

## **Beyond policy: Conceptualising student-centred learning environments in higher (music) education**

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### **Abstract**

*While student-centred learning environments are placed high on the policy agenda for how educational practices can be developed, it is less clear what this term actually means and what implications it may have for teaching and learning. This article discusses how student-centred learning environments in higher education can be interpreted and conceptualized from an educational sciences perspective, in which the term is used to characterize learning environments that aim at placing students at the centre of the activities and facilitating their active participation and engagement with disciplinary and/or professional knowledge. The article also provides examples from recent research on how such environments are organised and experienced by teachers and students in different Norwegian higher education contexts. The examples are mainly taken from studies of common educational practices in the general field of higher education, such as practices employing problem-based, project-based and case-based learning. Reflections on what these insights might mean for the specific field of music performance education are included on the way, and discussed in relation to teacher collaboration as a means of supporting student engagement and learning in higher music education. The article builds on a keynote presentation given at the AEC-CEMPE conference *Becoming Musicians—Student Involvement and Teacher Collaboration in Higher Music Education in Oslo in October 2018*.*

## Introduction

Student-centred educational practices are often high on the agenda in both educational policy and practice. Student-centred terminology has emerged as a way of promoting alternative teaching methods to the lecture format in higher education, and stimulating more engagement from students. As such, ‘student-centred’ is often understood as opposed to ‘teacher-centred’, and affiliated with approaches to teaching that are ‘learner-focused’ rather than ‘content-focused’ (see e.g. Baeten et al., 2016; Uiboleht, Karm & Postareff, 2018). At the same time, higher education policies and regulations reference a myriad of concepts, many of which highlight similar phenomena, whilst others, despite almost identical phrasing, reference different ideas. The concepts of ‘student-centred teaching’ and ‘active learning’ are at times used interchangeably, even if they point to two different processes, whilst in other instances the term ‘student-centred learning’ refers to quite different phenomena. Moreover, rather than understanding teacher-centeredness and student-centeredness as opposites, it may be more productive to perceive them on a continuum of pedagogical approaches that complement and even depend on each other in everyday practice (Elen et al., 2007). Nevertheless, research shows unconsciously mixing these concepts may be unproductive to student learning, and a clearer understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of different pedagogical approaches is needed in order to communicate the intentions of activities as well as to foster collaboration (Nerland & Prøitz, 2018; Postareff et al., 2008).

In this article, which builds on a keynote presentation given at the AEC-CEMPE conference *Becoming Musicians—Student Involvement and Teacher Collaboration in Higher Music Education* in Oslo in October 2018, I use the phrase *student-centred learning environments* (SLEs) as an umbrella term to characterise learning environments that aim at placing students at the centre of the activities and facilitating their active participation and engagement with disciplinary and/or professional knowledge. I begin by discussing the emergence of what we can call the ‘student-centred complex’ in policies for higher education. Next—as indicated in the title—we will move beyond policy to examine forms and conditions for SLEs. First, to conceptualise what SLEs entail when grounded in theoretical perspectives to learning and teaching, we move from policy to educational science. Second, we shift from policy to practice by examining how teachers and students experience different types of SLEs. Throughout I broadly explore common practices and perspectives in the general field of higher education. Reflections on what these insights might mean for the specific field of music performance education are included on the way, and also discussed in relation to teacher collaboration as a means of supporting student engagement and learning in higher music education.

## The student-centred terminology in higher education policy

The emergence of student-centred terminology in educational policy has different origins, but three interconnected trends interplay in bringing a stronger focus toward what students are doing and learning in higher education. First, developments within working life have generated new requirements to professional expertise, which include the capacity for change and for taking on responsibilities in shifting contexts of collaboration. As fields of knowledge grow more complex, expanding to include a range of knowledge-generating actors and stakeholders, the demand for advanced skills, such as knowledge integration, the ability to work with multifaceted problems and collaboration across domains of expertise, are increasing. This leads to increased interest in engaging students in explorative and knowledge-generating activities, and in 'the relevance of activities to working life. Especially in profession-oriented programmes there has been a concern towards developing 'authentic' tasks and learning environments, that is, tasks and environments that provide experiences with the type of problems or situations that characterize professional life (Herrington, Reeves & Oliver, 2014; Litzinger et al., 2011). Furthermore, such tasks and environments have been associated with student-centred learning environments (Land, Hannafin & Oliver, 2012).

