

**Inquisitive learning as a basis for instrumental teaching:  
an essay on four underpinning principles of the Prince Claus  
Conservatoire's instrumental teacher education**

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Up until 2005 Peter Mak was involved as pedagogy teacher in the instrumental teacher education of the Bachelor of Music of the Prince Claus Conservatoire. The programme's pedagogy section consisted of modules developed by Peter including 'Didactics', 'Learning processes', 'Study skills', and 'Exceptional learners.' These modules, all thoroughly developed and described by Peter, formed a neatly rolled-out set of tuition for the students in the programme. The content and set-up of the modules were based on the latest developments and insights in education. All modules were underpinned by authentic sources from the field and were easy to read. During the past decade Peter's influence and ideas for the instrumental teacher education remained of great importance. As a committed colleague he was always interested to look into issues and ideas related to the curriculum and stayed an important critical friend. But possibly most distinguished was his between-the-lines plea for all present and future teachers to approach each individual learner with respect and dignity. Thank you, Peter, for sharing this valuable work and for keeping us inspired.

Since Peter has moved on from the teaching curriculum, together with other teachers at the Prince Claus Conservatoire<sup>1</sup>, we took over Peter's legacy and continued the education of future instrumental teachers.<sup>2</sup> Since 2005, we have been working towards simultaneously solidifying and developing some of the foundations of this programme further, in search for creating adequate learning environments for students wanting to become broadly employable instrumental teachers. First of all, this was done as a response to new developments and insights in learning and teaching in general as well as in music. Secondly, as higher music educational institutes have to adapt to 21<sup>st</sup> century societal changes

<sup>1</sup> In the remainder of this document, the conservatoire will be abbreviated with its acronym PCC.

<sup>2</sup> Instrumental teachers are those that facilitate learning to play a musical instrument, including voice.

(Odam and Bannan, 2005) and prepare musicians for a portfolio career, the curriculum evolved step-by-step in light of current challenges.

Now, ten years after Peter has left the programme, with this reflective essay, we wish to explicit some of the principles on which the instrumental teacher education at the PCC thrives today. At the same time, this essay wishes to lay down a stepping-stone for continuing development of the programme in the near future. That is because the programme is in permanent transition; in other words, it is learning itself.

In September 2015, for the duration of a week, we conversed through email with the aim to explicit and reflect on some of the fundamentals of the programme and the dilemmas that spring from them. The question *Who am I as a learner in the teaching curriculum?* formed the initial impulse to facilitate the dialogue between us. This question results from our experiences of being participants in several 'communities of learners' in which we were involved as teacher, leader, participant or learner. Based on this question our discussion touched on underpinning principles of the teacher education curriculum. This essay draws out key ideas that resulted from this conversation.

### **Instrumental teacher education at the PCC**

What do we mean by the instrumental teacher education of the PCC? In this paragraph we present a brief sketch of the programme.

The teacher education consists of a coherent programme of lessons, workshops and work placements divided over a period of five semesters in the bachelor programme of the classical and jazz department. Work placements are offered with individual and group lessons coached by instrument-specific pedagogy teachers and mentors coming from the work field. Peer learning and experiential learning are core elements during these placements. Collaborative learning is central to the project work placement in which student groups design projects in collaboration with teachers from regular elementary education. Lessons in which instrument-specific pedagogy and music pedagogy are taught feed directly into the different work placements. Students also participate in work places, which serve as laboratories for mutual exploring, sharing, testing and reflecting on ideas, material and approaches suitable for their teaching practices. At the end of the

programme students present their view on music teaching through reflecting on their work placements, a case study and their development and identity as an instrumental teacher-performer.<sup>3</sup>

### **Transitions of the PCC's instrumental teacher education of the past decade.**

During the past ten years, the instrumental teacher education has undergone quite some change. This paragraph summarizes a few influential new insights that impacted both our thinking and the development of approaches in the curriculum.

