

**Teaching the Arts in Higher Education: Teaching Philosophies from
Finland and South Africa. A Collaborative Autoethnography**

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Abstract

This article documents the collaborative effort of a group of tertiary arts educators from Finland and South Africa. The methodological starting point of this study is collaborative autoethnography, as it focuses on our shared experiences and narratives. The data comprises our personal narratives, in which we highlight unique aspects of our teaching philosophies. Theoretical premises include concepts of compassion and caring. The results suggest that our teaching philosophies emphasize the creation of a positive learning environment, facilitated by embracing student diversity, making informed pedagogical choices, understanding learning methods, and demonstrating emotional awareness. Our narratives also include insights from the authors' reflections on our students' life experiences, shedding light on their diverse skills, self-awareness, and critical thought. Optimal learning, as the findings suggest, depends on emotional support, active participation, fostering a sense of collaborative belonging, and integrated learning.

Introduction

Universally, higher educational institutions face mounting pressure to deliver high-quality teaching that prepares students for professional success. This pressure stems from factors such as the evolving job market, increased competition among institutions, and the growing demand for graduates with relevant skills and knowledge (Campbell et al., 2017; Latif et al., 2019; Ruben, 2018). In response to these demands, new job prospects have emerged for artists and arts educators, particularly in arts-based initiatives that connect with other sectors, such as the gaming industry and social work (Lehikoinen, 2018). As Westerlund and Gaunt (2022) note, professionalism is an ever-evolving concept that is closely tied to how educators perceive the role and potential of music in society.

Educators play a crucial role in the process, delivering curriculum, facilitating learning, and equipping students with the knowledge and skills they need for their future careers (Sankey & Foster, 2012). Research indicates that as teachers interact with their students, they continuously adapt their belief systems and practices to better support student learning and well-being (Spruce et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2009). To keep pace with rapid societal changes,

technological advancements, and the evolving inner lives of students, classrooms and teaching methods must evolve even more swiftly (Hendricks, 2023).

In 2022 and 2023, educators specializing in music education, visual arts, and creative arts from South African and Finnish universities participated in the Southern African and Finnish Higher Education Institutions' Network for Health and Wellbeing (SAFINET) teacher¹ exchange program. The partners in this network include the South African University of Pretoria (UP) and the University of Zululand (UNIZULU), along with the University of Jyväskylä (JYU) and the University of Oulu (OY) in Finland. All four universities are known for their emphasis on training preservice teachers in music and art, as well as offering specialized undergraduate and postgraduate programs in these disciplines. The collaborative initiative, funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland, aimed to explore shared cultural activities to foster a sense of belonging in local and intercultural educational settings.

Finland is recognized for its exceptional arts education standards in schools (Anttila, 2018; Biesta, 2020; Väkevä et al., 2017; Westerlund et al., 2021), while South African schools struggle to maintain arts within their educational programs (Muthivhi & Kriger, 2019; Magagula et al., 2022). It was surprising to find alignment between educators from both countries regarding their beliefs, opinions, and challenges in arts education in schools. Encouraged by this realization, the group decided to explore further collaboration opportunities, recognizing their potential to enrich our learning environments.

The visits fostered mutual understanding, and, inspired by this experience, the participants committed to building trust and relationships through the exchange of knowledge, learning materials and ideas. We recognized that we can learn from each other as educators, allowing us to continually reassess our practices. Such reassessment helps educators stay focused on what truly matters to our students, both within and across our diverse learning communities (Hendricks, 2023). Higher arts education institutions are being called to rethink their societal engagement, moving beyond fixed goals and traditional practices (Sutela et al., 2022). This shift includes a focus on developing individuals who live compassionately, work productively, and care for and respect others.

In the spirit of collaboration, the group collectively agreed to initiate our partnership by sharing our individual teaching philosophies. According to research, the foundation of successful teaching starts with the creation of a teaching philosophy, which serves as a

¹ In Finland, tertiary educators are referred to as teachers, while South Africa uses the term lecturers. The terms educator, lecturer, and teacher were alternated throughout the article.

reflection of an educator's individual beliefs and principles that direct the process of facilitating student learning (Conway, 2020; Gabriel, 2023; Sankey & Foster, 2012; Schönwetter et al., 2002). Writing a teaching philosophy statement is a fundamental aspect of both reflective and scholarly teaching and learning practices (Coppola, 2002; D'Souza et al., 2014). A teaching philosophy exposes the educator as an individual, effectively conveying their values (Laundon et al., 2020), unique style (Coppola, 2002), and personal experiences (Scholl, 2014). Teaching philosophy statements provide a foundation for assessing teaching methods, facilitate the sharing of ideas with others, and enable educators to monitor their professional growth and progress (Coppola, 2002; Gregory & Burbage, 2017; Laundon et al., 2020).