Second, there is an increased emphasis on monitoring the quality of educational practices and institutions at the local, national and international level. This has given rise to a range of new actors and organisations engaged in developing higher education practices, such as student organisations, university alliances, quality assurance agencies and directorates, and networks like AEC. These developments are nourished by international collaboration and policy coordination, including the joint efforts and activities that constitute the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).<sup>1</sup> Student-centred learning is central to the work of the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) and the European Student Union, and currently there is interest in taking initiatives further, toward the educational ground floor, by facilitating the sharing of 'innovative learning and practices' across higher education institutions. As stated in the Paris Communiqué from the EHEA Ministerial Conference (2018, p. 3):

The success of the European Learning and Teaching Forum launched by the European University Association last year demonstrates the value and potential of collaboration in learning and teaching, with tangible benefits for higher

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1 [www.ehea.info/](http://www.ehea.info/)

education institutions, staff and students. Therefore, in addition to measures at national level, we will develop joint European initiatives to support and stimulate a wide range of innovative learning and teaching practices, building on existing good practice in our countries and beyond. This will encompass the further development and full implementation of student-centred learning and open education in the context of lifelong learning. Study programmes that provide diverse learning methods and flexible learning can foster social mobility and continuous professional development whilst enabling learners to access and complete higher education at any stage of their lives.

As this quote demonstrates, the policy discourse on student-centred learning is entwined with notions of lifelong learning and flexible educational arrangements, through which higher education may serve the evolving knowledge economy by fostering mobility and employability. This is further served by a well-developed infrastructure of standards and tools addressing input and output factors, such as qualification frameworks and learning outcomes descriptions. Efforts to address educational processes through international policy cooperation are a new trend historically. At the same time, the further development of innovative learning and teaching practices should be handled by the higher education institutions themselves, in ways that secure academic freedom and institutional autonomy (Paris Communiqué, 2018).

Third, both the calls for more ‘authentic’ and explorative learning activities and the efforts to promote innovative learning and teaching practices carry an implicit criticism of the learning environments offered in higher education. A common assumption is that common (i.e.,) practices in university-based education such as lectures and text-based seminars are insufficient to meet new demands. For instance, it is argued such practices rest on a ‘transmission view’ of knowledge and learning that does not account for the learners’ engagement and sense-making, that limited support and feedback is offered during the learning process, and that there is too much focus on what is taught by lecturers rather than what is learned by the students. Whilst the pedagogical approaches used will vary extensively between knowledge domains and institutions, and teachers seem increasingly eager to engage in developing course activities and learning environments, these notions provide the ground for a student-centred terminology that defines itself in contrast to teacher-centred or content-centred approaches.

Despite the many actors embracing a student-centred terminology—and likely an effect of their diversity—concepts are often used in different, imprecise ways. For example, ‘student-centred learning’ might be used when one is actually talking about

approaches to teaching or features of course design. From a pedagogical perspective, it is important to keep different processes and phenomena analytically apart for the sake of understanding how they can support each other. Thus, we should insist on separating learning from teaching, and learning processes from learning activities, even if it is the productive intersection of these processes we aim at supporting. Moreover, rather than learning itself being student-centred or active, student-centredness should be viewed as characteristics of the learning environment and of ways of engaging students in courses and activities. From this perspective, the concept SCLEs makes more sense. The next section explores the concept of SCLEs further by drawing on theories and perspectives within educational science.

## **Conceptualisations of SCLEs in educational science**

Several lines of educational theory and practice are relevant to conceptualising SCLEs. One important contributor is the literature on instructional design, which is concerned with the practices of designing physical and virtual learning environments. Grounded in constructivist perspectives on learning, this literature takes the stance that learning is an active process of knowledge construction and sense-making that evolves with guidance from teachers, other participants and/or the material environment (Land, Hannafin & Oliver, 2012; Mayer, 2004). Whilst differing interpretations remain, there is general agreement that SCLEs offer opportunities for students to work on real-world problems, gain practical experience from practices characteristic to the knowledge domain, and take ownership of their inquiry processes (Land, Hannafin & Oliver, 2012). This suggests the tasks and learning activities included in the pedagogical design should involve students in the types of explorative and investigative practices that are central to generating knowledge and showing expertise in the domain, and that such practices should be related to problems or situations that are relevant to the students' prospective work. The students' engagement with knowledge is highlighted, more than the content of what is taught. The emphasis on 'ownership' denotes that students, at least to some extent, should develop and follow their own paths in the inquiry process and commit to the task at hand. What this implies and what it looks like will vary according to field of expertise. However, a general principle is that activities should be guided, or 'scaffolded', by teachers and/or other actors and resources in the environment (Land, Hannafin & Oliver, 2012). Although greater responsibility for activities and learning processes is allocated to the students, they should be provided with processual support rather than being

left to fend for themselves. Moreover, again based on constructivist perspectives on learning, students should have the opportunity to activate their previous experiences as well as access to a range of knowledge resources in the learning process (Land, Hannafin & Oliver, 2012). This has implications for how the teacher's role is conceptualised. Rather than traditional instruction, teaching becomes a matter of designing activities and environments by carefully assembling a set of tasks, tools, resources and responsibilities that are distributed to participants (Goodyear, 2015). The role of the teacher in the learning process becomes that of a facilitator and a guide in the students' evolving inquiry process rather than a transmitter of knowledge.