At the beginning of this period, the teaching programme, which had been designed for and in collaboration with the local professional field, was made available for non-Dutch PCC students. As a consequence, generic teaching skills had to be recalibrated to ensure the education offered students core knowledge and skills which would not only be applicable in the local environment of the PCC but also in the different home countries of PCC students all over the world.

One such influential insight came by discovering the work of Donald Schön (Schön, 1987), who pleads for educating 'reflective practitioners' in higher education, instead of training professionals according to a (static) tradition of a specific profession. His ideas inspired us to reconsider the implications of this concept for the programme and consequently change its name, at that time called 'Teacher Training Programme', into 'Instrumental Teacher Education.' What stood central in this new concept was the idea of educating adaptable, flexible and reflective practitioners who are not only able to carry on their profession, but also become its innovators through reflective practice.

A shift in thinking about learning became influential as well, since concepts of learning had developed tremendously in recent decades, extending linear ideas of knowledge and skills acquisition into more complex notions of learning constructed within the realm of social practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Illeris, 2009; Jarvis, 2009). This implies a learning that is not constrained to formal institutional contexts such as conservatoires (Mak et al., 2007). Rather, learning takes place as a consequence of our 'lived experience of participation in the world' (Wenger, 2009, p. 209) in which 'life itself is the main learning event' (Wenger,

<sup>3</sup>The denomination teacher-performer follows a stance whereby the musician's identity stands central across all her activities. In practice, the roles will often overlap and cross-fertilize, which can be explained as a dual identity where both teacher and performer are at work constantly.

2006, online). From this perspective, learning, therefore, can be defined as a holistic process involving the whole person. Such a holistic approach yields and acknowledges various forms of learning including collaborative learning (Gaunt and Westerlund, 2012), biographical learning (Alheit, 2009) and life-long learning (Smilde, 2009).

Again around 2005, a debate about defining core characteristics, professional attitudes and competences<sup>4</sup> of music practitioners took place on a national level. As a consequence, all curricula of Dutch conservatoires evolved into competence-based programmes substituting the learning outcome-based curriculum. The competence-based focus of the instrumental teacher education was therefore not only intrinsically motivated from within the PCC, but got also validated by the professional field of conservatoires in the Netherlands.

Our thinking became also influenced by an awareness of the different roles that instrumental teachers take on. The field of practice of instrumental teaching increasingly indicated a diversification of functions and roles of those facilitating the learning. Whereas before it was just the designation of *teacher* that existed, the role soon opened up towards roles including coach, facilitator, mentor, educator, tutor, instructor or pedagogue.<sup>5</sup> These roles each seem to express a different relation to the learner as well as to the (musical) material. Encouraged by this change in the field, rather than speaking monolithically in terms of *the* teacher, the programme from then on endorsed an emphasis on the variety of ways in which teachers can facilitate, stimulate, foster and nurture learning.

In turn, the acknowledgement of the variety of roles of a teacher opened up a debate about the learning environment and the traditional hierarchical position of the teacher, resulting in an exploration of how teachers learn themselves during their interactions with students. Teachers rethinking their position from the perspective of being a learner as well as a teacher puts them in the position of

<sup>4</sup> Competences can be defined as the integration of knowledge, skills and attitudes within a professional setting (INVITE group, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> One concrete example of this is the formulation of roles of instrumental teachers by the AEC working group International Network of Vocal and Instrumental Teacher Education (INVITE), which sought to improve the collaboration and exchange between European conservatoires in the field of instrumental teaching. In their final report, the group formulated six clusters of roles and competences: (1) the performer & artistic role model; (2) planner & organiser; (3) communicator & pedagogue; (4) facilitator; (5) reflective practitioner; and (6) advocate, networker & collaborator (INVITE group, 2010).

becoming a member of a learning community again, or actually, of being a learner in a context of multiple learning communities. As a result of the re-positioning of the teacher, this has led to letting go of the idea of the student-centred approach, and to develop the programme from a viewpoint that is learner-centred, including the teacher as a learner in the context of education.