Our motivation to share our teaching philosophies stems from experiences as tertiary educators and researchers in music and art. We are curious about our approaches to teaching arts² and the principles guiding our students' artistic journeys in a higher educational environment. These environments differ in many ways: South African educators are affiliated with UP and UNIZULU. UNIZULU's Department of Creative Arts, emphasizes academic and research outputs alongside community projects that are relevant and viable for both the university community and the larger community it serves. UP's School of the Arts teaches art, music, and drama, producing postgraduate researchers and creative and performing artists contributing to South African communities. The Finnish arts educators come from JYU and OY. Their curricula in music vary, but in general the aim of music teacher training is to increase students' pedagogical skills, the use of music technology in learning, knowledge of music as a cultural, social, and psychological phenomenon, and creativity in music. We aim to share our collective perspectives on teaching art and want to answer the following question: "What constitutes the teaching philosophy of South African and Finnish art educators?"

Theoretical Premise

Developing a teaching philosophy that incorporates both lived experiences and aspirations for the future provides a liberating framework to actively engage with students, adapting and responding to their needs in real time, and through an iterative process (Beatty et al., 2020). Sharing our lived experiences regarding our teaching and learning practices prompted us to delve into various educational approaches. Our theoretical framework is closely linked to existing theoretical perspectives that will guide our study, particularly focusing on the implementation of diverse, student-centered teaching approaches in a compassionate manner.

² In this study, terms such as 'arts,' 'teaching arts,' 'arts educators,' and 'art' are used to encompass higher education studies in Music Education, Art Education, Visual Arts, and Creative Arts.

Compassion is a trait inherent to all individuals (Adhikari et al., 2023). Bergmark (2020) contends that a caring connection, or relationships in which people engage with compassion, are ethically important to humanity. Hendricks (2018) examined several methods for compassionate teaching, delineating six qualities of compassion: “trust, empathy, patience, inclusion, community, and authentic connection” (p. 8). Compassion and caring are integral to teaching and learning, as they create a supportive and nurturing learning environment (Anderson et al., 2020; Bergmark, 2020; Clouston, 2018; Nieto, 2006; Noddings, 2013). To do so, educators must expand their skills by understanding the diverse needs and experiences of students and adapt to new learning environments (Sutela, et al., 2022). As Hendricks (2018) notes, “By modeling compassion to those in our care, we plant seeds of compassion for the future” (p. 12).

The conceptualization of compassion and caring in education underscores their significant role in the holistic development of students, emphasizing empathy, understanding, and the creation of a student-centered, actively engaged, and inclusive educational space. A student-centered teaching approach encourages students to develop their own unique problem-solving strategies, collaborate with peers to discuss and refine these methods, and justify both their solutions and the reasoning behind them (Woods & Copur-Gencturk, 2024). According to Hendricks (2018), this approach not only places greater control and responsibility on students but also fosters a stronger sense of community.

Hendricks posited that teaching goes beyond intellectual development, and emphasized the importance of care. As compassionate teachers (Hendricks, 2018), it is essential to enhance listening skills, pose challenging questions to both students and oneself, and consistently evaluate the effectiveness of our established methods. This includes determining whether our traditional approaches remain relevant or if we need to broaden our perspectives and adopt new techniques. Compassionate teaching is fundamental in fostering positive teacher-student relationships, promoting a sense of belonging, and enhancing overall well-being within the educational community.

The personal narratives presented by the authors reflect our values, beliefs, and perspectives on teaching and learning in the arts. By highlighting the unique aspects of our teaching philosophies, our objective is to inspire active engagement among peers. We seek to foster a sense of community and collaboration, where we can learn from one another and contribute to discourse surrounding tertiary teaching in the arts. We aspire to establish a dynamic platform for meaningful dialogue and growth, empowering educators within the discipline to thrive and evolve.

