



## Analysis of constructive practice in instrumental music education: Case study with an expert cello teacher



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Constructive teaching conceptions are related to constructive teaching practices.
- Constructive teaching involves dialogic interactions and student-centered practices.
- This teacher is more constructive in the learning conditions and processes.
- This teacher's student is intrinsically motivated and learns in a complex manner.
- This teacher's student is quite autonomous and has a good self-esteem.

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 1 February 2016  
Received in revised form  
21 July 2016  
Accepted 2 August 2016

#### Keywords:

Case studies  
Constructivism  
Discourse analysis  
Instrumental music education  
Teaching and learning practices  
Teacher-student interaction

### ABSTRACT

A case study was conducted on an expert cello teacher and a 7-year-old student, to analyze the relationships between the teacher's constructive conceptions and instructional practices, by means of the *System for Analyzing the Practice of Instrumental Lessons*. This article describes a constructive teaching model based on: (a) the student's learning processes, (b) fostering conditions that enable learning and (c) achieving long-lasting learning outcomes which are student-driven and applicable to other situations. Results suggest that many of this teacher's practices reflect the constructive profile to which her conceptions are associated.

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## 1. Introduction

Research on instruction and teaching strategies over the past 20 years has shown two paradoxical results. Firstly, we have learned that in order to achieve meaningful, relevant learning in different educational contexts, teaching strategies must be student-centered, such that students will truly be the “engine of learning”—active agents who construct their own knowledge (Bruner, 1996), and in the context of this article, appreciate music through musical understanding (Wiggins, 2007, 2015), e.g. through

scaffolding activities promoting metacognition and self-regulation. Teaching practices should include complex dialogical and cooperative learning strategies that consider student knowledge and capabilities. Excellent teaching which enhances student learning makes schooling effective and improves teacher education and evaluation (Betoret & Artiga, 2004; Skamp & Mueller, 2001) would respond to the assumptions of the constructivist approach, acknowledged by educational psychology researchers.

Secondly, although there is theoretical and empirical consensus on the advantages of constructivist teaching, several studies show that in many educational contexts, teaching practices are still more like a “system of delivery” (in the words of Robinson, 2013) based essentially on direct transmission of knowledge to students. In fact, even if teachers would prefer to adopt more student-centered practices, they indeed recognize that they mostly use teaching strategies focusing on such transmission of knowledge (De Aldama & Pozo, in press; OECD, 2009, 2013). This shows that relationships

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between conceptions and practices are more complex than some studies supposed, as it may be assumed that in most contexts they influence one another (Buehl & Beck, 2015). Identifying the types of practice (activities, strategies, etc.) that characterize constructive teaching may help to extend its use among teachers.

This paper looks at instrumental music teaching, a field in which there is also a gap between theory and practice. In the music classroom it seems that even though teachers are aware of the theoretical assumptions underlying constructivist models, very often they are unable to put them into practice successfully (e.g. Gaunt, 2008; Pratt, 1992). Relevant research could contribute to bridging this gap. One research topic would be thoroughly analyzing real constructive learning situations that could serve as examples for in-service and pre-service instrumental music teachers. Another would be analyzing models of constructivist and complex teaching practices as sources for reflective teaching. Herein we describe the general features of a complex, student-centered practice in instrumental music teaching-learning situations through a case study of an experienced cello teacher who holds a constructive conception and a 7-year-old beginner student, during four consecutive one-to-one lessons. Our aim is to determine whether this teacher's practices are consistent with the complexity expected from a constructive teacher of a musical instrument in comparison to more traditional or teacher-centered practices.

### 1.1. *The difficulty of changing teaching conceptions and practices in the music classroom*

The gap between educational theory and classroom practices was revealed not only in the latest Teaching and Learning International Surveys (OECD, 2009, 2013), but also in many other studies. For instance, Liu (2011) found that 79% of 1340 elementary school teachers of technology held constructivist beliefs but used traditional practices. Lim and Chai (2008) found similar results for computer-mediated lessons in English, mathematics and science. Author et al. (in press) asked teachers about possible use of information and communications technology (ICT) in the classroom, and found that their answers displayed more constructive beliefs than did their descriptions of how they actually used ICT in classroom activities. To sum up, Fives and Buehl (2012, p. 481) claimed with regard to the relationship between conceptions and practices that “for every study that offers evidence to support the relation an equal number suggest that beliefs are not consistent with practices”. Buehl and Beck (2015, p. 71) conclude after a thorough review of 257 studies on the relationship between conceptions (or beliefs) and practices: “there was never a perfect correspondence between beliefs and practices, nor a complete lack of relationship”.

