Negotiating musical and pedagogical agency in a learning community: a case of redesigning a group piano vapaa säestys course in music teacher education

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The purpose of this study was to design a learning environment in group vapaa säestys (VS) within the context of music teacher education that supports the development of students’ musical and pedagogical agency, which is seen as the main goal of music teacher education. VS is a student-centered subject that concentrates on piano improvisation and accompaniment and playing by ear and from chord symbols, with emphasis on the process of music making and
learning. It is most often studied with the piano, and the majority of tuition is offered in the form of one-on-one lessons. All music education students of the Sibelius Academy study VS for at least three years, of which only the first year studies (VS1) takes the form of group tuition. As a teacher of VS in higher music education, my motivation for embarking on this study was underpinned by my own experiences of teaching VS in a piano laboratory setting, which triggered a need to evoke change in this specific environment.

The rationale for this study arose from the acknowledgment that, despite its student-centered goals, the student and his or her experiences is often neglected in VS1, which fails to take account the special characteristics of group tuition. In addition, VS1 usually focuses solely on musical issues and is not seen to have any pedagogical value. As a result, the VS1 course in the piano laboratory can be viewed as a badly designed learning environment; the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are mis-aligned with both the goals of VS and the goals of music teacher education. Through this investigation, I address this issue by aiming to design a learning environment that helps to align VS1 practices.

Working in a pragmatist framework, and adopting a sociocultural view on learning, this study is situated in the field of practitioner inquiry as a form of generating knowledge for practice from practice. At the core of this inquiry is a project where I held a dual role as the teacher-researcher. The inquiry took place in two cycles of academic years, and it was carried out in collaboration with the participants with the aim of improving shared educational practices. Although the context of the study was local, wherein the general aim was to develop this particular context in terms of better teaching and more effective learning, the study also aims to broaden the understanding of the ways in which instrumental courses in higher music education might contribute to the growth of music teachers and pedagogues.

I collected data by using various sources and methods during the two cycles of the inquiry, including: a teacher's research diary, videotaped lessons, videotaped exams, audio recorded group discussions, audio recorded feedback from colleague teachers, student essays, and individual follow-up interviews with students. The analysis in turn combines two approaches: narrative analysis and data driven qualitative content analysis. Using the narrative approach and triangulating various data sources, I construct three Vignettes as points of reference when discussing how the negotiated process of redesigning the VS group course as carried out by the members of the learning community – the students and the teacher-researcher – changed the course in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. I use data driven qualitative content analysis to analyze how the students articulated their experiences of musical and pedagogical agency in this learning environment, which was designed to facilitate collaboration in and as a learning community. Based on these accounts, I then proceed to discuss the kind of structure that would support the development of students' reflexive musical and pedagogical agency in group VS, within the context of music teacher education.

The findings of this study suggest that a learning community can be an important asset in music teacher education and in VS, because a learning community, once formed, starts to contribute to the process of teaching and learning by engaging in creative knowledge creation. Importantly, I found that being able to alternate between and explore different positions in the community (e.g. student, teacher, policy maker, researcher) was an important tool in building agency for both the students and the teacher-researcher. A significant outcome of the study was an increased level of reflection demonstrated by the students with regards to their musical and pedagogical agency. This reinforces the need for music teacher education students to acquire various diverse teaching and learning experiences as part of their education. The findings of this study also reinforce the need for music teacher education to align its curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment with the overall goals of the program, not only at the general level of the program but also at the level of individual courses situated in that program, as in the case of the VS1 course.

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Some models of general pedagogical knowledge combine pedagogical and psychological aspects, whereas others don’t make psychological aspects explicit. Psychological components account for the fact that learning occurs in a social context and learning success depends on the general cognitive and affective characteristics of individual students. Table 2 below contains some of the elements that the different models identify. Since the list represents several models, some components overlap. Table 2: The main components of the various models of general pedagogical knowledge.

1) How can music teacher education be designed and redesigned by developing, clarifying and reflecting the program visions within a local-global frame? 2) How can music teacher education programs be developed with respect to diversity through a partnership of similar institutions situated in differing contexts? 3) How can a knowledge of what is excluded from music teacher education contribute to clarifying visions and extending approaches to diversity, democracy and ethics of education? Negotiating musical and pedagogical agency in a learning community. A case of redesigning a group piano vapaa säestys course in music teacher education. Studia Musica 49. Helsinki: Sibelius Academy.