Research Design

In this qualitative study, we adopt collaborative autoethnography as our research approach to explore the diverse voices contributing to our collective ‘story’ (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 737). Autoethnography transcends storytelling (Blalock & Akehi, 2018), emphasizing investigative importance (Ngunjiri et al., 2010; Winkler, 2018) and connecting personal experiences (*auto*) to broader cultural understanding (*ethno*) through systematic analysis (*graphy*) (Ellis et al., 2011; Núñez & Cuisia-Villanueva, 2020). An autoethnography asks thoughtful and reflective questions, delving into the experiences and meanings behind personal narratives and participant observations (Blalock & Akehi, 2018; Ellis et al., 2011; Ngunjiri et al, 2010). As participants and co-authors, we invite readers to insight into the unique culture among arts educators in higher education. Within our teaching and learning environments, we have nurtured a unique culture. A fundamental aspect of any culture is philosophy, which plays a vital role in validating its values, beliefs, and overall worldview (Tosam & Takov, 2016). This study focuses on our individual teaching philosophies, shaped by our specific cultural contexts within arts education at tertiary level. Through the authors’ perspectives, we aim to authentically represent and enhance the culture under examination, infusing our stories with realism (Winkler, 2018).

After two online meetings, the initial group of lecturers, who first met in 2022, decided to begin the project by collecting personal writings from each participant. These writings, shared on an online platform, focused on their own teaching philosophies, and were guided by three central themes: 1) I believe students are..., 2) I believe students learn best when..., and 3) I believe good teaching is.... The group then divided into three smaller teams to discuss finer details during two additional online meetings. During this phase, three lecturers chose to discontinue their collaboration.

In 2023, two new South African lecturers joined the project. Teachers from the University of Oulu conducted in-person interviews with them during a visit to South Africa, exploring the same themes. The first and third authors transcribed the interviews, and the first and second authors collaboratively conducted a thematic analysis. Following Clarke and Braun’s (2017) approach, they uncovered patterns, themes, and relationships within the data. Once the analysis was complete, the manuscript was circulated among all authors for feedback and contributions. The final document was approved by all authors.

Researcher-Participant Narratives

The participant-authors included four South African educators and six Finnish educators. Before delving into our findings, we share our personal narratives to offer more context and details about what we uniquely contribute to our teaching environments.

Dana – Visual Design Arts Lecturer

I am passionate about visual arts, and am always trying to enrich my own knowledge and broaden my cultural awareness. I expose myself to diverse areas to connect past, current and new theories, and practices. I love discussions and debates with students, and I relish the challenge of helping each one grow in confidence and knowledge. I have been doing this for nearly two decades now and I am still energized by my students and teaching.

Eveliina – Music Education Teacher

Do more, speak less. I encourage my students to experience the world and the music beyond words through their bodies and minds, where togetherness is shaped through musical and emotional encounters. They should understand that through these holistic experiences they can give meaning to what they went through, individually, and collectively. In music, communication and teaching transcend the verbal world. Through experience itself they can become sensitized to this idea.

Jussi – Music Education Teacher

A person takes on different roles in different social situations, and the role of a teacher is one of them. I think it is good that the role of a teacher is not in conflict with the rest of their personality, but a part of it. Each teacher, like each student, is unique, and I believe it is important for students to encounter different teaching styles to match their individuality.

Katja – Music Education Teacher

I bring self-compassion, peace of learning, and acceptance of ongoing growth to my teaching. We are all evolving, and as a teacher, I am in the front seat in fostering this growth in students as both human beings and future educational professionals.

Marja – Music Education Teacher

I divide teaching into three dimensions: teaching about the arts (content and skills), teaching about the arts (their meaning in everyday life), and teaching through the arts (e.g., cultural education). At the University of Oulu, a UNESCO-school, ethical themes are central in my teaching. Integrating ethics into group learning, through creating and composing requires a sensitive and skillful approach as students evolve within the ever-changing field of music.

Masedi – Creative Arts Lecturer

I call myself a “lazy” teacher because I mostly listen to what my students share. When they realize I value their opinions, they find the energy to surpass me. Their ideas challenge and inspire me to give more, and it is through this exchange that real growth occurs.

Mfundo – Creative Arts Lecturer

I strive to be an agent of change, moving away from traditional approaches to teaching and learning. I believe that knowledge is about sharing-between the teacher, the subject (content) and the students. The knowledge and skills I gained as a student and later as a teacher now help me guide my students. Through our interactions, I learn as much as I teach. Education is a continuous journey where the student, in turn, becomes the teacher.

