

Preparing Students for a Digital Work-Life Using Student-Centred Methods: A Case Study from Music Production

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Abstract: Students are expected to be digital, using digital tools for staying updated on their study programmes, time schedules, and how to find and hand in assignments. The tools that the students need in their future jobs are not necessarily taught, as these tools may be specific to each company. However, in the study programme of Music Production, the use of equipment and digital software is a part of the education. This paper showcases how the students are exposed to tools and work forms that they will use in the music production business. Introductions are provided, and the students can then practice using the tools. The most intensive training is provided in five to six intensive sessions during a study year. These sessions are called “camps”. These camps have a duration of approximately 12 hours each, with the students divided into groups, the purpose of which is to develop and produce song texts and melodies, which at the end of the camp are presented in a plenary session. These intensive learning activities include the extensive use of tools for producing the songs, as well as collaborative work forms, as the students need to work together and learn together in groups. The qualitative investigations from these intensive song writing camps show how the students benefit from the group work, situated learning and collaboration, and present their view on the usefulness of these camps.

Keywords: situated learning, work-life preparation, collaborative work, cooperation, communication

1. Introduction

Within Higher Music Education (HME), there has been a turn to a more student-centred perspective (Ski-Berg, 2022). The employability of the students being educated has had an increasing focus, not only in performing arts, but also within music production. Being interesting for the work market after they have finished their education is attractive for most educational programmes.

In this paper, we will showcase a pedagogical “take” that will support the employability of the students in the Bachelor Programme in Music Production at the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences. Here, through collaborative methods (Christophersen, 2016), the students were exposed to technology, work forms and structures that they recognize in their future work-life.

2. The “camps”:

The students take part in a total of six “camps” during the first year of their Bachelor Programme. The “camp” is an intensive work session, which starts at 10 am and ends at approximately at 10:30 pm. Prior to the first camp, they are introduced to a digital programme for music production (GarageBand). Prior to other camps, they are exposed to other types of digital programmes to use as tools (Rhyme.zone, Masterwriter and Splice are all websites where the students can find different aids). The students are also instructed on how to organize as a group. For each camp, the theme is slightly different. For example, in camp 4 they are instructed to create a song that can be played on a Norwegian radio channel, while for camp 6 they are asked to develop songs for four different artists at Sony Music. At the end of the camps, the students are asked to reflect upon their experiences.

This intensive way of teaching to master tools, cooperation, collaboration, and to also make music, is intended to provide the students with a situated learning opportunity. Results from previous camps have resulted in published music; hence, the camps provide an arena for the students. But what do the students think of this way of working?

We have therefore formulated the following research question:

How do the students experience the songwriter - camps?

In the following, we will present a theory that will enlighten our study. We will also present the method of inquiry and the results from our investigations, and lastly, we conclude and point forward to future research.

3. Theoretical foundation

Student-centred learning approaches were advocated by Carl Rogers (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994). To help support this, one may facilitate for student activity and for students to be active knowledge-creators. They should be encouraged to build on their own previous experiences, reflecting and also actively investigating their environments for acquiring knowledge. It is important to develop the students' intellect (Kember, 1997; Tangney, 2014), and it is also about supporting the students and empowering them (Mezirow, 2010).

Since the students are primarily exposed to the camps in order to learn how to develop songs under time pressure, this is a way of "learning by doing" (Dewey, 1938). By experiencing how to develop music, using the tools and receiving guidance from their lecturers, they learn about music production and development. Because there are six camps during one year of lecturing, the students also have the opportunity to reflect and develop as singers/songwriters. Similar to what Kolb (2014) explains, the experiential learning cycle can be repeated, and they can improve based on their experiences and reflections. Reflections can be undertaken prior to, during- and after the camps, and since the students are encouraged to reflect upon their learning outcome, how they work in the groups regarding cooperation and collaboration can be related to any prior experiences (Schön, 1987).

As music production has gradually become more and more digitalized, to learn about digital work-forms is also necessary. Utilizing tools for not only developing music (GarageBand, Splice, etc.), they can use tools for co-writing, such as Google Docs. The lyrics are then available for all the group members. This may come in handy when they are to co-work with other songwriters not co-located with themselves. This resembles work from a distance, which during COVID-19 gained a renewed focus (Wang *et al.*, 2021). The enabling of work from a distance allows songwriters to cooperate and collaborate across borders.

