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Abstract

The article communicates an investigation of how collaborative learning is constituted in a PhD-course, namely Collaborative learning in music educational settings. The course was organized and run in a way that wished to investigate, develop and encourage collaborative learning among students and teachers at postgraduate level. Material produced and analysed included logbooks, assignments, peer-response, after-thoughts, and a Facebook discussion-thread. The results are presented as descriptions of the constituent parts of collaborative learning occurring in the “rooms” of the course. The results show the importance of structure as well as awareness when it comes to roles and kinds of participation.

Keywords: Collaborative learning, music education, PhD-course, Hannah Arendt, communities of practice

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Introduction

This article describes an investigation of how collaborative learning is constituted in a PhD-course, namely *Collaborative Learning in Music Educational Settings*. The course was organized and run in a way that wished to investigate, develop and encourage collaborative learning at postgraduate level. Collaborative learning was initially defined as learning processes where individuals learn together through common action, transformation and reflection. Consequently, course work was performed in the spirit of action research, where the course per se was seen as a starting point for collaborative reflection as a method. This starting point was expected to constitute a functional base for mirroring the music educational milieu as investigating, explorative, safe, and welcoming for the students' and teachers' learning, and for testing how existing resources and prerequisites could encourage the development of the participants' academic development. Traditionally, PhD-courses include individual reading of literature, individually prepared seminars and individually performed written tasks that in the best cases are reflected upon by a course mate as examination method. Digital learning platforms are most often used for distribution of different kinds of texts. Assignment-performance within the actual course was aimed at investigating if the collaborative approach that constituted the theme of the course – a way to offer knowledge development in close collaboration with others – could pervade the design, as well as investigating into what consequences this could have for common and individual learning processes. Earlier studies that focus collaborative learning among PhD-students in arts education show that sharing of texts, thoughts, and values in safe and curious environments develop academic skills, skills that function in becoming a member of and developing intellectual communities and communities of practice (Walker et al, 2008;

Constantino, 2010; Ferm Almqvist & Wennergren, 2016; Ferm Thorgersen & Wennergren, 2010). Westerlund and Karlsen (2013) who have investigated design of collaborative PhD-education in music education state that social participation in the spirit of Wenger (1998) is not enough to “spur development and make things happen” (p. 98). In relation to higher music education, Allsup (2003) in turn underlines that it is precarious to act like we are used to inside conservatoires and universities – if things are viewed to exist within a predetermined structure, people tend to meet the task in a more conceptual than exploratory manner. Peoples’ preformed concepts becomes hard to mould with others’, and instead of collaboration it leads to a bunch of individuals with severe problems in sharing (Ekberg & Ferm Almqvist, 2016). Furthermore, Allsup shows that building communities where participants are concerned about other’s feelings creates surprising results. The concept of peer learning, for example, had less to do with the transmission of skills and more to do with the process of discovery. The reason for this could be that in higher education, music institutions have not focused on creating reflective spaces. Knowledge exchange has mostly occurred informally, and instrumental and vocal teachers are engaged primarily with their own immediate field – thus with no interdisciplinary interest. Teachers need a reflective space that is *supported* by management and culture in the workplace (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013). Researchers/project leaders have to create trustful surroundings and a supportive atmosphere for collaboration to happen (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013; Allsup 2003; Ferm Thorgersen, 2014) Successful learning scenarios require a level of trust, acts of reciprocity and caring. As Allsup (2003) states: “The links between freedom, democracy, community, caring, and even friendship are strong ones – they disavow teaching methods that oppress rather than liberate, that separate more than join (p. 35). Therefore; it is of interest to go deeper into and try to understand what collaborative learning among PhD-students and teachers

in higher education could be, and in our case we primarily draw upon Hannah Arendt's definition of democracy based on her philosophical concepts of common sense. She underlines the relation between communication, individual and common growth as well as meaning-making, as a base for a democratic society. Further on Arendt stresses that communication is for all, that all voices have the right to be heard and that plurality is a precondition individual and common growth. Lastly, the arena for communication where human beings become clear to others and themselves has to be seen as a public space according to Arendt (1958). In addition; we use theories of Walker et al. (2008) and Isaacs's (1993, 2001) action theory of dialogue together with Slagter van Tyron and Bishop's thoughts on role differentiation and role schemas (2009) to be able to say something about collaborative learning processes.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to make visible and get insight into collaborative learning in music educational settings, and through activities among PhD students and professors. The following research questions were formulated:

- 1.) What constitutes collaborative learning in the specific setting?
- 2.) What characterizes individual learning in the collaborative setting?
- 3.) What prerequisites are demanded to encourage and enable a milieu for collaborative learning?