It can be argued these features are already in place in higher music education. The institutionalised traditions of teaching and learning always have placed emphasis on students' responsibilities and active participation. At least where music performance education is concerned, there is strong traditions for guided participation in one-to-one settings, through which students explore the musical works and practices of their area of expertise and generate visible and hearable 'products' in the form of performances. Such individualised tuition practices allow for tailored support, therefore avoiding one of the key challenges associated with SCLs in higher education more generally; namely, meeting the different needs and experiences of students who take part in the same environment (Hockings, 2009; Northedge, 2003). As musical works and interpretations are often shared across geographical boundaries, the available resources for learning exceed the local educational practice. In such a context, student ownership of the learning process is both afforded and required. Yet, some questions may be raised as to the flexibility of the educational arrangements and the possibility to 'design' them. For instance, to what extent are personal routes of development encouraged, and to what extent are students in the same specialist area (i.e., instrument tradition) expected to follow the same route? What spaces for and kinds of inquiry processes are supported? What can be changed and experimented with, and what needs to be kept in line with established performance conventions? With respect to the wider learning environment offered by the institution and study programme, how do different activities and learning arenas intersect in students' learning? Finally, to what extent can supportive environments be planned and designed in educational contexts that leave extensive time and responsibilities for self-studying?

Rather than seeking concrete solutions, these questions can be used as tools to reflect on the further development of learning environments in higher music education. The criteria for SCLs as described above are general, and will need to be translated and adapted to the specific practices one aims to develop. In the next sections we will

move to educational practice and look into examples of SCLEs and how these are experienced by teachers and students.

## **Insights from educational practice: Supporting learning through inquiry**

As noted above, one SCLE trait is the involvement of students in explorative and knowledge-generating activities, through which they gain experience by solving problems or addressing phenomena that resemble ‘real-life’ situations. This may be realized in various types of environments and through different pedagogical designs. Approaches often affiliated with SCLEs include project-based learning, problem-based learning, different forms of inquiry-based learning, as well as the use of case analyses and simulation games in digital or face-to-face environments (Land, Hannafin & Oliver, 2012). Whilst project- and problem-based learning adhere to specific methods and ways of sequencing the work, inquiry-based learning is used as collective term for approaches that stimulate learning through inquiry, of which project- and problem-based learning are two alternatives (Aditomo et al., 2011). In educational contexts, elements of the different approaches can be combined. What is clear both from research and practical experience is that the character of the knowledge domain matters to how learning through inquiry is organised and supported. In what follows, I will present insights from two projects in which teachers’ and students’ work with inquiry-based and student-centred approaches in higher education based on participant observation of course activities and supplemented with interviews, course documents and other course materials.<sup>2</sup>

The first project, *Horizontal Governance and Learning Dynamics in Higher Education*, was conducted in the period 2012-2016 and included close-up studies of teaching and learning activities in three professional programmes within the areas of law, engineering and teacher education. The aim was to examine how students, through participation in domain-specific knowledge practices, were ‘enrolled’ or initiated in their prospective professional knowledge cultures. All programmes used forms of inquiry-based learning in their introductory courses. This was organized as group work wherein students were required to explore real-world problems and construct knowledge together. The tasks given to students in law and teacher education focused

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<sup>2</sup> Both projects were supported by the Research Council of Norway under the Education 2020 and the FINNUT programmes, Grant no. 212285 and 237960.

on case analyses, whilst students in software engineering were asked to develop a webpage (see Jensen, Nerland & Enqvist-Jensen, 2015; Damşa & Nerland, 2016; Damşa, Nerland & Jensen, 2017). The law students attended an intensive one-week course involving daily teacher-led sessions and group work whilst the group process was spread across several weeks in engineering and teacher education.