Working in a group also allows for learning from each other. The students can share knowledge and improve as a group, and may also learn from their lecturers/mentors. This collaborative learning may resemble the SECI model from Knowledge Management (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). By socializing and discussing, both among each other and with mentors, they can externalize tacit knowledge, which by combining with existing knowledge with each student, becomes these students' internalized knowledge. So, by learning and being taught different digital tools, different ways of thinking regarding developing music and how to cooperate and collaborate, the students can develop as songwriters.

This will also provide the students with a situated learning opportunity. Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to learning in Communities of Practices and situated learning. Hence, learning from- and with fellow students in a work-like setting, cooperating and collaborating as they would in work-life, may be a part of the preparations for the future work-life.

The communication often aligns with Habermas (1985) and his principles of good communication, such as that the participants in a case should all take part in the dialogue, that all the participants have the same possibilities regarding presenting and "criticizing" within the dialogue setting, and that the participants should have the ability and will to understand each other. Furthermore, it is important that any discrepancies in the power structure between the parties are neutralized in order to maintain a consensus. Flyvbjerg (2012) points out that an infinite amount of time can be a factor to help support this. The participants also need to display their goals and intentions, and not think too "strategically" regarding their own gain.

To a certain degree, the "rules of the game" are established according to these principles, which open for a dialogue and participation, as one is now an equal partner in the communication, and all input and argumentation should be paid attention to. This prepares the ground, even for the less experienced, to take part in a new arena.

In the next section, we will explain our method of inquiry to investigate how the students experienced the "camps".

4. Method of inquiry

This study is a qualitative case study following three songwriter camps during the spring semester of 2022. Our aim was to investigate how the songwriter camps were organized, as well as the teaching methods, and making enquiries about the students’ experiences regarding student centredness. Due to this purpose, we chose to combine observation with formal and informal interviews, both individually and in groups (Dalen, 2011). We were three researchers taking part in the data collection. In addition, one of the three teachers in charge of the songwriter camps has contributed to this paper. We conducted an open observation during the camps, being in the role of present observers (Creswell, 2007). In addition to observation, we were doing both formal and informal interviews with teachers and students, e.g., sitting in at the introduction from the start, following the students doing studio practice during the day, and listening in at the presentations of music in the evening. This provided us with an insight into the processes of the songwriter camps, as well as the meanings, feelings and reflections of the various participants, which can be called thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973). During and after observations, we took field notes. In addition, three students were interviewed individually. Two group interviews were conducted by two of the researchers using a semi-structured interview-guide (see Table 1), and the conversations were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Table 1: Overview of data collection, timetable and informants

| Songwriter camp | Observation by researchers in classroom and studio (field notes) | Informal group conversations with students (field notes) | Informal conversations with teachers (field notes) | Individual interviews students (rec) | Group interview students (rec) | Group interview teachers (rec) |
|----------------------------|--|--|--|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 18 th Feb 2022 | Researcher 1 | x | Teachers1 and 2 | Informants A and B | | |
| 4 th March 2022 | Researcher 2 | x | Teachers1 and 3 | | | |
| 6 th April 2022 | Researchers1 and 3 | x | Teachers1 and 2 | Informant C | Four informants | Teachers 1 and 2 |

We have analysed the data by first going through the transcripts to identify themes and issues relevant to the research questions. The material was coded by marking sentences with a central meaning, thereby developing descriptive codes close to the experience. The findings are presented and discussed against the theories presented above.

5. Results and discussion

In this part, we will present the central findings from our material, and seek to answer the research question: *How did the students experience the songwriter camps?*

5.1 How did they experience working in groups?

“Great teamwork” (C)

Each session starts with an introduction, in which the teachers establish the groups of students who are to work together during the camp. They then also receive the day’s assignment, with each student assigned a role with a certain responsibility within the group’s work. This can be vocals, being a headliner, producer or being responsible for “good vibes” in the studio. The students go to the studios to solve the task of the day, as the work is well organized, structured and very intensive at the same time. The teachers take on the role as mentors, as they walk around and visit the different studios, and offer help, provide feedback, advice and the facilitation of the process of songwriting. As this is a very creative process, the feedback from the teachers/mentors is highly valued, and is important for the learning process.

