' experience in project activities*". However, the bigger number of lecturers emphasised that training future teachers of music it is expedient to apply PBL: "*the strategy of PBL is particularly appropriate for the study programme of music education and for each study subject of music*".

### 3.2. Positive lecturers' experience in project-based teaching

The results of the research highlighted lecturers' positive experience in project-based teaching, which is related to enhancement of self-dependence, responsibility for the attainment of the project goals and development of in-service music teachers' social competency (collaboration, communication, activity in groups, openness to critics, solidarity). According to the lecturers, the students experience satisfaction while completing a meaningful assignment of the project: "*Students themselves actively involved in activities: they submitted suggestions regarding organisation of the project, choice of musical repertoire and artistic solutions. They rehearsed during additional classes, did not count time and efforts. They were interested not only in formal performance but also in own stage image and scenography*".

During the discussions it was revealed that development of music educational projects creates opportunities for

lecturers and students to collaborate: a teacher and students experience satisfaction, when they exchange concepts, knowledge and skills. A lecturer experiences professional satisfaction because s/he learns from students, consults and educates them, enables them to improve and create together. According to the lecturers, “<...>when the project is successfully completed, several days are emotionally elevated – pleasant feelings and good spirits. While implementing the project you improve together with students and welcome their progress. Confidence in students’ capabilities and its demonstration are of importance”.

It may be stated that the success of students’ musical projects is influenced by lecturers’ didactic competency, i.e. preparation of meaningful and involving tasks. It was established that motivated involvement of students in the project tasks led to a higher level of responsibility and aiming at results as good as possible. According to the lecturers, “<...> the success of the project is when students suggest solutions themselves, organise events themselves and are active and openly express their emotions and discuss them”. This shows lecturers’ satisfaction with students’ involvement into project based learning.

### 3.3. Negative lecturers’ experience in project-based teaching

The lecturers described situation in project-based teaching (specific cases), which they determined as failure (unsuccessful). According to them, some students tend to shift the responsibility for the quality of studying to the group of project implementation, to avoid assuming responsibility for the outcome of activities of the whole project group, to insufficiently communicate with the study colleagues: “In the beginning the students supported the idea of project, started implementing it but team work, discipline, assumed responsibility for personal meaningful role in a team and collaboration were missing”. This demonstrates the lack of students’ social and leadership competencies: “<...>all the organisational work was conducted by several active students. In the beginning nobody took the role of the leader. Though the presentation of the project quite good, it cost extensive efforts of lecture...”.

The gap between expectations of a student and a lecturer is an undeniable reason for failure in project-based learning: students do not always perceive own role while completing the task assigned by a lecturer, whereas lecturers refuse to assume responsibility for initiation of a dialog with students, compliance of assigning project tasks with management of deadlines (time) of their implementation. According to the lecturers: “Negative feelings are related to emotions, which are related to emotions experienced, when students fail to perceive the essence of the project, benefit of project-based activities to further development of their abilities and skills”. Such facts allow to conclude that failures of project-based learning are frequently linked to lecturer’s didactic and managerial competencies: “Most probably my most serious mistake was that I relied to much on students and their capabilities <...>. Though two months were allocated to completion of the project, the students were not successful in fulfilment of the task. I understood that it is necessary to think over the timing (assigning of tasks and deadlines) and the tasks themselves. My mistake was to allow students themselves to independently choose works of music and to divide into project groups”.

## 4. Discussion

Though the majority of lecturers teaching in the study programme of music education implemented in Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences acknowledge the expediency of applying the PBL in studies, this learning is most frequently applied in the study programme of music education of this university as a method rather than a systemic strategy (Targamadze, Graziene, 2012). Even recognising the purpose of applying the method of PBL in studies of music education, it is still perceived as an episodic though innovative element of the process music studies (Lasauskiene, 2013). Therefore, the development of project-based learning has to be carried out systematically (Fernandes et al., 2014; Kapusuz, Can, 2014; Mohedo, Bujez, 2014).

The bigger number of lecturers emphasised that application of PBL in the study programme of music education is reasonable. However, the lack of collaboration between students and lecturers impedes application of the project method, educational influence on students assuming responsibility for efficiency of the learning process, achievements and outcomes of learning (Bubnys, Zydziunaite, 2012). The results of the conducted qualitative research revealed that lecturers frequently see only the role of the student in the centre of PBL. It is also obvious that the project method is used without consideration of competencies possessed by students. The lack of dialogue between a teacher and students, insufficient encouragement of reflection (discussions, disputes) predetermine unsuccessful experience in PBL.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of qualitative data analysis allow to conclude that positive feelings of lecturers while applying project-based learning (development of students' competencies, collaboration between a lecturer and a student, lecturer's professional development) create conditions for their professional self-realization and continuous improvement. Negative feelings experienced by lecturers, when the applied project-based learning (lack of students' competencies, lack of dialogue with students, lack of lecturer's competencies) does not perform the planned role in students' learning, encourage lecturers' self-reflection and empowerment to develop their didactic and managerial competencies.

Pursuing implementation of the paradigm of project-based learning in pedagogical study subjects of music education, it is recommended to introduce solutions at institutional level: to develop the conception of implementation of PBL as a strategy, to design model for implementation of PBL and its testing, to improve professional competencies of lecturers (change their attitude to active study methods, to encourage personal initiative of lecturers, their collaboration among them, providing students with more extensive knowledge of the project method), study organisation in an institution and study programmes.

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