Musical Safe Space

Jaco van den Dool
Codarts University of the Arts
Erasmus University Rotterdam
The Netherlands
jvandendool@codarts.nl

ABSTRACT

Learning music as a subject proves to be a point of contention for students of the Primary Education BA program in the Netherlands. Two firmly rooted cultural dispositions are at play here. First, arts education holds a marginalized position in the curriculum of education in general (Schildt-Mol, 2011), but particularly in this BA program, with a mere 20 hours per year. Second, as a result of this marginalized position, students face musical activities in a traditional classroom setting with stage freight and insecurities.

To combat both dispositions, blended learning could offer valuable insights and solutions. Blended learning is often defined as the integration of digital tools with face-to-face education (Garrison and Kanuka 2004; Graham 2004; Macdonald 2008; Oliver and Trigwell 2005; Poon 2013). In the context of this study, students have the chance to immerse themselves in musical learning within online communities and the classroom, rather than only learning within the traditional classroom setting.

Drawing on this theory, the research group of Codarts University of the Arts undertakes innovative work to research the ways in which digital tools can improve musical skills of Primary Education BA students. In collaboration with Leiden University we build a digital safe space for students to develop musical skills at their own pace through the medium of peer feedback. To determine whether the feedback website rendered a positive effect on musical skill development, we designed and conducted an experiment. The first group of 25 students underwent the experimental procedure of learning musical skills from the peer feedback website, coupled with weekly traditional face-to-face education. The control group of 25 students only received traditional face-to-face education. They were expected to master musical skills independently, without peer feedback.

Preliminary findings indicate significant increased engagement due to the encouraging feedback website in which students can safely explore their musical skills. According to the students, intensified blended peer feedback learning through an interactive website coupled with face-to-face learning significantly enhances engagement in musical learning. Subsequently, students experience less stage freight and insecurities.

INTRODUCTION

Students live in a world of unlimited access to information. In a diversity of ways, they absorb and process this information with blended modes of learning, drawing on a variety of digital tools and sources. Within the professorship 'blended learning', Codarts undertakes innovative work to research the ways in which digital tools can improve student engagement, study results, and learning strategies within the more traditional education in the fields of dance, music and circus. Different from more academic settings, blended learning within performing arts studies is still in its infancy. Learning an instrument or a choreography is predominantly bodily driven, whereas academic courses require a mainly cognitive involvement. Blended learning within the latter has proven its value and benefit for study engagement and study results (Garrison and Kanuka 2004; Graham 2004; Macdonald 2008; Oliver and Trigwell 2005; Poon 2013), while the effects of blended learning within performing arts studies remain largely unexplored. Besides implementation of blended learning within the conservatory, the professorship 'blended learning' has the obligation to disseminate research results to other institutes. Among those are education institutes including performing arts in their curriculum, such as Primary Education BA program, Hogeschool Rotterdam. They offer mandatory music training to BA-students following a full time (elementary school) teacher training course. Since these students usually have no professional background in music, the learning process turns out to be a challenge.

Learning music as a subject proves to be a point of contention for students of the Primary Education BA program in the Netherlands. Two firmly rooted cultural dispositions are at play here. First, arts education holds a marginalized position in the curriculum of education in general (Schildt-Mol, 2011), but particularly in this BA program, with a mere 20 hours of music per academic year. Second, as a result of this marginalized position, students face musical activities in a traditional classroom setting with stage freight and insecurities. Limited time for music and musical insecurities could be combatted with a blended approach. Both constraints are at the heart of this study.

To combat the both dispositions, blended learning could offer valuable insights and solutions. Blended learning is often defined as the integration of digital tools with

face-to-face education (Garrison and Kanuka 2004; Graham 2004; Macdonald 2008; Oliver and Trigwell 2005; Poon 2013). In other words, blended learning merges online approaches with classroom activities, catering to various learning strategies of students. In the context of this study, students have the chance to immerse themselves in musical learning within online communities and the classroom, rather than only learning within the traditional classroom setting.

