

## Supporting music students' reflection in instrument studies

Tuulike Kivestu<sup>ac1</sup>, Äli Leijen<sup>ab</sup>, Kadri Steinbach<sup>ac</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *University of Tartu, Viljandi Culture Academy*

<sup>b</sup> *University of Tartu, Institute of Educational Sciences*

<sup>c</sup> *Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre*

### Summary

The use of active learning methods is an integral part of contemporary education, including music education (Brown, 2008; Kährik et al., 2012; Scott, 2010, 2011). Active learning in a wider educational context is associated with a constructivist approach. According to constructivism, the acquiring of knowledge is closely connected to communication with others, and, as a result of this, a new cognition is constructed through analysis, solutions to problems and answering questions. Important aspects of this learning process are self-regulation, self-evaluation and reflection of the learning process (Zimmerman, 1998). Such an approach is in contrast with the practice where learner's self-awareness is limited, e.g. learning situations where the students are actively involved in the practical activities, but less attention is paid towards thinking how certain tasks could be solved. Opposing mere practical engagement, it is argued (see e.g. Leijen et al., 2009a; Leijen et al., 2012; Sööt & Leijen, 2012) that students should be encouraged to reflect on their practice in order to manage, give meaning to, and become aware of their learning.

### The role of reflection in music education

The importance of reflection in music education is often referenced in connection with making instrument practice more effective (Parncutt, 2007), as reflecting helps to interpret and explain one's weaknesses and reach conclusions about how to improve upon them. In addition, reflection promotes the emerging of a self-regulated learner who is in charge of their own study process and is able to develop their skills and abilities on their own.

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<sup>1</sup> University of Tartu, Viljandi Culture Academy, Posti 1, 71004 Viljandi;  
tuulike.kivestu@ut.ee

Despite a rise in interest towards active learning methods and self-reflection in the general education community, only limited number of studies are reported in the context of music instrument studies (see e.g., Draper, 2007; Kivestu & Leijen, 2014). Nielsen (2001) has written about strategies that can be used while learning an instrument. According to Nielsen, music studies often include a self-regulatory aspect but students use them without self-awareness and often in an unsystematic manner.

Reflection and support of it in the context of instrument studies demand more attention and the present research draws on a model that was developed for supporting reflection in this context. The model is based on supporting the four general processes of reflection as proposed by Procee (2006). Experienced lecturers of music education have previously validated the model (see Kivestu & Leijen, 2014). The present research focuses on the first implementation of the model among students of music instrument studies and attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How do the reflection assignments developed according to the general processes of reflection support the learning process of music students in their perception?
2. How do the music students conceptualize the usefulness of applied reflection tasks for their professional development?

In addition, the suggestions for further development of the model will be proposed based on the answers to the research questions

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The model for supporting reflection was applied by 11 students of a music department in an Estonian university, three of these students were studying at the Bachelor level of school music, six in applied higher education of jazz music, and two in applied higher education in traditional music. The participants included five male and six female students between the ages of 19-26. Students had the following specializations: two in saxophone, two in guitar, two in piano, three in voice, one in flute and one in percussion.

### **Model and data collection**

The model for supporting reflection consists of two phases: reflection and meta-reflection. The reflection phase consists of three cycles in itself – description, evaluating and relating (one cycle lasted for 3 weeks). The

meta-reflection phase (lasting for 2 weeks) consists of reflecting upon the reflection process. The tasks of each cycle are supported by video, different supporting questions and peer feedback.

Regarding the reflection phase, the process of describing demanded the student to make a video of themselves playing their instrument, decide upon two aspects and describe their playing in accordance to those. In the process of evaluation the student was expected to compare their playing to the evaluation criteria provided. In the relation process students were asked to pose two questions they wished to receive feedback on from their peers. Regarding the meta-reflection phase student were asked to look back on the different cycles of reflection phase and think about their professional identity.

A specific course was created in the *Moodle* environment and a separate topic was created for each task, giving detailed instructions on conducting the task. In addition, for the reflection task the students were divided into groups of four and feedback was given in these groups. The student's field of study or instrument studied was not considered when creating the groups.

Two focus group interviews were carried out to collect data on students' experiences. The first interview was conducted with 5 students, the second with 6 students. Separate questions were asked related to every reflection task, as well as regarding the reflection model in general and possible areas for improvement. Both interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Data was analysed following the thematic analysis principles.

## **Main results and discussion**

The results showed that students encounter problems with all processes of reflection and the developed support could facilitate overcoming these problems. More specifically, the participants pointed out that the reflection assignments helped them to take a more objective view on their practice and offered a detailed way for improving in a systematic manner, and helped to focus on specific goals and to target exact training needs as also noted in previous studies (see e.g. Kori et al., 2014; Leijen et al., 2009b). All participants suggested that such reflection assignments should be integrated in regular instrument studies curriculum.

According to the data gathered, certain changes need to be implemented to the organization of the reflection method. This is needed for increasing the meaningfulness of reflection in relation to their music instrument studies. Teacher of the major music instrument should be involved more in this

process, helping to tie the reflection activities with the studies of the student's main musical instrument. Hopefully this could motivate the university teachers to make more effort for formulating the most useful criteria for evaluation and supporting the students. Another reason is to ensure that the students have the opportunity to propose more specialized questions about style or instrument specifics in order to get more detailed feedback from their teacher and peers who study the same instrument. Besides this, there should be also opportunities to receive feedback from students from other areas of specialization because they can point out different aspects. In brief, it would be beneficial if students' groups in the relating phase of reflection would include both students of the same style and instrument as well as different instruments and styles.

Most of the participants of the study did not find it practical to divide the reflection exercises up over the course of three weeks; they thought it was thinly spread. The organization of assignments could be restructured to involve the description and evaluation phases in one week and the relation phase on week two. In order to assure that the students would benefit more from the reflection assignments in relation to their proceedings in the chosen specialization, it is advised to lengthen the timespan of the model and hold a reflective cycle twice a year – for example at the beginning the fall semester and at the end of the spring semester. Assignments divided across a longer time-span would help the students to better plan, monitor and evaluate their professional development. As the participants of the current study noted, growth as a musician does not come fast and requires more time. The latter suggestion is again in line with the idea that reflection assignments need to be meaningful for students and designed to support their own major learning objectives as already proposed by Dewey (1933).

*Keywords:* reflection, instrument study, constructivism, active learning