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Teaching Reform of the "Music Education for Preschool Children" Course in Open Education Based on Learners' Needs

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Abstract

Understanding learners' needs is a prerequisite for teaching reform in open education. By distributing a self-designed electronic questionnaire and analyzing the 282 responses collected, the study found that learners have a demand for further learning, require online learning resources, expect face-to-face tutoring sessions, hope to apply their learning to solve practical challenges in their work, and desire adjustments to the assessment methods. The course teaching reform will be centered around these learner needs.

Keywords

Learners' Needs, Teaching Reform, Music Education for Preschool Children

1. Introduction

"Music Education for Preschool Children" is a core course in the Open University's Early Childhood Education (college diploma) program. Through this course, learners will master effective methods to guide preschool children in gaining musical experiences. The course is highly practical and relatively challenging, requiring learners to possess a foundational knowledge of music and dance, as well as the ability to integrate concepts from previously studied courses such as pedagogy, psychology, and activity design. Ultimately, learners should be capable of making appropriate educational decisions for children's music and dance learning.

The course has been offered in rolling sessions for nearly 30 terms. However, over the past decade, the landscape of early childhood education has undergone significant changes, and the demographics and learning methods of open and distance education learners have also evolved. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate

and reassess learners' foundational knowledge and needs to lay a solid groundwork for curriculum reform.

2. Survey on Current Learning Status and Learning Needs

2.1. Research Methods

This study primarily employs a self-designed questionnaire survey method, supplemented by semi-structured interviews with selected learners and instructional tutors. Based on the learning processes and key elements of open education, as well as the characteristics of the course, the researcher initially developed the questionnaire and interview outline. A preliminary survey and interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of teachers and learners, after which the questionnaire and interview outline were revised and refined.

Subsequently, electronic questionnaires were distributed across nine municipal learning centers in Zhejiang Province, including Hangzhou, Huzhou, Jiaxing, Shaoxing, Jinhua, Quzhou, Wenzhou, Taizhou, and Lishui. A total of 282 valid questionnaires were collected, and the data were statistically analyzed.

In parallel, classroom observations were conducted at some learning centers, and interviews were carried out with both tutors and learners to gain deeper insights into their perspectives and needs. These qualitative findings were used to validate the statistical results from the questionnaire survey, providing valuable references for future course teaching reforms.

2.2. Results of the Survey

2.2.1. Learner Demographics

Among the enrolled learners in this course, 84.8% were female and only 0.7% were male. The majority of students are 20 - 30 years old, of which 42.2% are 20 - 25 years old, 15.6% are 25 - 30 years old, and 18.5% are over 30 years old. Of the students enrolled in this programme, about 69.1% were engaged in pre-primary education and about 1.1% were teachers of other ages.

2.2.2. Foundation for Course Learning

Singing, piano, and dance skills form the essential foundation for this course, as they are the most frequently utilized competencies in preschool music education. Before learning this course, 44% of learners considered their current knowledge basically sufficient, 11.7% have mastered music theory, 36.5% will learn as needed, 6% report no understanding. About Sight-Singing and Pitch Accuracy, 44% maintain good pitch accuracy when singing, 9.9% can sight-read sheet music while singing expressively, 38.7% can follow along with piano accompaniment accurately, 6.3% tend to sing off-key. In terms of Piano and Dance Skills, 47.2% possess basically adequate skills, 8.5% have advanced proficiency, 28.7% will acquire skills when required, 14.5% currently lack these abilities.

2.2.3. The Purpose of Course Learning

The survey results indicate that 29.1% of learners expect to acquire music educa-

tion theory through this course, 75.9% aim to improve their practical skills, 53.5% hope to enhance their overall competence through the course, while only 27.3% are taking it because it's a compulsory requirement. From an emotional perspective, learners who report liking or strongly liking this course account for 73% of the total respondents. As shown in **Figure 1**.
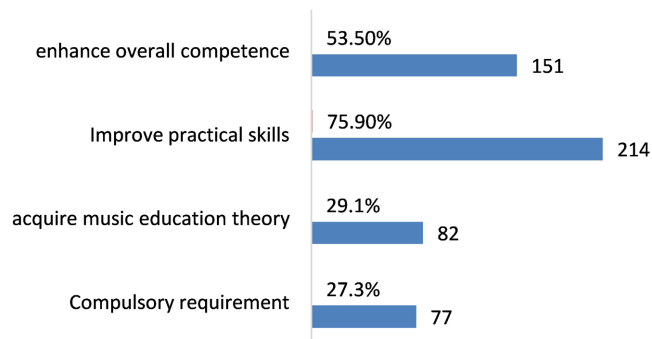

Figure 1. The purpose of course learning.