In the field of music there has also been much research on the different conceptions of teaching and learning held by teachers and students (e.g., Bautista, Pérez Echeverría, & Pozo, 2010; López-Íñiguez, Pozo, & de Dios, 2014; Marín, Scheuer, & Pérez Echeverría, 2013). Detailed analyses of the types and evolution of these conceptions show that they range from more traditional or transmissive and teacher-centered to more constructive and student-centered (see Fives, Lacatena, & Gerard, 2015; Hofer & Pintrich, 2002), which would affect the ways in which students construct knowledge, experience learning and make conceptual connections to learning contents rather than to learning processes (*sensu* Wiggins, 2015; Wiggins & Wiggins, 1997).

This paper focuses on the main features of the constructive conception held by teachers and learners regarding teaching and learning. These features are organized according to certain psychological assumptions. Following studies on conceptual change that identify some basic epistemological (Vosniadou, Vamvakoussi,

& Skopeliti, 2008) and ontological principles (e.g. Chi, 1992) that underlie students' and teachers' ideas in different domains, we assume that a constructive approach to learning and teaching requires a change in three main principles. Certain *epistemological assumptions* need to be accepted such that knowledge would be a construction developed by the subject, who constructs own and personal models to interpret reality (which may be more or less appropriate). According to *ontological assumptions*, learning could be conceived in terms of complex systems (e.g. self-regulation processes), internally managed by the learner in order to build and develop abilities or strategies. Finally, according to *conceptual assumptions*, there would be a complex, interactive relationship among learning conditions, learning processes and learning outcomes (Pozo et al., 2006).

Also, following learner-centered instructional approaches showing that learning and teaching must be oriented to reconstruct students' conceptions, attitudes and strategies within a constructivist framework (e.g., Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Sawyer, 2006), if we want to promote more student-centered instruction, teacher training strategies should be designed to promote more constructive conceptions or beliefs in teachers. In recent years, there has been increasing interest in studying teachers' and students' ideas about how teaching and learning take place. It is believed that these ideas may influence (1) teachers' classroom practices (Hermans, Tondeur, van Braak, & Valcke, 2008; Tikva, 2010) as a result of learning experiences in different social contexts (Olson & Bruner, 1996), (2) students' conceptions and focus on learning (López-Íñiguez & Pozo, 2014a, 2014b; Pramling, 1996; Tikva, 2010) and (3) students' commitment to lessons (Schroeder et al., 2011). Although various case studies describe the general features of teaching in the field of instrumental music, we have not found any case studies describing teachers' practices in depth according to their conceptions of teaching and learning.

The closest empirical studies on music related to this topic are Pratt (1992), who looked at the relationships between perception and practice in 20 teachers during individual instrument lessons and singing lessons, and Gaunt (2008), who analyzed the perceptions of 20 teachers at a conservatoire regarding aims, context and processes in individual instrument lessons. Both these studies found that although teachers stated that they were very interested in teaching their students autonomy and self-confidence, their practice showed transmissive, non-student-centered teaching. Gaunt suggested that this may be partly explained by the professional isolation in which instrument teachers often find themselves at educational centers. Similarly, Mills and Smith (2003) assessed 134 instrument teachers whose aims were that students should have fun, participate and make progress during the lessons, whereas their students' perceptions were entirely different. The same was observed by Rife, Schnek, Lauby, and Lapidus (2001) in their study on children's satisfaction with private instrument lessons.

The abovementioned studies are general and looked at superficial (albeit important) features of instrument lessons. However, we are specifically interested in describing teaching-learning practices which are either student- and process-centered (constructive) or teacher- and content-centered (traditional or transmissive). The following section describes more replicative, teacher-centered classroom practices which are farthest from the assumptions of the constructive conception and from approaching the student's world in a “friendly” manner.

### 1.2. *Studies on effective (and not so effective) teaching practices in music classrooms*

Various studies have analyzed teacher-student relationships in

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