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Digital technologies in music education – The prospects of interactive course development in primary school music education

Within the framework of the 'Education Innovation - Modernisation of the training structure, methods and content in higher education, enhancement of its labour market relevance', we conducted a course material development project for the length of two terms at the Institute of Education and Social Sciences, Apáczai Csere János Faculty of Humanities, Széchenyi István University. We devised course material to be applied in e-learning and in a place-based studying environment (VR course material). The aim of the project was to create support material that assists teacher candidates in processing and acquiring the material of primary school music education. Its necessity and timeliness are justified by the insufficient level of music skills of newly admitted teacher candidates. The present paper is intended to display a summary and short-term evaluation of the project.

1. Context

Theoretical and practical music skills of teacher trainees beginning in their primary teacher training programme have been on the decline in recent years. They begin their studies in higher education with less background knowledge of music literacy. We are experiencing a tendency that Brigitta Nagyné Árgány has also noted:³ upon admission to college, only those students who have attended music schools or primary schools specialised in music can meet the music-related requirements. During the teacher training programme itself, we can clearly see that the majority of students who did not have this educational background have great difficulties with the course material, and for this reason, they experience increased stress during their studies. Furthermore, the quality of their performance is also lower. A real task of higher education is now “*filling the gaps left behind by secondary, or in music, my primary education.*”⁴ The

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³ Brigitta Nagyné Árgány: “Complex Study of the Components of Musical Background among Preschool and Primary School Teacher Training BA Students at Kaposvár University”. PhD thesis. Parlando 62, 2020/2 <https://www.parlando.hu/2020/2020-2/Nagyne.pdf> (downloaded on 14/10/2020)

⁴ Ibid

backlog stemming from the deficiencies of primary and secondary education represents a severe challenge for the academic staff active in higher education, since “*some of the students lag greatly behind, as proficiency in music literacy (as with basic music skills) is much more difficult and much less effective at this age (young adults) than at a younger age. With many of these students, we have to deal with a backlog of a decade.*”⁵ Therefore, we must pose the question of how we can create an environment, curriculum and tools that can support these students in acquiring the actual material that helps to remedy their shortcomings. At the same time, we should not forget about those students who already have sufficient skills thanks to their former music education. It is essential to foster and improve their skills and boost their strengths. “*Beyond all of this, our ultimate goal is to make our students motivated—encouraged by joyful experience with music—to make efforts to make progress in their music education and to make music, to train themselves further and to acquire a cultivated musical taste even as a practising teacher.*”⁶

2. Introduction of the project

Our course material development programme, which focussed on the first term of the academic year 2018/19 within the framework of the project EFOP-3.4.3-16-2016-00016, searched for ways to deal with the above-mentioned problems. The project offered help with the methodology of higher education training, modernisation of its content, and devising education materials both online and in a classroom context.

2.1. Aims of the course development process

Our aim was to create support material that helps students process and acquire the school material in music in the first four years of primary school, supplemented with methodological and practical guidelines. In the long run, the project also aims to make sure that in the first four years of primary school, the subject of music should be taught by well-prepared teachers using appropriate pedagogical methods. Accordingly, we integrated two courses in our project and prepared support material for the courses “Music Education” and “Development of Music Skills and Methodologies I”.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

2.2. Elements and timing of the project

In the first phase of the project, following a review of the relevant literature, we systematised the knowledge base in the various fields for all songs involved. Based on these, we set up the following criteria: typical melodic contour, scales, rhythms, and vocal range. Then, for the individual songs, we selected music reading exercises based on the above criteria framework, which we matched to the actual songs. Consecutively, we set up an audio-database using the children's songs included by the general curriculum. In the video-database, we uploaded the material for the 1st and 2nd forms from the college notes used at the Apáczai Faculty.⁷ The study material for sight reading were selected from Kodály's *333 Reading Exercises*⁸ and Tegzes's *Heptatonic Reading Exercises*.⁹ as these exercises are still the most useful for helping students sight-read with a Relative Solfa method. We attached scores to all the exercises, and two different audio recordings also assist students in their learning process.