The informants consider the work in teams like this to be very beneficial to them when it comes to learning from other students. This is conveyed in both informal conversations and formal interviews:

I enjoy working in a group, because if you have an idea that you find is a good one, and then the others come in and don't know about that idea. If I had been alone, I maybe would have used an idea that was very bad. (C)

This implies that they are learning from each other, much like what you would expect, e.g., in Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This also resembles a real-life setting, and allows the students to learn in a work-like environment, which enables the explorative opportunities of student-centred learning (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994; Kember, 1997; Mezirow, 2010). Also, the learning from mentors allowing the students to integrate learning absorbing tacit knowledge is similar to what is described in the SECI model with socialization (with mentors and fellow students), externalization by discussing and communicating, the combining of new knowledge with previous knowledge, and lastly, internalizing it so that it becomes the students' own knowledge to utilize now and later.

5.2 Communication and cooperation in teams

According to our informants, the communication in the groups usually works very well. This is a prerequisite for maintaining a good relationship and keeping the songwriter process going. This has developed from the first camp, when it was somewhat different, and it took some time to get to know each other: *"From the start, the mood was different from what is it now. You didn't know the people, and everyone was a bit quieter, actually."* (C)

Although the members in the groups change from camp to camp, the informants find that the communication is very good. They speak very freely in the groups:

"We sometimes almost talk too freely." (C)

"It's very instructive. Because you learn from the others, and they maybe know things that I don't know." (C)

The instructed communication allows for students to elaborate their ideas and build on previous experiences (Habermas, 1984; Flyvbjerg, 2012).

5.3 Establishing a safe learning space provides better results

The open and free communication is also a prerequisite for good cooperation:

"I have never worked in this way before, with other people. So, before I went to study, I have just been sitting in my room alone and producing music". ..

"The results become better when working in teams. "(C)

The "safe space" allows for support for acquiring new knowledge (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994), which also helps to empower the students (Mezirow, 2010).

5.4 Developing digital skills

The songwriter camps are structured and organized, as each student knows what role to take in the studio production. The learning teams are organized like a real-life studio team, so that all can have a near real-life experience: *"I have learned more about the use of the technics and the digital programmes and stuff."* (C) This statement confirms the experienced learning outcome from the work, much like what is described by Dewey (1938) and Kolb (2014).

This contributes to establishing a space for learning that feels safe, and a culture in which you can ask questions and be open, instead of acting strategically. The feeling of safety is also important, because some of the programmes (e.g. Google Docs) are used in cooperation with others, which requires a safe learning space in the student teams. Naturally, this takes some time to establish, as far as getting to know the others:

"We get ideas from each other... and if someone is stuck on a baseline, then the others can say: Why don't you rather do it like this? Then you get done faster." (C) This statement points towards the knowledge sharing described by Nonaka (1994) and Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995).

We found that what is positive about writing together is that ideas can be developed and cultivated in cooperation with others, and this is more easily accomplished when you feel safe about your group members. Statements like: “I find that most of what we have been through has been very good” (C) show that the collaboration and cooperation in groups have been perceived as positive.

Although we asked about how reflection would support their learning outcome, the students did not have a clear idea about reflection as a tool for learning. We found that they reflected well upon being asked, and were to hand in reflection notes, but we did not find any distinctive awareness about reflection supporting learning outcomes. Here, the faculty staff should be advised to work more on supporting reflection for learning purposes. Schön (1987), Dewey (1938), Kolb (2014) and Rogers and Freiberg (1994) promote reflection to support a deeper learning process.

6. Conclusion

The students are very positive about the “camps”, and feel that they learn a lot from both each other and their mentors, from learning about and how to use the different tools, and from collaborating and cooperating. The way they communicate among each other provides a safe arena for cooperation and collaboration, and allows knowledge sharing among group members. They seem to experience a real-life situation during the camps, not only by utilizing the tools of the trade, but also by developing music for real artists. Even if they are able to reflect upon their learning and written reflection notes, they do not seem to connect reflection to enhanced learning outcomes. This shows that the “camps” are arenas for student-centred learning in most of the aspects of the term.

6.1 Further research

As researchers, we see a plethora of potential for further investigations into what the camps represent as a tool for learning and support for real-life learning opportunities. In this paper, we have investigated how the students perceived the camps, without going more in-depth into the various features of the “camps”. We suggest investigating the role of the mentors, and how they prepare and work during the camps. We also propose to conduct further research into how to utilize *reflection* as a learning tool. Yet another suggestion would be to follow these students in their further education and career, in order to establish how much from their education they use in their future work-life as songwriters.

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