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E-Learning in Music: A Case Study of Learning Group Composing in a Blended Learning Environment

Inkeri Ruokonen[a]*, & Heikki Ruismäki[a]

[a]Department of Teacher Education, University of Helsinki, Finland

Abstract

New educational technology has become an important part of modern teacher education in Finland today. Studying music in Finnish teacher education means both studying music didactics and developing musical skills. With only a limited number of contact lessons in the regular curriculum, new learning environment solutions with new technology are needed. This is a qualitative case study of 16 students' experiences of studying group composing in a blended learning environment. The purpose of the study is to enrich face-to face, teacher-led learning in music with new technology and the e-learning environment and to develop a new technology-based blended learning model for student teachers' needs. The research questions considered the kind of learning experiences students had in studying music, especially group composing in a blended learning environment and how a blended learning environment can help students learning music in a creative learning process. The research is a qualitative approach to students' (16) experiences of a new blended learning environment. The blended learning method used was the rotation method, in which students learn through a schedule of independent online study in the "Rockway" music-e-learning environment, other informal online learning environments, social media and face-to-face classroom time during a 5 credit points music course. The qualitative data has been collected during the studies through group interviews and reflective writings of students' learning experiences that took place after the course. The data has been analysed by content analysis. The major advantage of blended learning is that it offers more opportunities for independent and constructive learning. The experiences of a blended learning environment were positive and the teacher's role was seen as an important and helpful mentor for more independent learning and creative learning in groups. According to students' experiences, the greatest benefit from e-learning was achieved by those who already had some musical background before these studies. The use of information and communication technologies improved students' attitudes towards independent learning concerning their musical skills.

Corresponding author: Tel.: +0-000-000-0000 ; fax: +0-000-000-0000 .
E-mail address: inkeri.ruokonen@helsinki.fi

1. Introduction

In recent years new technology and online learning have become increasingly important components of teacher education in Finland. According to Graham (2003), the blended learning environment is a learning environment that combines face-to-face instruction with technology-mediated instruction. This concept can also be referred to by the term hybrid learning environment, but in this article the term blended learning is used (Graham, 2006; Bonk & Graham). Traditional face-to-face instruction involves interaction between a teacher and students who are in the same location, whereas technology-mediated instruction uses informal or online information and communication technologies (ICT) to mediate the learning experience and interactions without requiring that students and teacher are in face-to-face contact.

Graham (2006) and Graham & Dziuban (2007) introduce three primary reasons for adopting a blended approach to instruction. Firstly, blended learning can improve learning effectiveness; secondly, it can increase access and convenience, and thirdly, it can save money of the department. In this case we adopted blended learning to explore which kind of learning experiences it brings compared to traditional face-to-face learning. The growth of online education in music as well as the lack of the resources and contact lessons has driven us as music educators to find new combined ways to teach music.

For decades peoples have used informal ways to learn and study music and combined them with face-to-face learning whenever possible. Nowadays social networking platforms and online communities form an integral part of most music students' everyday life (Salavuo, 2008). In the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Helsinki, we began to provide and use online learning opportunities in learning music with (or in addition to) face-to-face learning. The student teachers are part of a very heterogeneous group in terms of their musical background studies and skills. The Rockway online learning environment, which is the online programme used in this study, provides video courses at different levels for beginners or advanced students in several instruments, singing, improvisation, musical production and creativity. The purpose of this case study was to enrich face-to face, teacher-led learning in music with new technology and an online-learning environment and develop a new technology-based, blended learning model for student teachers' needs.

2. The blended learning environment—A new way to engage learning

The blended learning pedagogical approach takes advantage of the knowledge building paradigm of Scardamalia and Bereiter (2003). Learning is based on small teams that share in content creation and use online learning. Blended learning solutions have been advocated by many educational researchers (Bereiter 2002; Garrison, Archer and Anderson 2003; McLoughlin and Lee 2007; Bonk and Graham, 2012). Blended learning is learning that mixes various event-based activities: self-paced online learning, live e-learning and face-to-face classroom learning.

According to Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal (2005), blended learning is a pedagogical approach that combines the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with the technologically enhanced active learning potential of the online environment; it does not necessarily conform to a ratio of delivery modalities. Watson (2008) sees that blended learning should be approached as a fundamental redesign of the instructional model with the following characteristics:

1.   a shift from lecture- to student-centred instruction in which students become active;
2.   a focus on interactive learners both online and face-to-face;
3.   an increase in interaction between student-instructor, student-student, student-content, student-informal outside resources, and
4.   an integrated, formative and summary assessment mechanism for students and teacher.

In this view blended learning represents a shift in instructional strategy; blended learning offers the possibility to significantly change how teachers view online learning in the face-to-face setting (Watson 2008; Bonk &Graham 2012).