Sanna - Music Education Teacher

I see unique possibilities in each student and help them believe in their skills through trusting in them. My approach focuses on learning by doing, embracing brave mistakes, developing teaching philosophies, and honing value-based reflection and emotion skills. I use phenomenon-based teaching strategies (e.g. combining global issues, value reflection, music, and communication skills), to build group dynamics through music.

Sonja – Music Education Lecturer

My teaching style is grounded in the belief that both life and music are rich and diverse. I aim to inspire my students to be open-minded, and equip them with the skills to become independent, versatile music educators. Teaching is more than imparting technical know-how; it is about connecting and inspiring students to reach their full potential as teaching artists. I strive to instill a passion for all musics, encouraging them not only to enhance their musicianship but also share their knowledge and enthusiasm with others.

Susanne – Art Education And Art History Teacher

I create environments where students feel safe to express themselves without fear. I encourage critical and communal thinking, focusing on themes such as power relations and emotions. I am especially interested in analyzing art and popular culture that is nasty, difficult, or challenging. Perhaps my main contribution to teaching environments is to try and create atmospheres in which these kinds of cultural products can be encountered in a safe and intellectually stimulating way.

Teaching Philosophies in Focus

The narratives representing our teaching philosophies, reflect both our teaching experiences and our understanding of the students we work with. Our teaching philosophies are structured around several key principles. Firstly, we prioritize understanding our students' capabilities and backgrounds. Secondly, we focus on identifying their habits, skills, and potential for learning. Lastly, we reflect on our own teaching skills, methodologies, and practices, recognizing that our role as art educators is dynamic and evolving. During data analysis, the

narratives were examined within the framework of Hendricks' (2018) dimensions of compassionate teaching.

“Students Are ...”

In response to the theme ‘I believe students are...,’ the educators shared experiences delving into “life histories,” capabilities, and self-awareness of students. Eveliina encountered that “students come from diverse starting points with different life histories and experiences that have shaped their identities and beliefs of themselves as learners a long way already.”

An Extension of Their “Life Histories”

Educators’ experiences resonate with the notion that the role of students’ socio-cultural and musical backgrounds, as well as their prior knowledge (Oleson & Hora, 2014) of art, culture, or the academic world, play a central role in how they learn. Masedi and Mfundo pointed out how their students, many of whom hail from a traditional, teacher-centered educational background, have been accustomed to a system where creativity was not encouraged. In such an environment, students’ ideas and opinions were often unnoticed.

Katja highlighted how the polarization of society is also reflected in the students: some have a better start to their studies at university than others and they are more likely to do well throughout their studies. On the other hand, those students who must study harder and catch up with their peers at the start of their studies are more likely to drop out. These students often suffer from mental health problems and many of the students have underdeveloped study skills and need support in planning, doing, and completing assignments. This polarization has also been recognized in studies of Crozier et al. (2019) and Crozier et al. (2008), which reported that students’ identities can be challenged and, for some, even violated and undermined by the polarization.

Embodiments of Diverse Capabilities

Teaching art (in any form) to students who lack a background in the subject was found to be challenging among teachers. Similar findings have been reported by Burn (2007) and Burn et al. (2007) regarding the development of student teachers’ professional knowledge. The diversity of the students was also reflected in their ages upon entering the university. As Susanne noted, “The biggest difference within our student [populations] probably derives from the fact that some come straight from high school, while others (especially on the Master’s level) come to do their studies as adults, having worked in the field for years already.” Sonja added, however, that regardless of background, students “are at university to prepare for their careers. Some might not have a clear idea yet where their main focus of interest lies, but use the opportunity to study to figure it out.”

In the realm of education, not many students initially grasp the full scope of what a university entails or comprehend their roles within it. For example, Masedi described students as 'diamonds in the rough,' that is, capable of much more than they initially believe. Also, Jussi expressed a profound belief in the limitless capabilities of students, contingent upon their sustained enthusiasm for the subject matter. Students are eagerly exploring novel ways to express and teach music and arts. Katja noted that students, in many instances, surpass her own abilities at their age, proficiently articulating their opinions, emotions, biases, and thoughts.