The third stage of the project was devising material for the content requirements of the course “Development of Music Skills and Methodologies I”, which we performed according to the proposed project aims. Due to the complexity of the course—it comprises both the school subject “Music and its methodology”, we aimed to present certain methodological elements of the Primary Education as subject “Music” (1st to 4th years). We elaborated on some aspects of music lessons based on the songs used in the 3rd form while still applying the principles used in the previous term. We also began this phase of the project by reviewing the relevant and available bibliography, which consisted of the following: Döbrössy-Réti (2012): *Az ének-zene tantárgypedagógiája*. (Methodology of the school subject “Music”), ELTE Eötvös Kiadó, Budapest; Judit Kelemen (2018): *Ének-zene tantárgypedagógia, tanító alapszakos hallgatók számára*. (Methodology for teaching “Music” in primary school) Líceum Kiadó, Eger; Lilla Oroszné Tornyai (1998): *Énektanítói alapismeretek*. (Basic skills for primary music teachers). Printed by Kecskemét Primary Teacher Training College, Kecskemét; Yvett Orsovics (2019): *Zenei alapismeretek* (Fundamental music skills); Erzsébet Várszeginé Gáncs (2005): *Példatár és útmutató az ének-zene tanításához* (Workbook and guideline for teaching music).

We structured the material for the term in the following way:

1. Didactic exercises to the initial phase of the music lesson

⁷ Erzsébet Várszeginé Gáncs (2011): *Workbook and guidelines to teaching music*. Partitúra Stúdió Bt. ISBN 9789630680745

⁸ Zoltán Kodály (c1941): *333 Reading Exercises*. Editio Musica, Budapest.

⁹ György Tegzes (1991): *Heptatonic Reading Exercises I-II*. Tankönyvkiadó

- breathing exercises, warming up, singing the songs selected for the 3rd school year with exercises and lesson excerpts.
2. Didactic exercises to the core part of the music lesson
 - teaching songs - by ear; the songs of the 3rd school year with solfege hand signs, exercises and lesson excerpts.
 - teaching new rhythmic skills - syncope, whole note; eighth-note rest, time signature of 4 and the deeper understanding of the time signature of 2 with the songs of the 3rd form, exercises, and lesson excerpts.
 - teaching new melody patterns – deepening consciousness of the Low Sol and High Do with the songs of the 3rd study year, exercises and lesson excerpts.
 3. Further exercises related to music lessons
 4. Song Database

The structure of the first 12 chapters follows the same principle: we divided the course material into didactic exercises and developed the individual theoretical chapters based on the music theory supplement of Erzsébet Várszeginé Gáncs (2011): *Példatár és útmutató az ének-zene tanításához* (Workbook and guideline to teaching music). We completed the description of algorithms with practical content, such as sample lesson plans with audio material in mp4 format. These chapters are concluded with a bibliography. Chapter 13 encompasses the entire song material for the 3rd study year listed in the workbook. In accordance with the requests of the students, not only the written lecture but also the relative sol-fa version with hand-signs was included in the material. In the part focussing on assisting practical preparation, we added presentations performed on the recorder, as individual items become more concrete and visible this way. This certainly adds value to the sample lesson plans of our project. Chapter 14 serves as a summary, providing further information and a review of the relevant bibliography.

3. Experiences

3.1. Direct effects

Our current instruction practice is to use our course material in the form of blended learning. Our students can access the database through the university's Moodle System. *“Blended learning is a combined approach of studying in a conventional (place-based) way and with online materials. With the help of blended learning, we can turn course material into online material requiring a physical presence now and then. On these occasions, consultations and*

mentorship activities take place. In the case of online tasks, e-learning methods and communication channels play the central role."¹⁰

Our course material is unique and more effective from a didactic aspect than other materials preceding it because it couples each children's song or folk song with excerpts focussing on a music theory subject. Due to this, our students not only read the songs but can also watch and listen to them in a version completed with a steady pulse, rhythm-clapping and sol-fa hand-signs. The preparation and profound acquisition of rhythm- or melody-related characteristics and novelties are assisted by corresponding reading exercises and guided exercises. The reading exercises can also be accessed individually, thus it is easier to search for them upon the revision of a specific theoretical subject. The video presentations have the advantage, among others, of showing methods of giving the starting note and of practising the vocal range suitable for the given age group.

Another aim of the project was to promote the presentation programme developed at our university, the extremely useful MAXWHERE. The programme does not only have an attractive, modern interface, but it also helps us present the entire course material. Consequently, students do not receive the material in a fragmented way but see it in its entirety; the individual elements are juxtaposed, and thus the students can connect them mentally more effectively. The programme presents space in three dimensions, which evidently has a positive impact on the learning processes.