Description of the Course Design and Context

The course *Collaborative Learning in Music Education* is a five-week postgraduate course at the Institution of Art, Communication and Education at Luleå University of Technology (LTU). The participants were four PhD students in music education (three internal and one external) who are also teachers, and four professors. One of the professors functioned as

course leader and examiner, and was responsible for the planning and proceedings of the course activities. The course took place during fall 2013 and included five full day course seminars. Between the course seminars the participants were encouraged to treat and prepare the assigned literature in different collaborative ways, mostly virtually, and at the actual seminars different collaborative activities were tried and explored. The participants were also expected to write individual logbooks regarding their learning processes during the course and share and comment these. Peer response and collaborative writing also constituted course content. The final tasks were an individual paper, where the content should be connected to the PhD students' own research, and a collaborative paper, which constitutes the current text. Most of the participants travelled to the institution to participate in the course. Outside the seminars, coffee breaks, dinners, and other forms of socializing functioned as informal extensions of the course activities for further sharing and communication. In addition to the course design, the students started a Facebook™ group chat room where they held discussions about course-related topics like structure and content of the course, but also non course-related subjects about their everyday-life events as doctoral students, music teachers, musicians, and family members. In addition, Skype™ was used for collaboration regarding the writing of this article.

The expected learning outcomes of the course were that the students should be able to describe and critically reflect upon the concept collaborative learning and its function and relevance in different music educational settings in connection to recent research, describe and critically discuss varied epistemological and theoretical foundations and their consequences for music educational practice, relate recent research about collaborative learning to their own music educational research and carry out collaborative writing and peer response, virtually as well as non-virtually, resulting in papers passable in relevant academic contexts.

Themes that were treated in the course were for example; *collaborative musical learning, mutual learning from a democratic perspective, critical friends, quality conceptions in collegial dialogues, social and collaborative aspects of music consumption, and teachers' collaborative study groups*-- all critically investigated and connected to different epistemological and ontological starting points and contexts (Allsup, 2003; Ferm Thorgersen, 2014; Gaunt & Westerlund, 2012; O'Hara & Brown, 2006; Gullberg, 2010; Stanley, 2009; Zandén, 2010).

Method

The investigation had an action research, or scholarship of teaching and learning-inspired, approach. By exploring and improving the educational practice simultaneously (Ryan, 2013), the impetus was to improve practice and understandings within the contexts in which these understandings were developed and implemented (Kemmis, 2010), with specific focus on collaborative learning. During the course the material that was produced, as mentioned above, was integrated in the course activities. This material constitutes the base for analysis, and includes the logbooks of the PhD students together with related comments, the Facebook™ discussion thread, documented tasks and peer-response as well as documented after-thoughts. The purpose and research question for the study was developed collaboratively during the course, not at the beginning of the writing process. The participants took on different tasks. The PhD students were divided into pairs that approached different parts of the generated material, while the course convenor analysed the organisation course material including after-thoughts and another senior lecturer took on the task of investigating the literature and connected theory. During two days, activities of action – analysis and writing – and common reflection and discussions in larger and smaller groups were alternated. The texts generated were analysed

collaboratively through an inductive, theory-generating content analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The analysis of the logbooks conducted by two of the PhD students was performed in ten different steps. In the first step, individual readings of the logbooks and marking of keywords were made. Step two entailed a discussion between the students regarding key words, and converting these into categories. Here, the Facebook™ group emerged as an informal part of the logbook, and a decision was made that one of the students would analyse the Facebook™ group conversations while the other would continue to analyse the formal logbook. In step three, a new single reading was implemented, in which the categories of step two were placed in the foreground. Step four was a new discussion between the two PhD students, analysing the formal and informal logbooks and thereby developing the categories further and adding new questions regarding the material. During step five, all participants of the collaborative course met for further problematization of the emerged categories and questions. A new reading followed this (step six), also providing a presentation of results. Parallel to this, the seventh step was carried out with a continued analysis of the logbooks and new discussions between the two PhD students. This resulted in a new presentation of results (step eight). Step nine was a new discussion within the collaborative course group, resulting in the tenth and final step: producing a final text.

The second pair of PhD students, the ones analysing documented tasks and peer-response, chose to work side by side, intertwining separate tasks of analysis and translation with dialogue and discussion. This way themes, categorizations and conceptualizations emerged, and after common discussions with the rest of the participants, these were directly inserted directly into the result and altered and merged with those from the first pair of PhD students. Within this

process of analysis, the analogy of different “rooms” for collaboration appeared and contributed to a structure of the final result.

Theory

An intellectual community has, according to Walker et al. (2008), four specific characteristics. It has a shared purpose, “a community-wide commitment to help students develop into the best scholars possible so that they, in turn, may contribute to the growth and creation of knowledge” (p. 125). It is diverse and multigenerational; including multiple viewpoints and healthy debate with students integrated as junior colleagues. It is flexible and forgiving in that it encourages risk taking and supports opportunities for experimentation. It is respectful and generous as the members of the intellectual community act with civility and respect and are connected through a shared goal. Members are generous by sharing opportunities, resources, and connections, a generosity that “derives from the assumption that all members of the community ought to be helped to succeed, and, indeed, that other community members bear a measure of responsibility for helping foster that success” (Walker et al., 2008, p. 125-127).