Jussi explained: "Music is a broad subject and students already have their own strong and weak areas when they enter music teacher training. Someone may be an experienced choir member, another may play an orchestral instrument, and yet another may be already a natural pedagogue." According to Sonja, many students have a good idea of the music styles they enjoy and recognize, and often they tend to prefer listening to their favorite classical and popular music styles. This poses a challenge for the teacher: how to combine the students' previous knowledge, skills, and interests so that studying is enjoyable for everyone, regardless of the level of competence.

Engaged in Self-Awareness and Critical Thinking

Katja realized that students exhibit a heightened awareness of their rights and a keen understanding of broader societal issues. The essence of self-awareness lies in recognizing our internal states, observing our external appearance and conduct, and understanding our interactions and surroundings in a social context (London et al., 2023). The engagement between teachers and students often involves a dynamic interplay of perspectives (Carless, 2020; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Many students actively challenge their educators through critical thinking. While they may question the teachers' experiences and viewpoints, these interactions frequently—but not always—lead to a mutual understanding through thoughtful discussions. Jones and Brown (2011) highlighted the mutual or reciprocal interaction, emphasizing the collaborative nature inherent in the mentoring relationship. Critical thinking and questioning teachers' perspectives is an essential part of a student's growth as a professional (Cáceres et al., 2020; Yuan & Stapleton, 2020). To give practical examples, Masedi prompted students to reflect on their identity, pushing beyond a mere name. The objective is to instill a broader perspective by asking questions such as 'Who are you? Where do you come from? Who are your people?' This exercise has served as a catalyst for students to realize that learning is not just a personal endeavor; it has wider implications for their communities. Dana also focused on altering the internal dialogue of 'I can't' and 'I won't,' advocating for a mindset that embraces trying new things and engaging with unfamiliar concepts. Beginning with the basics, this approach aligns with the belief that openness to learning is essential from the very start. Both approaches require teachers' patience, as they

support students in developing the confidence and self-efficacy necessary to accomplish specific tasks (Hendricks, 2018).

The lecturers thoughtfully acknowledged the rich tapestry of students' life histories, embracing and accepting their diverse values and experiences. Hendricks (2018) links this approach to fostering empathy and patience in supporting students' development. Recognizing and exploring their individual capabilities as prior knowledge serves as a catalyst for meaningful learning experiences. Moreover, nurturing students' self-awareness not only enhances their personal development but also fosters positive teacher-student and student-student relationships. Hendricks (2023) emphasizes the growing need to prioritize care, not just in individual teacher-student interactions, but in promoting collective well-being. By embracing these principles, educators can create inclusive and supportive learning environments where each student's unique strengths are valued and leveraged for collective growth and success.

Students Learn Best When...

Fostering a student-centered environment is one of the most impactful ways educators can enhance student learning (Doyle, 2023). Such an environment empowers students to take ownership of their education by making meaningful decisions about both the content and methods of their learning. In these learner-centered classrooms, collaboration becomes a fundamental practice, aligning closely with the principles of compassionate teaching, which values student autonomy, empathy, and mutual support.

They Receive Emotional Support

In the realm of art education, all educators agreed that students learn best when they experience a deep sense of connection and emotional support. Sanna, emphasized that students thrive when they feel loved and cared for, coupled with a clear understanding of the purpose behind their studies. Similarly, Eveliina and Katja recognized the significant impact emotions have on the learning process, noting that the ability to feel empowered and knowledgeable evokes strong emotional responses, both positive and negative. Several studies indicate that positive emotions enhance learning and contribute to academic success, influenced by self-motivation levels and satisfaction with learning materials (Tyng et al., 2017; Um et al., 2012).

Katja noted the potential hindrances students may face due to past negative experiences, such as being belittled or bullied in music education contexts. Despite these challenges, we highlight the resilience of students who, upon entering university, find the courage to try new things and connect with like-minded peers who share their passion for arts. Eveliina further emphasized that a non-judgmental atmosphere encourages open expression and

acknowledgement of emotions in learning. She also stressed the significance of a safe and accepting physical and social environment for effective learning, aligning with Hendricks et al.'s (2014) ideas for creating safe spaces for learning. Hendricks (2018) connected safe learning environments with an empathetic culture where there is “relational trust” (p.49), “inclusive education communities for everyone” (p.114), and an authentic connection to self, others, and music within a welcoming community. Jussi aimed to assist students in turning their weaknesses into strengths, encouraging continuous curiosity, and equipping them with the skills to thrive in the professional realm. Open-mindedness and the willingness to step outside one's comfort zone are identified as crucial components of successful learning experiences (Hudson & Luke, 2023).