Whilst all programmes introduced students to a set of epistemic practices critical to each professional culture's investigative processes, what these practices entailed and how students were engaged and supported varied. In legal education, emphasis was placed on introducing students to methodological principles for examining legal conflicts. Key practices included sorting information and identifying types of conflicts and parties involved, investigating sources of law and how these could inform the case, and justifying decisions by building a convincing legal argument (Jensen et al., 2015). Teacher support was provided through modelling how to sort conflicts, reading the sources of law and navigating the textual universe of this professional culture. In engineering education, students developed a product (a webpage) by employing programming knowledge and techniques presented in teacher-led sessions. Key practices included writing, testing and validating code using developer tools, generating ideas, and documenting the work process (Damşa & Nerland, 2016). Teacher support took the form of modelling programming activities and pointing to tools available to programmers in the professional field. In teacher education, students were asked to use theoretical concepts from learning theories to analyse a case narrative involving a school situation. This led to a written report; key practices included academic writing, formulating an inquiry question for the analysis and integrating theoretical knowledge with practical experience (Damşa & Nerland, 2016). In this case, teacher support was less procedural in character, and more directed towards conceptual understanding and criteria for academic work. In sum, these examples show inquiry activities are domain-specific and that being aware of, and making explicit, the key practices for exploring and generating knowledge in the domain is crucial when designing student-centred learning environments and activities. Moreover, the examples show how educational activities, by way of these practices and profession-specific tools and resources can link students to the wider professional world in which they aspire to work.

How, then, can these insights inform the development of SCLEs in higher music education? One important question to ask is what inquiry-based learning might mean in this educational context. Several options may be envisioned: Project-based activities could be organised with the aim of integrating different knowledge forms when developing a performance or analysis, such as knowledge from aural training and



performance studies. Inquiry activities could combine analyses of musical works based on musicology with musical interpretations and performances, thus resembling the type of artistic research practice that exists in the form of master theses and PhD projects. Or activities could be more fully based on music performance, for example organized in projects with the aim of developing concert productions for specific audience groups. These activities, and many others, are frequently used in higher music education. However, the awareness of what constitutes the aims and means for inquiry in the various activities, what it takes to enact these, and how teacher support could be organised in different phases of the learning process may be less clear. When developing SCLEs based on inquiry activities, the specific investigative practices involved in the type of inquiry activity should be explicated, and how these can be modelled and supported in the learning process must be considered.

## **Insights from educational practice: Challenges in developing SCLEs**

The second project, *Quality of Norwegian Higher Education (QNHE)*, was conducted in the period 2014 – 2018 as a collaborative effort between the research institute NIFU and the University of Oslo Department of Education. One part of the project investigated experiences with student-centred learning environments, as these were organized and enacted in eight higher education courses (for an overview, see Nerland & Prøitz, 2018). The aim was to learn more about the opportunities and challenges teachers and students face in their everyday educational activities, and the studied learning environments included larger lectures combined with seminars, project-based learning in smaller groups, problem-based learning, case-based learning, simulation exercises with and without technology use, field work, portfolio work and online activities.

The findings, summarised in a report edited by Nerland and Prøitz (2018), show both teachers and students generally embraced efforts to create SCLEs, but these also generated a set of challenges. First, when looking at the course environments as a whole, we noticed they tended to comprise a range of activities, tasks and assessment forms and that it was not always clear for the participants what they were expected to do and achieve with the various activities. This indicates a risk of overloading the course designs in the effort of developing SCLEs, without sufficiently grounding the activities in clear ideas about their envisioned role in students' learning processes. Second, as student-centred approaches tend to delegate the responsibility of organising

work to the students, with the teacher as a facilitator, support from teachers is both necessary and more difficult to provide. Analyses conducted in the QNHE project showed students' participation in optional activities was quite variegated, and that they often organised their work in spaces and arenas where teachers were not present. For instance, students tended to prefer widely available social media platforms rather than those offered by the course or programme. This is not surprising, and indeed self-organised activities may be seen as critical to creating ownership of the learning process. However, it raises challenges as to how processes can be planned, monitored and supported by teachers. Third, the findings from the QNHE project reveal gaps and conflicts that arise between courses and activities in which students are engaged. This relates to the placement of a course and its knowledge content in the overall programme structure, such as how a given course builds on previous courses and prepares students for what comes next. Conflicts may also occur between parallel courses in the students' programme; for example, when there is a significant uptick in workload in several courses at the same time. Especially when course activities rely on students taking on responsibilities and participating actively, and when students are dependent on each other's contributions, it is essential to secure time and space for such engagement. This demonstrates the importance of seeing the course activities from a student perspective, and the need to create a progression in ways of working across courses. This, in turn, requires collaboration across courses as well as collaborative investments from teachers in the planning phase.