2.2.4. Preferred Learning Methods

Independent study and face-to-face tutoring sessions serve as the primary learning approaches for open education students. Survey results indicate that 77% of learners occasionally find time for self-directed learning, while 29.4% persistently overcome difficulties to maintain independent study. Regarding tutorial attendance, 60.6% occasionally participate in face-to-face sessions, with 34.8% consistently attending. In terms of peer interaction, 41.5% occasionally contact classmates regarding academic questions, 32.3% actively engage in classroom discussions, and 17% frequently collaborate with peers to resolve learning issues. Notably, 57.4% proactively utilize library resources and online materials to supplement course learning. When examining format preferences, 57.4% favor face-to-face instruction, 57.1% prefer online learning platforms, 41.8% opt for textbook-based self-study, and 26.6% enjoy group collaborative learning. As shown in **Figure 2**.
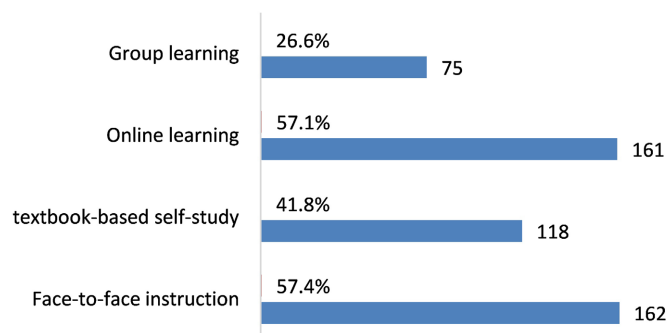

Figure 2. Learners' preferred learning methods

Regarding the content of face-to-face tutorial sessions, the survey reveals that

41.8% of the sessions focus on connecting with learners' actual work experience, primarily using case study methods; 23% concentrate on explaining key points while expanding on course content; 16% involve textbook content review, whereas 11.3% are dedicated solely to pre-exam coaching. Notably, 69.2% of learners expressed their preference for tutorial sessions to be closely integrated with practical kindergarten work scenarios, such as analyzing specific teaching cases or conducting teaching simulations. Additionally, some learners suggested incorporating teacher lectures or skill-based training activities like singing exercises.

Regarding online real-time teaching activities (including course forums and two-way video instruction), 54.6% of learners indicated they would participate if aware of such activities organized by instructors, while 24.5% reported knowing about them but either lacking time or interest to join. Notably, 30.9% of learners perceive value in these online real-time teaching activities, whereas 19.9% prefer seeking face-to-face instructors when encountering problems. Concerning the content of online real-time activities, 20.8% of learners anticipate content focused on musical knowledge and skills, while 41.6% hope for content closely integrated with practical preschool music education, such as exemplary recorded or open classes followed by related discussions.

2.2.5. Perspectives on Online Course Resources

Given the quasi-separation of teachers and students in open education, learning resources play a crucial instructional role. Survey results indicate that 40.4% of learners rely on printed textbooks, 67.4% utilize online course materials, and 70.9% frequently use resources provided by tutors. Additionally, peer-shared materials are widely accessed, accounting for 43.6%. Among all digital resources, over 60% of learners find teaching documents and instructional guides most valuable, while 42.6% prioritize educational videos, and 37.6% value reference materials. Specifically, for video content, real-world recordings of preschool music classes are the most preferred, followed by music theory tutorials. These findings highlight learners' strong preference for practical, work-applicable resources that address real-world challenges and supplement subject knowledge gaps. As shown in **Figure 3**.
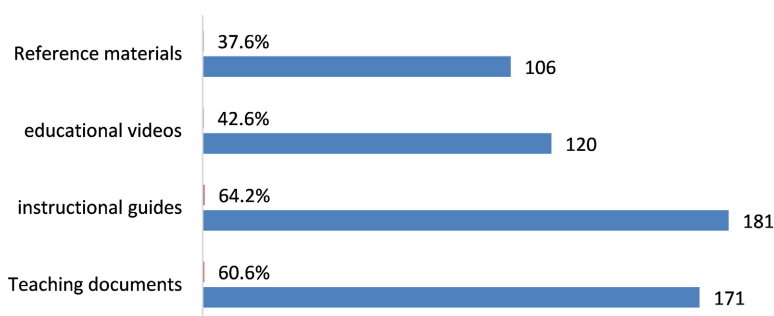

Figure 3. Resources considered valuable.