They Are Actively Involved

Hendricks (2018) has proposed compassion as a means of approaching motivation and engagement in educational settings. Similarly, Cayubit (2022) clarified that university students are more motivated when they are encouraged to get involved in discussions and activities. In such compassionate and interactive environments, students feel more engaged, which ultimately enhances their learning experience. Sanna emphasized the importance of self-evaluation and peer-evaluation, allowing students to actively participate in goal-setting, planning, and timing of their learning journeys, leads to a positive learning experience. This aligns with the view of Carpenter and Pease (2012) that students who actively engage in their learning journey gain a deeper understanding of the content, develop a broader set of academic and life skills, and cultivate cognitive habits that prove beneficial beyond the classroom. Similarly, Dana advocated for a learning environment where students are encouraged to engage deeply with topics, defend their positions with valid arguments, and prioritize critical thinking over rote memorization. This method encourages students to challenge ideas and reshape their understanding of subjects, aligning with Palavan's (2020) call for 21st-century educators to prioritize fostering thinking skills over mere memorization to enhance cognitive development.

A Sense of Belonging Is Cultivated Through Collaboration

The encouragement of stepping into discomfort zones, self-reflection, and information-seeking skills, contributes to a well-rounded and effective learning experience. This resonates with the teachers' focus on fostering a sense of belonging, acceptance, and confidence in one's abilities. Hendricks (2018) explained that when students collaborate to create something meaningful and expressive, it has the potential to foster a sense of accomplishment and belonging. Susanne stressed the importance of students feeling a sense of belonging to the academic community in which they participate. The sense of community is foundational to optimal learning experiences with both peers and teachers. Callan (2016) discussed the concept of “dignity safety” (p. 65), underscoring the importance of fostering an environment

where all students feel equal and empowered to participate. Building on this idea, Harless (2018) emphasized that such a sense of safety is achieved through encouraging participation, which enhances visibility and expression; both of which are fundamental for active involvement in classroom discourse. This emphasis on participation aligns with Eveliina's support for co-creation, where students collectively construct their understanding of various topics.

Extending this collaborative perspective beyond the classroom, Marja suggested that collaboration between students and teachers should not be confined to the classroom but should also foster partnerships with different cultural institutions. Masedi's 'I teach you, you teach me' philosophy, rooted in African tradition, emphasized mutual learning and sharing of knowledge. Similarly, Hendricks (2018) linked the act of helping others to a "shared awareness" that fosters compassion and mutual understanding between people who are treated as equals (p.3).

Empowered Through Integrated Learning

Essentially, the authors collectively advocate for a learning environment breaking traditional classroom boundaries, emphasizing the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical, real-world applications. This holistic approach aims to equip students with the skills and mindset needed in both their academic and professional journeys. Masedi's three "I's"—interpret, implement, and innovate—form a powerful framework for student engagement. This approach challenges students to interpret scenarios, implement solutions in their lives and surroundings, and innovate in their roles as members of society. Using the example of teaching dance, Masedi has prompted students to apply these principles to their movement and interpret the world uniquely through their artistic expression. This way, students are trusted to develop and grow as artists and human beings, thereby taking responsibility for their own learning. Sanna and Sonja underscored the effectiveness of a teaching approach where theory and practice go hand in hand. The emphasis on practical application ensures that concepts are not merely studied in theory but are, as Sonja asserted, actively tried and tested in "real-world situations, extending its relevance to the world beyond the classroom."

Our reflections on teacher learning experiences and teaching approaches collectively support a dynamic, inclusive, and hands-on educational environment. The focus is on fostering a constructive learning process that integrates theory and practice, empowering students to actively shape their educational paths. By connecting compassionate teaching with the integration of theory and practice-based learning, we emphasize how compassion supports meaningful application while nurturing student growth and confidence in real-world scenarios. We suggest that students learn best when teaching is not merely about imparting knowledge but rather a shared journey of rediscovering the joy of learning. We agree that it is our responsibility to assist students in recognizing and cultivating their creativity, strengths,

and providing an environment conducive to individualized learning. Creating a safe and supportive community is paramount, as students will utilize their personalities as primary tools in their future professions, particularly in fields such as teaching arts.