One way to look further into such a community and its characteristics is the crucial starting point in Hannah Arendt’s thinking of the balance between *Vita Activa* (the action life), consisting of labour, work and action, and *Vita Contemplativa* (the philosophical thinking life) consisting of different ways of thinking. Arendt investigated possible connections between the two. She meant that *Vita Activa* takes place in the world wherein we are born, through speech and action, where what she chooses to call actors and audience depend on each other. To reach *common sense*, we also need to step back, Arendt says, and think, imagine, value and reflect – activities that constitute *Vita Contemplativa* (Arendt, 1958). Before going deeper into the ideas

of common sense, and the local room where human beings exist dependent on each other, *Vita Activa* and *Vita contemplativa* will be presented more in detail.

Vita Activa consists of; Labour (animal laborans) which focus on human beings survival activities; Work (homo faber) which contains the creation of necessary things that can give profit, which provides safety but is also mandatory and is not in harmony with nature, and finally; Action – (the political life) where human beings are seen as political beings. Actions at this level do not have any goals in themselves – they concern economics, politics and art, and they contribute to something lasting.

The political life is characterized by equality and pluralism. Human beings are born into the political life; they don't need any other qualifications to participate in what Arendt calls the good life. Together, people create political and economic institutions in society, which in turn become carriers of history. Arendt underlines that norms are created in cooperation by active human beings where language functions as a pre-condition. In the political life, human beings meet as equals in a public space where they speak, act and freely express their opinions. Through human actions and appearance in public, things get “real”, and through conversations and actions *with* each other the *who* appears in relation to a common and meaningful world – a world where people are related as well as separated. Consequently, equality concerns mutual recognition and respect of each other's rights, not only each other's existence. In being with others in the common, given world individual existence becomes possible, but there is also a need to reflect upon activities, a need for *Vita Contemplativa*.

According to Arendt, thinking is about dealing with objects that are absent, removed from direct sense perception. Hence, an object of thought is always a representation, something or somebody that is absent, just present in the form of an image. Thinking is equally dangerous

to all creeds and, by itself, does not bring forth any new creed. *However, non-thinking, which seems so recommendable a state* for political and moral affairs, also has its dangers. By shielding people against the dangers of examination, it teaches them to hold fast to whatever the prescribed rules of conduct may be at a given time in a given society (Arendt, 1971, p. 436 italics original).

Arendt underlines that philosophers, who primarily cope with thinking, have separated themselves from the communalism that she stresses as man's most human condition. She further expresses that as the philosopher turns away most of the perishable world of illusions to enter the world of eternal truths, s/he turns away from one or the other, and withdraw into her-/himself.

Thereby, the responsibility to respond to the appearance of something or someone is what she calls "thinking". This kind of thinking cannot be acquired in conventional ways; it is not a capacity for reflexive problem solving, or a skill or a strategy: rather it is a search for meaning. Thought, therefore – although it inspires the highest worldly productivity of humans – is by no means their prerogative. It begins to assert itself as a source of inspiration only where the human overreaches himself, as it were, and begins to produce useless things, objects which are unrelated to material or intellectual wants, to man's physical needs no less than to his thirst for knowledge. Cognition on the other hand, like fabrication itself, is a process with a beginning and end, whose usefulness can be tested, and which, if it produces no results, has failed (Arendt, 1958). Hence, thinking is no prerogative of the few but an ever-present possibility for everyone.

Through the meeting between *Vita Activa* and *Vita Contemplativa*, common sense is constituted, and this condition is something human beings strive towards – in other words inter-subjective validity. If we step back and watch the world from the outside, we lose our common sphere (the common sense), which implies the need to combine actions and reflection. To reach common sense, we need to take into account different backgrounds and experiences. Otherwise

individuals can be excluded from traditions, lose their power of initiative and feel rootless. If we lose common sense, we cannot value the world we share. Common sense also includes several senses in interplay in experiencing of the world. We need contact with other people's sense-connected common sense, which in turn presupposes curiosity and respect, the ability to imagine and an engaged partaking in creating processes, where we also go into each other's worlds of imagination.

Hence, an important starting point is the right to make oneself heard and be listened to. Holistic being in this setting is a way of being where *Vita Activa* and *Vita Contemplativa* are balanced, which in turn can be seen as a prerequisite for holistic learning, where 'all' have the possibility to experience and embody forms of expression and become able to handle the world. Plurality is seen as a crucial point of departure, but the challenge is to really include everyone.

This view of democracy requires of human beings the courage to give up the position they hold and to be engaged in an uncomfortable position that is not theirs. This act of 'disposition' is freedom, and it cannot exist without the other. The impossibility of relying on and trusting oneself totally is the price that has to be pay for freedom. It is in this way that we have to understand democracy based on Arendt's thoughts, as the possibility of transforming the self, of putting the self in question.