3.2. Student feedback

Our hypothesis that students would use the course material only on occasion, directly prior to tests, was not verified. To assess the efficiency of the course material, we prepared a brief questionnaire. So far, 53 students (the significant majority) have completed it.

¹⁰ Péter Kiss: *Blended learning. Hitek és tévhitek.* (Beliefs and misconceptions) <http://elearning.co.hu/2011/12/28/blended-learning/>. Last download: 20/09/2020

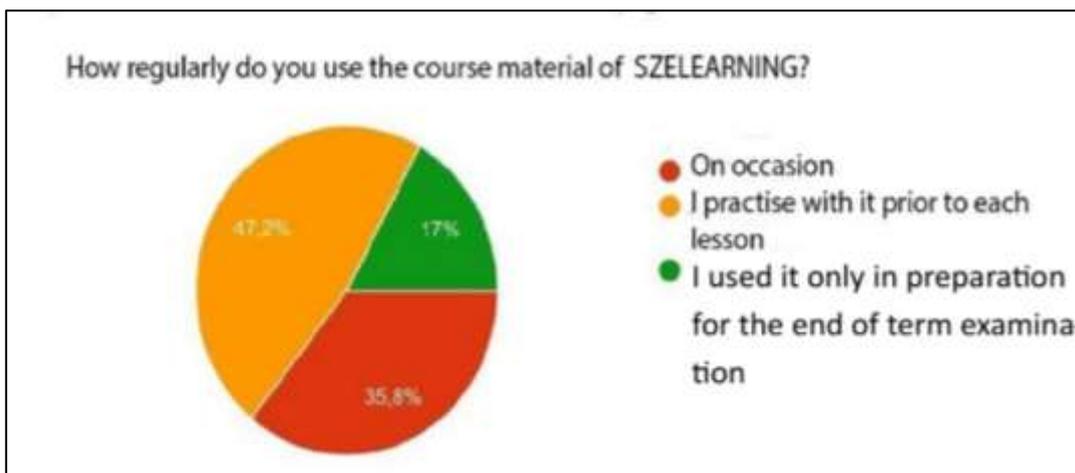


Figure 1. Regular use of course material of SZELEARNING

Based on the above feedback, nearly half of the primary school teacher trainees had used the course material on a regular basis, 35,8% consulted it only on occasion. All respondents had made use of the interface, as almost one-fifth of them had worked with it before the end of term examination. It greatly helped teacher trainees to complete the term, which they expressed in the questionnaire.

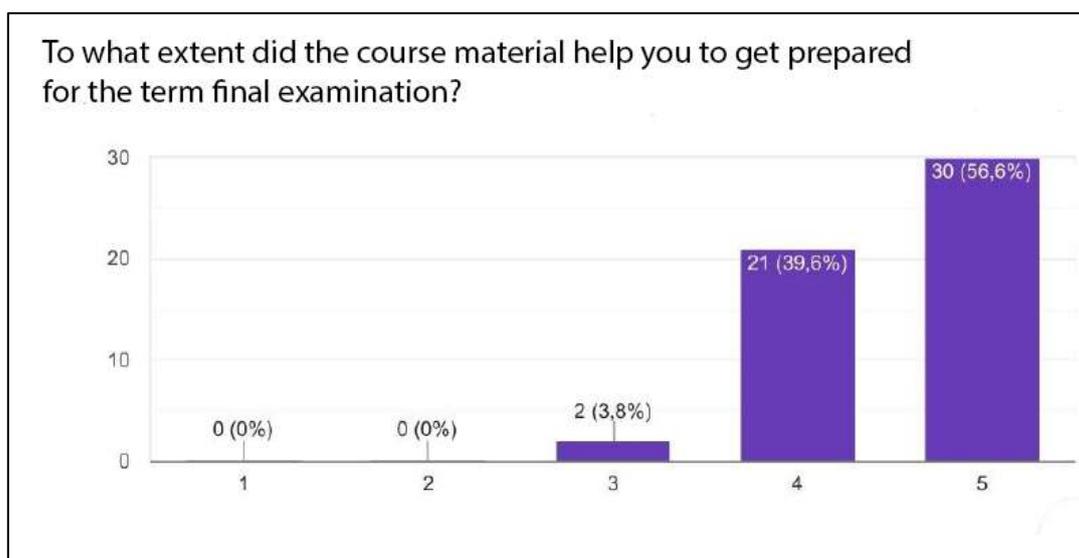


Figure 2. Getting prepared for the term final examination by the course material

Videos proved to be the most beneficial of the various elements in the course material. More specifically, the demonstrations on the recorder and the oral presentations were the most popular parts.