Having portrayed the key phases that the programme has gone through in this past decade, hereafter we will introduce four underpinnings that, in our perception, define the footprint of the PCC's instrumental teacher education programme as it is today.

### *1. A central position for dynamic and broad learning*

At the core of the teaching curriculum stands learning, which means that all programme activities and participants hook up on learning as the main source continually and at every stage of development. This expands on the assumption that adequately exploring, interpreting, recognizing and understanding learning informs instrumental teachers when they effectively design, facilitate and motivate learning environments. Two qualities further define the concept of learning: it is dynamic and broad.

Firstly, learning is seen as *dynamic*, because this allows theoretical and practical perspectives to evolve and transform. Such a dynamic stance enables the programme's flexibility. An example of an implication of this is the plasticity of roles within the group of programme participants. In contrast to more traditional views, where roles such as either teacher or student tend to stand centrally, in a dynamic learner-centred programme, participants are given the space to develop and experiment with roles that suit the learner at a given occasion in time or space. In practice, those participants that enter the programme as students try out teaching roles in various ways without removing their privileges as student. This provides a sense of safety and the space to retreat in comfortable roles or push boundaries towards new roles in an equal way. Those initially participating as teacher may equally explore their role as learner. Learner-centeredness therefore not only facilitates flexibility of roles, but, if that is to the benefit of the participant, equally allows roles to coincide. Hence, all participants receive the opportunity to contribute to the programme as equal members of the learning community. In

education that intends to develop participants as instrumental teachers, such flexibility and equality is relevant.

Secondly, learning is seen *broadly* or *inclusively*, because that allows multiple perspectives to emerge and co-exist. Due to the nature of the profession, musical learning is the principal theme in a broader frame of reference. However, the exact approach is up to the learner to develop and decide. Every participant is considered expert in her own learning. Any person taking part in the programme is therefore encouraged to interpret and develop her idiosyncratic view on learning. Celebrating the uniqueness of each individual learner, learning is therefore not seen as a one-size-fits-all, but as an agency that reinforces what is already there.

As a result of a dynamic and broad concept of learning, it is the intention of the programme to foster flexibility and reflexivity in the learner and to tap into incentives intrinsically.

Unavoidably, we, as any facilitator in the programme, put forward our personal view on and experiences of learning, stemming from our incentives. As a result of this, the activities we facilitate are already coloured.

What resonates with us as facilitators in this programme, is a holistic view on learning that includes all parts of *being and the life of a (musical) human being*. Within this holistic view, we see a dialogue between, on the one hand, inner processes and, on the other hand, interactions with the environment. The following two paragraphs will further expand these two aspects.

## 2. *Biography as a resource*

A common thread in the teaching curriculum is the opening up and use of individual learners' learning biographies. Inspired by Peter Alheit's biographical learning, which describes learning as the processing of experiences and impulses from the outside on the basis of one's own biography (Alheit, 2009), deriving from prior learning experiences can provide motivation for personal and professional development.

Throughout the curriculum, participants are made aware of their prior learning through reflective practice. In such exercises, participants are encouraged to reflect on their experiences and to try out various perspectives. The focal points in these

exercises are the self or identity, motivation, needs, the development of attitude and agency. These often seem affected by a variety of traits such as self-confidence, resilience, self-efficacy, development of personal or spiritual values, and the self-management of all of these. Reflective exercises are often repeated in a similar fashion across the curriculum so as to allow new understandings to emerge. A biographical learning exercise may also facilitate the imagination of future selves. This encourages participants to reflect on future educational roles.

As a result, the programme wishes to create awareness for biography in learning. It also assumes that such awareness may inspire participants in facilitating learning environments involving others and in developing as individuals themselves.

### *3. Working environments to facilitate learning through social interaction*

The teaching curriculum presumes the idea that individual learning is embedded in a social environment and is fostered through social interaction with others. This is done by means of nurturing *working environments* where participants are invited to share material, collaborate on understanding cases and solving problems, and give and receive structured feedback. A focus on social interaction follows a social theory of learning (Wenger, 2009).