To be able to experience the other, interaction is a necessity. Isaacs (1993, 2001/2007) sees intersubjective communication as a field of interaction, and stresses that the quality thereof is dependent on a set of choices that human beings make, both consciously and without awareness, something that mirrors Arendt's theory of a *Vita Activa* and a *Vita Contemplativa*. Isaacs (2001/2007) sees the creation of a dialogue as a series of phases, or "containers", each

involving “skilful choices and the navigation of crises for both individuals and the collective” (p. 741) as pictured in Figure 1:

Figure 1. Evolution of Dialogue

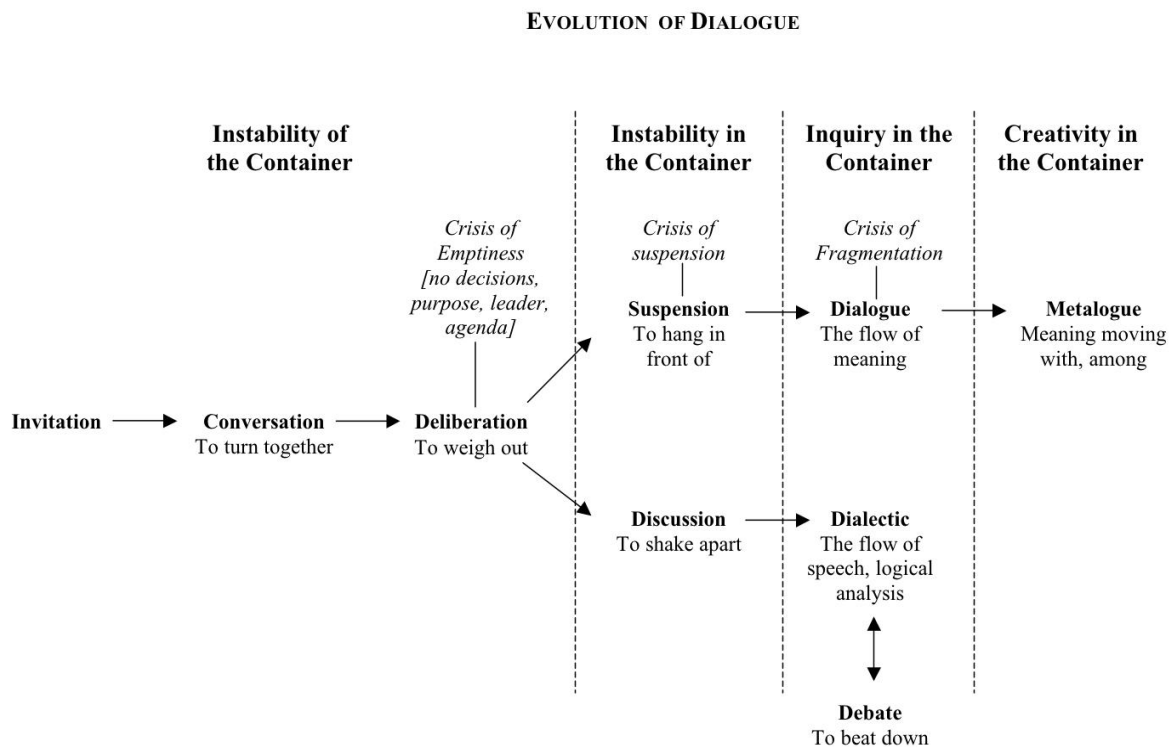


Figure 1. Evolution of dialogue according to Isaacs (1993, 2001/2007) illustrating the transition from instability of the container to creativity in the container.

Each stage of the dialogue process contains critical elements and forces, not only concerning physically perceptible actions but with an emphasis on “the nature of the thought processes that underlie what is appearing in the group, the quality of the individual and collective reasoning, and the quality of their collective attention” (Isaacs, 2001/2007, p. 741). Within the *Inquiry Container* for example, the objective is no longer to give feedback to others. Instead, participants are asked to reflect upon their own impulses and projections – “to listen to oneself in

essence” (p. 742). At this stage, inquiry into aspects of a collective pattern is encouraged, grounded in personal experience.

The choices we make regarding dialogue affect the learning process: do we allow ourselves and others to examine and change underlying assumptions or theories behind our actions, enabling what Isaacs (1993) calls *double-loop learning*? To actually reach some type of collaborative learning, this process – open but directed at effectiveness – is not sufficient: “Without learning about learning [this double-loop] cycle is likely to repeat itself” (Isaacs, 1993, p. 30). Hence, we need to learn about the context in which we collaborate, thus initiating a possible *triple-loop* type of learning. This learning method opens inquiry into underlying “why/s”, and permits insight into the nature of a paradigm itself, not merely an assessment of which paradigm is superior. Thus we are able not only to answer the question about what alternative actions and reflected views of a situation could be taken, but also the following: What is leading me and others to have a predisposition to learn in this way at all? Why do we have, and set these goals? The importance of these two questions are in our case paramount, not at least in planning and managing a course like ours and its assignments – setting up “safely dangerous environments” (Isaacs, 1993, p. 38) for (collaborative) learning by risk-taking and sharing while feeling safe (cf. Arendt, 1971).

Returning to dialogue, Isaacs (1993) sees this as representative of triple-loop learning. Maintaining a dialogue involves learning about the context and nature of the processes by which we form a paradigm, and thus take action. This stresses the power of collective observation of patterns of collective thought that otherwise risk speeding by us, or influence our behaviour without our noticing. Is learning then collaborative just because you give commentary? In our case, this lies within the type of feedback and reaction to input as described above, but is also

related to relationships and role taking: how well do the participants know each other and for how long have they known each other? What roles do you have, take or are given within the group, in an assignment or within the different rooms?