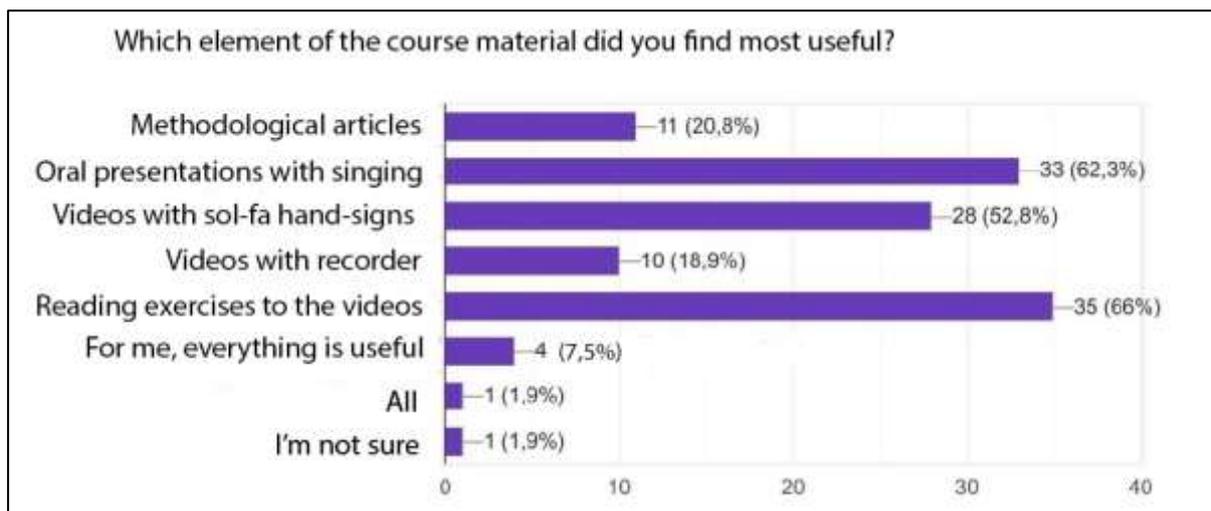


Figure 3. The most useful element of the course material

The answers to whether they would find further online content useful and how they would expand it if they could, proved extremely instructive. Most of the students were satisfied with the structure and the content of the course support material. However, in individual cases, they would have found it useful to also have a bibliographical summary and further possibilities to study music and have online consultation in which they could ask further questions (to complement the classroom lessons). They also wished to have online tasks connected to their online classes and recordings. It was unexpected that the students gave a near unanimously positive response to the question of whether they were planning to use the uploaded material after graduating. According to their replies to this open-ended question, they intend to use the content in preparation for their classes, lesson planning and practice; and they would draw inspiration from it in their classes. One of the respondents stated she would use the recordings in her own classes.

4. Ways of applying the course material in special needs teacher training

In our institution (DIA), we also pursue special needs teacher training, so special needs teacher trainees can benefit from the course material we developed. During the entrance exam process, they do not have to a music admission test, however, their graduation competence requirements are similar to (but not identical to) those of primary school teacher trainees. The course material we composed also provides help to these students in their course work. Music education—nursery rhymes, singing games, improvisation, and instrumental demonstration—can be early development tools similar to kindergarten education. Consequently, our course material can also be very useful in the field of special needs education. Following a reinforcement of fundamental music competencies, special needs education students can also acquire the vocal

and instrumental skills more easily, skills which they need to acquire in their art education classes. In the course of their careers, they can make use of their skills in speech therapy, cognitive and emotional development activities, as well as in their endeavour to develop movement coordination or cooperative competencies. Since provisional SEN teachers do not receive as thorough musical training as primary school teacher trainees, drilling has a special significance.

5. Directions of expansion

While constructing the material, we experienced further need to expand its contents. First, we would like to devise materials for the music classes of the first four years (from forms 1 to 4) of primary school. Should the grant system allow it in the future, we could expand our didactic knowledge base with the descriptions of traditional children's games related to the school material. Later, it could also be extended with a children's dances database. A recorder workbook would also be necessary that could help students develop more profound skills. We would then complete that with a practice-oriented children's instrument guide. A glossary of music-related terminology would also be useful. Based on our students' feedback, a subject-based bibliography collection and exercise pool are also required.

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