The two projects drawn upon in this article were both oriented towards teaching and learning practices in higher education courses organised around classes or larger groups of students, within academic and professional programmes that are offered by many universities and which accommodate large numbers of students. As a consequence, the exploration of SCLEs have been limited to a set of pedagogical approaches used by teachers in these contexts. One could easily imagine that there are other ways of engaging students actively in learning processes, and even more so in performance-oriented programmes as in higher music education. Nevertheless, the insights described above may prompt questions of relevance for further development also for music performance education. One issue concerns what teacher collaboration and coordination of learning activities might look like. Such efforts must rest on clear ideas regarding collaboration objectives, what kind of learning processes the collaborative or coordinating efforts should support, and the potential barriers to bringing different forms of knowledge and expertise together. Some forms of collaboration may aim at supporting progression in student learning over time; for instance, in the way activities and courses build on each other. In other cases, the aim may rather be to integrate theoretical and experience-based

forms of knowledge in the moment of examining, say, a musical work. Alternatively, the aim of collaboration may be to bridge educational activities with ongoing developments in professional music life. Therefore, relevant questions to ask include: Does teacher collaboration in higher music education essentially mean inter-subject collaboration? In what ways does collaboration involve complementary resources and forms of expertise; conversely, in what ways does it support joint work with similar forms of expertise? And what are the implications of the various forms on the distribution of responsibilities to teachers and students?

In my PhD project on teaching practices in music performance education (Nerland, 2003, 2007) different versions of teacher collaboration were identified: performance teachers and pianists could collaborate to create a more holistic context as a basis for tuition, a performance teacher could collaborate with a composer to support the students' interpretation and performance of contemporary music, and performance teachers representing the same instrument could collaborate to distribute responsibilities for supporting the development of different technical skills. The activities of CEMPE and the presentations at the recent AEC-CEMPE conference show extensive activities currently taking place when it comes to teacher collaboration, and that students themselves are taking on coordinating roles and facilitating the integration of courses and activities in their learning trajectories. This is promising when it comes to creating meaningful learning experiences for students and teachers alike. It is hoped that experiences from these activities will also be examined and documented, so that examples of music-related SCLs and their practices can be shared amongst the wider educational community.

## **Concluding remarks**

This article has discussed several reasons why SCLs currently are high on the agenda in higher education, both in policy and practice, and outlined some ways in which such environments can be interpreted, conceptualised and organised. Based on studies of educational practices in a range of domains other than music education, the article has also pointed to challenges faced by teachers and students in developing SCLs. Drawing some conclusions from this discussion, one implication is that we, in the context of SCLs, need to expand the conception of teaching in ways that go beyond instruction and guidance to students in specific situations. In addition, teaching is about planning and designing learning environments, within and across courses in a study programme, and often in collaboration with students and colleagues. This requires some

understanding of the pedagogical notions and principles underlying different activities such as inquiry-based learning. Moreover, it necessitates an explicit awareness of the types of knowledge practices and investigative processes students need to master in order to participate in, and take responsibility for, activities. Complicating matters further, SCLEs place students and their learning opportunities as main concerns in the activity, which means attention must be paid to the wider educational system that makes up the students' world of learning. This may include resources and practices offered beyond organised educational activities, such as online resources and experiences from professional life. Taking all these issues into account, it can be argued that SCLEs may never be fully actualised for all students in higher education. Rather, they may be seen as an ideal to work toward, and as a set of conceptual and exemplary resources that can be drawn upon in the further development of educational practices.

In these efforts, higher music education may learn from other domains and programme contexts in several ways. For instance, other domains may have developed more explicit collective descriptions of learning processes and progression principles in inquiry-oriented activities, or models for coordinating content and activities across courses. At the same time, music education has a long tradition of placing students in the centre of activities and allocating extensive responsibilities as well as ownership of processes to the students. Moreover, schools of music, academies or conservatoires are certainly more than a composition of educational practices. These are richly textured environments where high-quality resources for students' self-directed learning are offered, and where there are many opportunities for searching feedback from teachers, peers, and other social and material instances. This indicates the further development of learning environments in higher music education should build on these resources rather than breaking with them. It also suggests other programmes may learn from the way music education is organised. One recent development in ways of conceptualising learning is to see learning as *performative actions* through which students actively construct knowledge and through which their actions, based on achieved insights, become consequential for further action (Säljö, 2010). This is related to new technologies as well as to the complexity of knowledge domains, in which students are encouraged to select and integrate information from different sources and to demonstrate their knowledgeability through ways of doing rather than through ways of reasoning. This way of approaching learning is certainly relevant for music education and other educational practices in the performing arts, and these institutions may have important insights to offer in this area.

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