Slagter van Tyron and Bishop (2009) talk about “role differentiation and role schemas” (p. 297), where participants of a group develop two types of roles related to tasks and socio-emotional well-being respectively and *agency* (control/submission) as well as *communion* (grades of connectedness) – roles that are traditionally constructed by physical, real-life meetings (see Fig. 2). In online environments, as sometimes occurred in our case, the only thing that changes in comparison to physical meetings is the channel used by participants to communicate, and that the sharing of personal information is voluntary – the latter as a mean to develop group structures and roles.

Figure 2. Role differentiation and role schemas

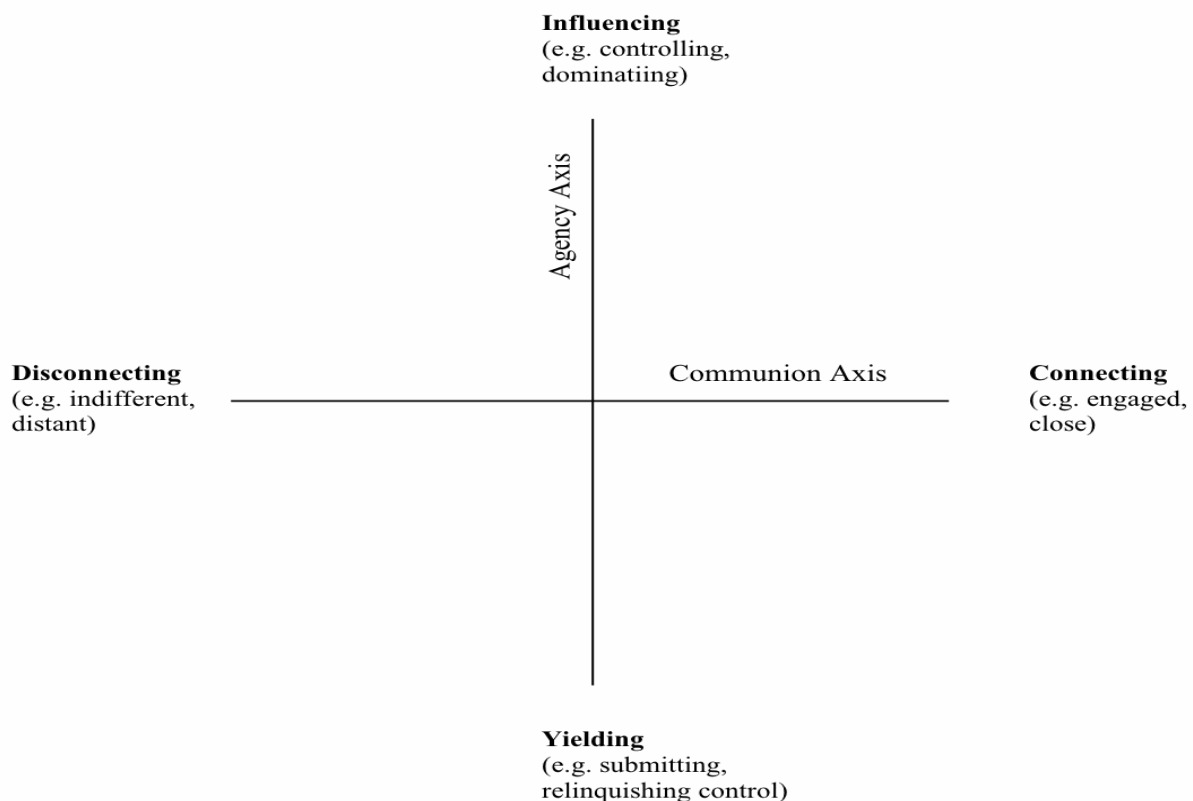


Figure 2. Role differentiation and schemas according to Slagter van Tyron and Bishop (2009).

Collaborative Learning as Constituted in Shared Rooms

The results are presented as descriptions of the constituent parts of collaborative learning occurring in the different, shared “rooms” of the course: the online assignment and logbook rooms, the Facebook chat room and the physical room. Within these rooms, course assignments and the efforts working with these were shared (within and) by different participant constellations.

Categories Regarding Collaboration in the Assignment Rooms

The eight assignments included in the course can be divided into two categories regarding collaboration: *collaborative execution* of assignments and *collaborative themes* within the assignments, i.e. the course material addressing collaboration (text, image, video). Six of the assignments have been based on some form of preparation, either reading of literature or as in one case the analysis of videos documenting teaching situations and the (individual) learning of a piano piece. Writing this article collaboratively was yet another assignment, as well as that of the doctoral students individually writing a final text/examination piece. Noteworthy is the aspect of freedom in choosing literature, or parts of this, thereby enabling collaborative planning and reading of books and articles. For instance, by dividing text chapters between the participants, everyone in the group was forced to reflect upon methods and modes of sharing the material contents. This called for responsibility and awareness of aspects regarding both preparation as well as reception of the content, different from that of a more traditional, “mutual” reading since the presenter(s) had to take into account that the others had not read the same parts. There was also a shared responsibility to cover the contents of chosen publications. By communicating

summaries and reflections during seminars, creating not only a unity of parts, the group could collaboratively construct an interpretation of these.