The thrill of exploring new things, coupled with successful experiences at the edge of the unknown, instill a sense of self-directed research and practice. Similarly, we all believe that students learn best when given freedom and latitude to make errors, stressing the teacher's role in guiding towards alternative solutions. Involving students in discussions and valuing their input builds confidence and fosters a collaborative learning atmosphere. Providing students with the opportunity to influence and choose various aspects of their learning process enhances their overall learning experience.

I Believe Good Teaching Is...

A student-centered environment empowers students to take ownership of their education, encouraging them to make meaningful decisions about both the content and methods of their learning (Doyle, 2023). Teaching in this environment with compassion allows educators to relinquish control as an act of relational trust (Henricks, 2018). This creates a space that is sensitive to and recognizes student diversity, enabling compassionate pedagogical decision-making that contributes to understanding how students learn best.

Embracing Student Diversity

Good teaching is being open to the uniqueness of each student and acknowledging their diversity is essential in our teaching philosophy. Katja, for example, emphasized the importance of understanding students' backgrounds, skills, and modes of expression, shaping their teaching approach to fit each student individually. In her teaching, Katja stressed the equality of all students, valuing everyone's contributions and creating an inclusive atmosphere where everyone's thoughts and feelings are respected. This approach creates a space where students actively engage in peer interaction, sharing their strengths while gaining new perspectives from one another (Hendricks et al., 2014). Encouraging self-expression within a supportive environment enhances these authentic connections, a key quality of compassionate teaching (Hendricks, 2018). In our teaching philosophy, good teaching is based on the idea that we know our students on a personal level. Understanding pedagogy is crucial, yet the success of students hinges significantly on educators establishing meaningful connections with individuals from diverse backgrounds, regardless of the educators' own backgrounds (Nieto, 2006). Masedi spoke of giving a concrete example, as he often started classes with conversations to understand students' motivations, while Katja valued the benefits of an experienced teacher's ability to utilize students' knowledge and skills to enhance the learning experience.

Pedagogical Decision-Making

Effective teaching means that the teacher is aware of students' prior knowledge, skills, and experiences is crucial in making pedagogical choices in teaching. Mfundo, for example, emphasized the importance of tapping into students' existing knowledge to facilitate learning. In our teaching philosophy, we advocate for starting from the known to the unknown, making concepts more accessible by relating them to familiar experiences. This approach aligns with Wiggins's (2015) viewpoint that understanding new ideas requires connecting them to previously acquired knowledge. Sharing prior knowledge in inclusive classrooms settings can foster collaboration and mutual learning, aligning with compassionate, community-oriented teaching (Fernández, 2024). For example, when teaching music theory, Mfundo explained that he starts with examples from songs students are familiar with, making abstract concepts like rhythm and melody easier to understand. By connecting to students' prior knowledge, Mfundo ensured that learning is meaningful and engaging. Dana underscored the meaning of staying up-to-date with current cultural and artistic trends as it allows teachers to engage students and help them find connections between their interests and the subject matter. This idea is supported by Harackiewicz et al. (2016), who recommended leveraging students' existing interests by integrating instruction within the context of those interests. By incorporating contemporary tools and trends into teaching practices, educators can enhance learning experiences and adapt to the evolving needs of students. Sonja realized that a transformative learning environment—one that fosters creativity, critical thinking, and adaptability—should promote students developing the skills necessary to find a meaningful role as a teaching artist in today's society. Jaffe et al. (2015) explained, “Yes, art is “good for you” and “good for society.” It makes you think, it helps you learn things, and it can be a powerful tool for revealing all sorts of truths and communicating them” (p. 13).

The teachers' pedagogical approaches reflect the inclusion of student opinions and diverse prior knowledge, nurturing trust by staying current with student interests to help students develop the skills needed for their future teaching careers. These approaches align with Hendricks' (2018) perspectives on compassionate teaching. By making transformative educational decisions, educators can equip students with the confidence and expertise to thrive as teaching artists in an ever-evolving artistic and educational landscape.