2.2.6. Attitudes toward Practical Teaching in the Course

This course places strong emphasis on practical application, with 52.1% of learners expressing keen interest in its hands-on teaching components. Regarding preferred practical teaching methods: 70.6% favor video demonstrations followed by discussions; 48.6% select written case study analysis; 46.5% recommend simulated teaching scenarios. Additional endorsed approaches include group discussions, activity-based teaching, and diligent note-taking.

2.2.7. Completion Status of Course Assessments

Regarding the formative assignments for this course, 56.7% of learners can complete them independently but will consult instructors if questions arise, while 19.9% prefer instructors to explain the answers directly. As for the content, question types, and volume of these assignments, most learners expressed a preference for smaller quantities, simpler question formats, and easier tasks. Some learners specifically suggested incorporating more practical application components, adding instructional design questions, and ensuring alignment between formative assessment content and final examinations.

Approximately 44% of learners read through the textbook once while completing formative assignments, with 21% managing to review the textbook twice. Additionally, 16% of learners reread sections of personal interest after their initial textbook review. However, 7.4% admitted not having read the textbook at all before examinations.

Concerning final examinations, 37.2% of learners reported conducting thorough review sessions beforehand, while another 24.1% emphasized the importance of consistent study throughout the term. Regarding examination format preferences, 71.3% favored open-book tests, and 15.2% advocated for eliminating final exams altogether, suggesting that 100% continuous assessment through formative assignments would better evaluate course learning.

2.2.8. Learning Needs and Outcomes

Adult learners engaging in continuing education emphasize practicality, aiming to solve real-world problems (Freeman, 2008). Therefore, understanding the challenges learners face both in their work and during the course is essential. Regarding workplace difficulties, survey results show: 55% of learners feel inadequately skilled in preschool music education; 45% lack understanding of music education theory; 23.4% struggle with organizing music activities; 23% face difficulties managing classroom discipline. For course-related challenge, 46.8% cite music knowledge and skills as their main difficulty; 44.7% struggle with music education theory; 43.6% find it hard to connect theory to practice; 16.7% lack motivation and avoid reading materials. The table below compares learners' initial expectations with their actual outcomes after completing the course. As shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Learning expectations and practical gains.

	Items	Number of participants (N)	Ratio
Expectation before learning	Master music education theory and broaden knowledge horizons	178	63.1%
	Master the methods and procedures of music activities	188	66.7%
	Master classroom management techniques	139	49.3%
	Else	47	16.7%
Practical gains	Very rewarding	140	49.6%
	Limited gains	88	31.2%
	Hard to say	31	11.0%
	No gains	7	2.5%

2.2.9. Results of Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were primarily conducted around the content covered in the survey questionnaire, with interviewees randomly selected based on convenience sampling principles. Through interviews with more than twenty teachers and learners, the conclusions drawn were largely consistent with the statistical results of the questionnaire survey. This can be said to have, to a certain extent, validated the findings from the interviews.

2.3. Research Findings

Through data analysis of 282 questionnaires, we have gained a clear understanding of learners' course participation and further insights into their challenges and needs.

1) Learners demonstrate genuine needs for further education. As a predominantly young cohort, they lack adequate musical knowledge and skills required for this course while encountering significant challenges in practical work settings. Although workplace-study conflicts are prominent for these in-service learners, a proportion persists diligently in their studies due to strong learning motivations. Their participation stems from clear expectations: to enhance subject knowledge and practical competencies through learning, ultimately aiming to improve both professional performance and life circumstances.

2) Learners have specific requirements for online learning resources. While they do utilize available digital course materials, their primary expectation is for web-based content that directly addresses practical workplace needs—resources that help resolve real professional challenges rather than abstract theoretical discussions. Specifically, they strongly prefer video recordings of actual preschool music activities and instructional content on musical fundamentals that demonstrate concrete classroom applications.

3) Hold expectations for Face-to-Face Tutorials. Despite the prevalence of self-directed and online learning, along with advancing technologies and the growing

promotion of mobile learning theories, learners still strongly value in-person instruction. During face-to-face sessions, teachers and students engage in discussions about real-life teaching cases encountered in daily practice. Through these exchanges and the teacher's guidance, learners gain practical solutions to their professional challenges, creating a tangible sense of achievement. Moreover, these tutorials foster emotional connections between instructors and peers. This networking enables direct consultation when future issues arise and cultivates a meaningful sense of belonging to the learning institution.