In the construction of assignments and classes, what kind of quality within a course assignment calls for collaboration, i.e. what level of *collaborativity* is embedded within an assignment? In what way(s) are participants expected to learn? The themes of collaborative learning within the course range from the individual to *learning from/together with others, others will learn from me* and *we will learn from each other*.

The textual or visual content of the assignments were in four cases of a collaborative nature, while one focused – if not explicitly – what we choose to call *collaborativity*. One of the assignments, the analysis of videos, depicted teaching situations that were strongly non-collaborative within group settings (based on a method called *Whole Brain Teaching*).

In general, the assignments prepared for and executed during seminars have followed a similar structure and setup. These can be divided into three steps: *gathering, execution* and *presentation*. In all of the assignments, the gathering of data had initially been done individually. Thereby the initial phase of learning had been set within the group. The execution relates to the work concerning assignments, which in one case – this article – has been fully collaborative. One assignment was partly collaborative (text analysis of Brändström, Thorgersen and Söderman (2012) and Gullberg (2010) while the six remaining assignments have been executed without collaborative elements as sharing of experiences and reflections or the creation of a discussion or dialogue prior to the seminars. During these seminars, presentations of assignments had generally been of a collaborative nature, pending from strong to weak in relation to role shifting: the course convenor in some cases assigned, and thereby enabled, the students to become convenors by calling for the presentation formats to be of a collaborative nature. These

assignments called for reflective thinking regarding forms of participation and learning in a collaborative setting. Examples ranged from “Speed reflection pairs” to “Post-it collages”

One question that arises is if collaboration really is about understanding the other – to put oneself in the shoes of another, trying to understand what they understand – or if it is more of a question of understanding oneself and the task at hand? This will be elaborated upon further in the discussion, but what is clear is that we have come to be aware of a balance between the collaborative and the mutual, i.e. to be a participator and/or to be an attendee. This is related to the understanding of goals and ways and efforts made to reach these, something that became visible through one of the tools for collaborative learning used during the course.

Collaborative Learning in the Logbook Room

In an ongoing, parallel process throughout the course, all participants (including senior staff participants) were assigned to write and share a logbook regarding learning processes and outcomes within the course. These were posted in an online course room and commented on according to a set turn-taking, while everyone was supposed to read all logs – a procedure that somewhat wavered towards the end.

Through the use of logbooks, it became obvious that the different mandatory course assignments created a movement within the group of PhD students. Within the logbook room, they used conceptualization in order to enable a collaborative learning at the same time as they used the collaborative assignments to conceptualize. They reflected upon and discussed the different topics and concepts within the literature, but also created other ones as well. In doing so, they went in and out of processes of individual learning and collaborative learning. Thus it became clear that it was not within the individual work on assignments the collaboration took

place, instead the individual assignments created a foundation and background for the collaboration in itself.

All participants reflected upon their own learning processes in relation to understanding as an overall concept. The PhD students discussed how taking notes was used alongside reading to achieve deeper knowledge, a need felt in order to be able to conceptualize. They all used the written word in some form when they created their own collaborative performance of their understanding, developed through work with the different assignments.

One interesting discovery was that the design of the assignment strongly influenced the level of collaboration. Even though the official assignment of writing logbooks was meant to create a communicative space where knowledge could grow continuously, the PhD students did not act upon it except in one case. The written communication ended after the initial comments from the response-assigned peer. Instead, the PhD-students collaborated within their own space (via Facebook Messenger™). The tasks created to enable collaboration were not implemented within the PhD group. It occurred that the individual ways of learning and collaboration have a bigger role than the assignment itself.

Furthermore, a well-defined structure showed to be needed in order to create a progressive, collaborative space. Another issue that strongly affected the degree of collaboration was the time and workload issue: the longer the course continued and the more stressed the participants became, the less they collaborated within the given assignments, falling back on familiar and secure behaviour and routines.

Collaborative Learning in the Facebook Messenger™ Chat Room

Two weeks after the first course meeting, one of the students created a closed group chat room via Facebook™ and Facebook Messenger™, an online social network service and smart

phone application, and invited the other students to join in. In her invitation, she formulated that the chat room could be used for discussions about the course, “Perhaps juggle ideas about our views on the assignments and what should be done. What could be improved in structure, to share theories before we meet on sight” (Annette, 17/9, FB). All invited students accepted Annette’s invitation, and communication in the chat room began. During the three-month progression of the course, the four PhD students made about 900 posts in the chat room, with a fairly equal amount of participation from everyone. The chat room conversations, based on voluntary participation, were at first structured in accordance with Annette’s invitation. Later on, a transformation created collaboratively by the students turned the room into a place where their communication was expanded due to individual initiatives on behalf of all participants. This communication took other forms than within the collaborative course assignments and meetings, and taking place in an environment free from course teachers’ reading, interactions or assessments. The characteristics of the chat room conversations were similar to “school corridor conversations”: a mixture of conversations of course-related and non-course-related topics that involved the whole group. Several tools were used for communicating within the chat room: written text, pictures, symbols (such as emoticons, digital “stickers” or “emojis”) as well as links to YouTube™ and other sites on the internet. Apart from the text, these tools were mainly used for non-course-related topics or for giving praise and affection to someone or all in the group (smileys, hugs and so on). The conversations in the chat room were mainly centred around structure and contents of the course (course-related) and the participants’ everyday life-events and experiences as doctoral students, music teachers, musicians and family members (non-course-related). One continuously appearing aspect in the chat room conversations was the feeling of lack of time in relation to deadlines – both in connection to course-related and non-