One prime example of a work environment is the lesson series on musical learning processes in which participants work on their self-produced or self-selected learning materials. Such materials can be video, the narration of a case or the description of a contextualised question. Queries that come to the table in relation to the material are usually connected to the areas of effectiveness and appropriateness of teaching strategies, interpersonal contact with particular pupils or motivational aspects of pupils across ages and levels. The concrete cases then provide room for generating associations, sharing knowledge, recalling experience or giving advice. Giving and receiving feedback non-judgmentally and in an argumentative way is a recurrent activity of the meetings. This is occasionally done in a structured way using conversation protocols. Whereas the purpose of a working environment is to encourage participants to independently get hold of their individual learning processes, the meetings are there to foster interdependence and to reflect and collaborate on each other's learning.

Working environments are organised around material that represent the individual learning. Independent as well as interdependent reflection are fostered to generate understanding and to equip students with self-managed and collaborative strategies of learning.

#### *4. Creating a community of learners*

The fourth and final principle that underpins the teaching curriculum concerns a supportive context that nurtures all of the intrinsic processes and interactive forms of learning just described. Such a context provides the individual participant with a freedom where creative thinking and experimentation can take place.

Having experienced the teaching curriculum in this shape for a couple of years now, we start to notice that particular preconditions seem to aid the functioning of such an environment. Three of these seem most prominent. Firstly, transparent communication about the teaching curriculum and its underlying concepts appears to be a requisite so that potential participants can make informed choices. Not only is the mind-set of each participant important, the set of values of the hosting culture or environment, specifically in this case the PCC, is important too, as it affects the nature of and support for the programme. Secondly, there seems to be a tension surrounding the diversity of participants in terms of cultural background, experience, instrument group, musical genre and age. It is our experience that group heterogeneity stirs the speed and intensity of the interactions, which consequently improves the functioning of the concept. Thus, although the concept learning perceives participants as equal, diversity is celebrated and is a resource to the ecosystem. Thirdly, we notice that participants who develop a sense of responsibility towards shared processes often optimize their exploitation of the concept of learning. We also sense that the participants thriving best in the teaching curriculum, are those that endorse learning attitudes characterised by inquisitiveness and sense of agency.

Adding up the elements that seem to compose the context, we consider the instrumental teacher education as a community of learners, where independence and interdependence is fostered and where ultimately the individual learner is invited to take charge of her learning.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>The insights presented here are not exclusive. Others have formulated a similar construct of learning, see Alheit and Dausien (2000).



## **Final thoughts**

In this essay we have presented four principles that underpin the instrumental teacher education programme at the Prince Claus Conservatoire in its current state. We have tried to argue that the programme is permeated with flexibility and reflexivity and that it tries to foster those same qualities in its participants by devising working environments where participants experiment with forms of biographical learning and learning through social interaction. All this is derived from a flexible and broad concept of learning. It is the intention of the programme to nurture such a flexibility and reflexivity within participants intrinsically, so that it becomes innate to all their teaching practices too. This follows the presumption that inquisitive learning forms a basis for responsible instrumental teaching.

Ultimately the programme provides a context for learning that seems to foster independence and interdependence of participants in a community of learners.

Although this essay has given the opportunity to demonstrate some developments of the past decade, from our day-to-day practice we feel that the dialogue is not over and that the programme itself is in constant flux. What is more, we sense that the questions raised around the concepts are as pressing as ever. We feel that we are part of a valuable discussion that is going on both outside and inside the conservatoire, and we wish to reach out to students and colleagues to carry on having this conversation.

Writing this essay has made us reflect on our membership and anchoring in communities at the PCC and the Hanze University of Applied Sciences as a whole. On a concrete note, we wish to involve others to explore and reflect on the concepts that were mentioned here. If we may, we wish to start the dialogue right here by returning to the question that enveloped this essay and by posing it on behalf of our learning communities: *Who are we as learners?*

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