EXPERIMENT

Drawing on this theory, the research group of Codarts University of the Arts undertakes innovative work to research the ways in which digital tools can improve musical skills of Primary Education BA students. In collaboration with Leiden University we build a digital safe space for students to develop musical skills at their own pace through the medium of peer feedback. Students submit their musical pitch in video format in the gallery and are assigned to peer review a number of pitches on specific musical skills criteria (see image 1 below).
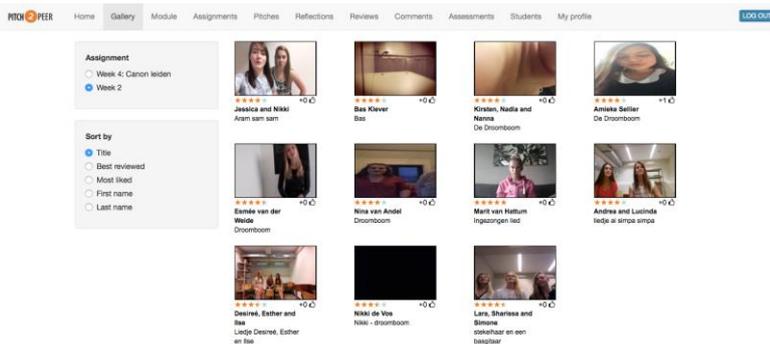

Image 1. Video gallery

To determine whether the feedback website rendered a positive effect on musical skill development, we designed and conducted an experiment. The first group of 25 students underwent the experimental procedure of learning musical skills from the peer feedback website, coupled with weekly traditional face-to-face education. For each assignment the experimental group of students was divided in smaller units of 3 or 4 students. Every student had to write a song and upload their video on the musical safe space website. Each individual student was required to provide feedback based on a criteria list, provided by the teacher (see image 2 below). The general rule was that a student can only receive feedback after providing it. Subsequently, all students were involved in the learning process. Upon processing the received feedback, the students were asked to upload an improved version of their song. In the final phase, the teacher provides feedback. Finally, the students uploads the final improved version of the song. In addition to peer-feedback-learning, the teacher offered tutorial videos (to prepare the students for a theoretical concept), gamification elements (students were able to rate songs), and a forum for discussions.
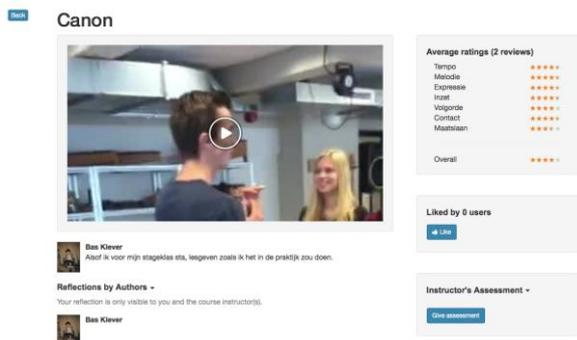

Image 2. Rating and criteria list

The control group of 25 students only received traditional face-to-face education. They were expected to master musical skills independently, without peer feedback. This experiment aimed at collecting quantitative data, relating intensified peer blended feedback learning with improved musical skills and less musical inhibitions. We conducted a pre-test and a post-test with a survey and a musical skill-test.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

At the moment of writing the experiment is not fully conducted. The complete dataset is expected for analysis in May 2017. Unfortunately, we can only present a two significant preliminary findings. First, we found that the peer-feedback-group demonstrated a significant improvement of 29% in pitch acquisition against 3% improvement in pitch acquisition within the control group. Apparently, the feedback website enabled the students to fully immerse themselves in the melodic material in a flexible and safe way. They could measure their pitch to those of their peers and check the right pitch without being directly exposed to others. Second, our data indicates that music technical skills (vocal technique) improve by 16% within the feedback website compared to a lower improvement of only 10% within the control group. As with pitch improvement, technical skills improve due to the safe and experimental nature of the feedback website. Aside from written feedback, thee website provides students with video material which they use as reflection for their own bodily posture. Correction by means of self-reflection and peer-feedback feeds into refined bodily postures which directly results in improved vocal techniques.

Furthermore, the findings indicate significant increased engagement due to the encouraging feedback website in which students can safely explore their musical skills. Albeit expected to encourage students' engagement, the forum was not widely used. Apparently, text-based interaction between peers on musical activities seems difficult. This is largely due to the ineffability of musical activities. In other words, it is very difficult to reflect on musical activities with words. The knowledge clips, however, proved to be more conducive to student engagement. Based on the results of the student viewing system, students even watched more videos than required. According to the students, intensified blended peer feedback learning through an interactive website coupled with face-to-face learning significantly enhances engagement in musical learning. Subsequently, students experience less stage freight and insecurities.

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