course-related topics. The chat room seemed to function as an enabler for collaboration during the course-work for the doctoral student group. By providing (themselves with) a voluntary alternative to the mandatory rooms of the course, the students' collaborative skills could evolve aided by their social encounters.

Collaboration in the Physical Room

Four times during the course, the participants came together at the institution primarily to share and discuss understandings based on the assignment work. At the end of these sessions, the participants were encouraged to make written reflections regarding tasks and lessons. What became obvious in these documented after-thoughts was the problem of really setting aside and leaving one's own opinions and values, to share and not at least take in others'. In the beginning, the words and concepts used did not have mutual/shared meaning, or were not understood in common ways. One of the participants expressed that she read what the others had written, but read it with an automatic output from herself, "I got stuck in myself as a concept". At the centre of the lessons was another aspect: the knowledge. Here it turned out that these "concepts of myself" and the lines of thought are broken, and developed. "To be challenged to develop – to not be an island". In the physical meeting, the students revealed that they became aware of and saw their own views, and these became clearer to themselves through the eyes of others. One example was the blurred understanding of literature which became clear in the meetings with others' (equally) blurred understanding.

It also became clear that collaborative learning is situated, e.g. through the structure of tasks as well as the organisation of the physical meetings. Furthermore, the virtual platform had to be crucial to encourage collaborative work, as encouraging and challenging response through discussions in a safe setting was central.

One important question when it comes to creating prerequisites for/enabling collaborative learning is, how to actually get lost and dare to go out into “the nothing” to be able to contribute to something new and shared? Also of importance was the insight into, openness for and acceptance of collaborative learning leading to unknown results. Bravery, presence, inclusion, authentic participation, challenges, in addition to adhering to set frames and agreed upon rules turned out to be crucial aspects of collaborative learning processes.

Commentary Characteristics Obvious in the Different Rooms

Analysing the collaborative learning outcomes of the course, we feel some aspects are worthy of further consideration. These include the commentary characteristics of the different rooms as well as the area of role taking and role shifting.

Some of the assignments and actions during seminars have included commentary actions in relation to written material and/or statements, continuously as well as on isolated occasions. In what ways could these be seen as collaborative, i.e. how have these influenced and affected collaboration and collaborativity? Analysing material from the course, different characteristics appear regarding commentary. Comments have been:

Strife towards further dialogue

- Descriptive/elaborative (in relation both to the subject and assignment texts)
- Problematizing/conducive (directly and/or indirectly), i.e. commentary revealing/sharing uncertainty of one’s own competence.

Not openly towards a further dialogue

- Confirming

- Supportive (along the lines of “don’t be so hard on yourself”, “good work” etc.)
- Orienting (getting to know each/the other, sharing of tastes)
- Assertive

With unclear definition

- Descriptive/non-elaborative
- Contrasting – “I do not see it that way” – both in the form of statements and (rhetorical) questions

These characteristics could be seen as enabling collaboration. Locating them as actions within the frame of interpersonal relationships (see Fig. 1), they call for responses moving along the communion and agency axes. The collaborative outcome is thereby dependent on the type of reaction/response.

The questions that arose during our analysis were if there can be degrees of collaboration, and if so: what are the constituents that control these? Regarding the first question, our data analysis gives us a positive answer. The other calls for reflection regarding both the type of interaction as well as openness and awareness regarding *agency* as well as *communion*: how far along the respective axis do you find and place yourself (see Fig. 2)? What tools do you then use to establish your position, eliciting collaboration and collaborative learning? In the case of this course, some of the assignments were, as mentioned earlier, motivated as they should encourage collaborative actions, but communication occurred mostly through written and spoken dialogue and (although our physical meetings included body language as well as formal presentations). According to Isaacs (1993), you have choices regarding what type of dialogue you create. What also became clear is that call and response is not enough to constitute collaboration, what is

needed to establish what Isaacs (2001/2007) calls *constructive discussions* and *generative dialogues* is call-response-response, which accordingly have to be encouraged and instructed in the assignments.

Discussion

From Hannah Arendt's point of view individual backgrounds and experiences make extensions of the local room as a course setting, possible. Here the weight of action, reflection and common sense become crucial; to be visible and make one's voice heard, to express ideas and to create common thought. Arendt stresses that we have to review critically, and see through others' perspective to be able to create our own meaning. Consequently, diversity constitutes a prerequisite for the individual, social interactions which create unique human beings. At the same time the public sphere, for example PhD-courses, are created by unique individuals who in collaboration can create new chains of actions, and by that widen the sphere to become something new. What has been obvious in the investigation is the need of structure for this kind of collaboration to happen, the need of awareness when it comes to which roles the participants have and go into, and finally what different kinds of participation and interaction must take place to be able to talk about collaboration as common sense.