Understanding the Way Students Learn Through Empathy and Emotional Sensitivity

Wiggins (2015) highlighted that understanding how students learn is essential for effective teaching, as individuals construct their own understanding of experiences. By making a sincere effort to grasp our students' perspectives, educators can practice “cognitive empathy” (Hendricks, 2018, p. 65) thereby fostering a deeper connection with their learning process. Employing a variety of teaching and learning approaches promotes holistic growth and critical

thinking among students. Sanna emphasized the role of teaching in guiding students, encouraging reflection, information seeking, and critical thinking skills. Similarly, Marja supported the importance of verbal communication in arts education in Finland, emphasizing the significance of discussing ideas and concepts rather than solely focusing on tactile or experiential knowledge. Susanne advocated for the use of multimedia resources, group discussions, and practical exercises to enhance learning experiences. Ultimately, the goal of music education is to equip students with the skills and competencies needed to contribute meaningfully to society. As the working environment evolves, students must develop the ability to adapt and innovate, potentially creating their own opportunities in both Finland and the modern South African context.

Emotions play a vital role in understanding the educational experiences of both students and teachers (Linnenbrink, 2006). An approach that values emotional awareness in the classroom is essential for creating a positive and supporting learning environment. According to Jussi, teaching with emotional sensitivity involves dynamic interaction, requiring teachers to be adaptable and responsive to unforeseen circumstances. By maintaining clear goals while being open to improvisation, teachers can explore various paths to student insight and learning. Similarly, Dana promoted openness to all possibilities and opportunities for growth and change. Being flexible and receptive to new ideas and emotions enables continuous development for both teachers and students.

Discussion

While this collective autoethnography has offered a unique and insightful method for exploring our personal and professional experiences as South African and Finnish art educators, it has several limitations. These include *cultural specificity*—shaped by distinct histories, societal values, and educational traditions—*subjectivity*, which may arise from the personal biases of participants that could privilege certain perspectives over others, and *power dynamics*, which pose a risk of dominant voices overshadowing others. Combining this method with other qualitative approaches could enhance the validity and depth of the findings.

Recognizing these complexities, our proposed teaching philosophy centers on compassionate teaching, emphasizing inclusion, authentic connections, empathy, community, trust, and patience (Hendricks, 2018). Teaching with compassion and care involves inclusive practices that consider each student's strengths and learning styles, fostering a sense of ownership in their learning. We have concluded that effective teachers are not only passionate about their discipline and teaching but also prioritize the well-being of their students. This sentiment resonates with Hendricks's (2022) statement, "I have never met a person—teacher or otherwise—who did not consider the act of caring as fundamental to good teaching" (p. 42).

Demonstrating care encompasses a holistic understanding of the educational context and can significantly influence students' engagement with course material, enthusiasm for learning, and goals for the future. When educators embrace shared responsibility through compassionate teaching, they enhance the competencies of both themselves and their students (Bergmark, 2020). We believe that teaching through the arts fosters a communal atmosphere where everyone can participate equally, promoting authentic connections and facilitating knowledge creation. Additionally, educators could encourage students to express disagreements, thereby refining their empathy and conflict resolution skills (Hendricks, 2018). In our experience, a teacher's vulnerability humanizes the learning experience, allowing students to practice empathy and recognize that perfection is an unrealistic expectation.

Effective teaching guides students in discovering their unique ways of participation. In our teaching, we offer options, involve students in task and examination planning, engage in meaningful dialogues with peers and the teacher, and ensure a supportive learning environment. Taking extra care to prioritize their sense of safety in learning situations is paramount. The establishment of a feeling of safety is not solely the responsibility of a teacher but also relies on the support provided by other figures in the student's life, such as peers (Hendricks et al., 2014). Through active listening, sharing, and observation, a genuine and straightforward connection is fostered. In this paradigm shift, the role of the teacher transforms into that of a facilitator. The emphasis is on viewing students as fountains of knowledge, with the teacher guiding and nurturing their innate abilities.

Establishing shared goals and understanding in social learning contexts is essential, facilitated by cognitive social capital (Chang & Chuang, 2011). Assignments should promote collaboration, wherein students are encouraged to think, learn, and reflect together while synthesizing new knowledge from their existing understanding and acquired information. Hendricks (2018) supports a pedagogical approach that emphasizes collaborative creative involvement, where individuals—regardless of age or experience—are recognized as equals in the shared human experience. This approach aligns with the authors' advocacy for transparency in content, goals, and assessment, as it empowers students by providing them with clear expectations.

This collective perspective has portrayed students as dynamic, multifaceted individuals—diamonds in the rough—whose potential becomes evident when provided with the right environment and encouragement. The educational journey, therefore, becomes a process of uncovering and refining these latent abilities, potentially transforming students into brilliant contributors to society.

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