Structure of rooms for collaborative learning as common sense thereby becomes crucial for the desired processes to occur. Clear instructions about how to prepare, interact, and reflect as well as with whom, what time, and in how many turns must well thought out and communicated beforehand. In addition; the themes in the literature and the learning objectives provide structure to the development of new perspectives on collaborative learning. This structure provides the framework for developing old and new concepts as well as individual and collaborative reflection. For example, it is not enough to respond upon a participant's task assignment to create

new common understanding, the conversation must include comments upon comments in the spirit of curiosity and care. The collaborative aspects embedded in course planning, assignments, execution, participation demand dialogue, is time-consuming and also requires (at a minimum) three-turn communication: statement – response – new statement (Isaacs, 2001/2007).

Arendt further stresses that the coming together of plurality of persons into different roles based on who they are is what makes changes in lived reality possible. Such a view function as a prerequisite for collaborative academic learning, where *all* have the possibility to experience and embody theories in relation to practice for future success in the academic world. The structure also indicates what roles the participants will go into in different phases, or parts of the course. Subsequently, the one who sets the frames goes into other organizers role, striving towards creating space for collaborative learning as common sense. However; this can also limit possible ways of participating, which we will come back to later.

This can be compared to a traditional University course that has a set hierarchy with leaders/convenors (e. g. lecturers, examiners) and participants (e. g. students or other kinds of (temporary or full-time) participants who are not being examined). The work within the course Collaborative Learning in Music Education has called for an evolving type of role taking and a shift in hierarchies within the participating group, albeit a temporary one. In some cases, the assignments within the course have fallen short on a collaborative stance. The participants' efforts regarding work on assignments and themes were not always addressed at seminars by the one with the role of lecturer/convenor, and thus traditional roles have come into play. What causes this? Do we get stuck in old, familiar, safe and comfortable roles? Do we not take the time needed to create more of a collaborative effort in the spirit of common sense?

Teachers' and students' attempts of implementing a collaborative stance sometimes wavered in perceptions on behalf of the other participants, and actions depended upon how well the old and familiar roles were kept at bay. In some instances, it is unclear to what extent this has been the case since it seems that these have automatically kicked in. In the cases where seminars have drifted from the agreed upon collaborative aspects of the assignments towards more traditional lectures, the students have become *collaborationists* instead of collaborators; not stepping up to the plate voicing their opinions, observations or perceptions. Or is it rather a question of commitment to the task at hand from the collaborating parties and their roles (facilitator, learner, teacher, supervisor)? With what kind and level of engagement and understanding do the participants enter an educational arena such as the course described and analysed within this text? What are the points of entry for each participant, and (how) do these change with the evolving roles?

When it comes to which kind of participation that can take place in a specific situation, diversities such as professional background, scientific experience, gender, and musical belonging are crucial. An important starting point here is the right to make oneself heard and listened to. If different ways of identifying oneself, different perspectives and different group belongings are considered valid contributions and possibilities, if they are maintained, encouraged, respected, and reflected upon, different rooms - or courses - in our late modern society can function as spaces for common sense. In the course different kinds of initiatives towards collaborative activities were taken. Sometimes the participants chose to take part in ways that challenged traditional hierarchies, other times not.

The question is to what degree the course did allow the multiplicity of PhD-voices to be truly heard, responded and reflected upon - to be shared and developed in the spirit of common

sense. What became clear in the study was the fine balance between the collective and the collaborative – to participate or to be engaged. To really understand the content, through the other, as a way to develop new knowledge, participants have to take the role of the other, be curious and willing. Otherwise the participants get stuck in parallel understandings. The creation of mutual conceptions, or that of a common ground, in what ways does the (perceived) amount of work and engagement teachers’ put into an assignment affect the collaborative stance – the *collaborativity* – among the participants? Is it the level of perceived interest on the behalf of the students in relation to this that decides the (amount of) collaboration? The onset and directedness towards collaborativity, in what ways does this show itself for instance within an assignment? In what degree does this onset lie within the participants’ own will and ways to collaborate?

Questions such as who is expected to make their voices heard, who is seen as a possible participant, and who has access to the specific areas frame underscore the aspects of democracy in the view of Arendt. Democratic spaces must allow each one to present her or his story, to share the story and in one way or another define her/his self, and in the end to reject taken for granted knowledge. In order for this to happen spontaneity must be nurtured, and opportunities should be facilitated so that new knowledge can be developed in the sharing of experience in public spaces. Clear and open initiatives encouraged such participation, at the same time as detailed structures became crucial. All these aspects have to be discussed and agreed upon, in a course aiming to develop knowledge in and about collaborative learning. The different roles have to be clearly defined. If this is to happen “automatically”, there need to be trust between members and an acceptance of the results leading in another direction than the (personally) predicted or desired. The democratic aspect of a collaborative learning environment is also a

question of power and identity, as discussed above. Most importantly, collaborative processes take time.

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