4) Learners expect the course's practical components and online real-time instruction to focus squarely on musical knowledge and skills and preschool music teaching practices. Their primary challenges—both professionally and academically-stem from deficiencies in musical competencies and difficulties implementing music activities in early childhood settings. Consequently, they explicitly request that instructors structure both face-to-face and online teaching around these two core areas to elevate their subject matter expertise and enhance their instructional capabilities.

5) Request for Simplified Course Assessments. As most learners are working preschool teachers heavily engaged in frontline early childhood education with limited time for studying, they hope to reduce the difficulty of course assessments. They believe traditional closed-book written examinations are unsuitable for their situation and suggest decreasing or eliminating memory-based test formats like fill-in-the-blank questions. Instead, they propose adopting more flexible assessment methods that align with their actual working conditions and focus on evaluating work-related practical content.

3. Curriculum and Teaching Reform Based on Learner's Needs

3.1. The "Iron Triangle" of Quality Assurance in Open Universities

The three fundamental elements—teaching factors, learning factors, and institutional management factors—form the "iron triangle" (Chai, 2015) that determines quality assurance in open universities. Regarding teaching factors, instructors' development of teaching materials, construction of course resources, and design and implementation of both online and offline teaching activities significantly impact the improvement of educational quality. For learning factors, learners' motivation, self-directed learning capabilities, and self-management skills are particularly crucial. Concerning management factors, the proper execution of each step in open and distance education processes, along with the effective coordination and integration of various resources, plays a vital role in ensuring teaching quality. Only when these three elements operate in a highly coordinated state can teaching quality be maintained at a high level. This paper focuses specifically on the teaching perspective, exploring how instructional reforms in this course can enhance overall teaching quality.

3.2. Specific Measures for Curriculum and Teaching Reform

3.2.1. Establishing a "Competency-Focused, Practice-Oriented" Foundational Course Philosophy

This curriculum reform is grounded in the Professional Standards for Kindergarten Teachers (Trial) and Teacher Education Curriculum Standards (Trial), with special emphasis on "competency focus" and "practice orientation". The main learner population of open universities consists of frontline kindergarten teachers. Survey results show they strongly hope to solve practical problems through learning. Therefore, the course development will emphasize competency cultivation and practical awareness, focus on real-world issues, reflect the new requirements for teachers from educational reform and development, help learners identify and solve practical problems, innovate teaching models, and develop their own practical teaching wisdom.

3.2.2. Establishing a Curriculum Objective System Composed of Professional Values, Knowledge, and Competencies

Objectives represent expectations for outcomes, and articulating them in detail and with clarity contributes to the achievement of effective teaching outcomes. The fundamental value orientation of music education for preschool children is to cultivate personality through music education. When setting curriculum objectives, the first priority should be to help learners update their understanding of music education while broadening their perspectives and solidifying their foundational competence in music education. In terms of professional knowledge, learners are expected to master the developmental progression of children's musical abilities, understand the principles of the four key elements of preschool music education—objectives, content, implementation, and evaluation—and acquire implementation strategies for singing activities, appreciation activities, group dance activities, percussion instrument performance activities, as well as music education in daily routines. They should also become familiar with the value orientations, content, and methods of evaluation in preschool music education. Regarding professional competencies, special emphasis is placed on the ability to design child-appropriate scenarios for musical works and represent them through child-friendly movements (Wang, 2022), the ability to identify and confirm the core experiences of children's music learning and provide corresponding guidance, the ability to design and implement various types of music activities in kindergarten, and the ability to evaluate these activities.

3.2.3. Developing Integrated Curriculum Learning Resources Emphasizing Practical Competency Development

Learning resources and online platforms are the two core pillars of distance and open universities (Yan, 2011). The pre-designed learning resources provided by instructors primarily include printed materials and online resources, such as teaching documents, instructional guidance, video lectures, and reference materials. Additionally, there are supplementary learning resources, such as university libraries, digital repositories, and open online courses available on the internet

(Yang & Liu, 2012). These pre-designed learning resources are developed through an integrated approach to ensure mutual reinforcement and complementary support among different resource types. When online courses are launched, supplementary learning resources are incorporated to broaden learners' perspectives and enhance their educational experience.

Prior to compiling the new edition textbook, comprehensive research was conducted on the knowledge and skill requirements for kindergarten music teachers. The textbook system is organized according to the formats of kindergarten music education activities. The textbook incorporates numerous exemplary kindergarten teaching cases, covering all types of music education activities while meeting the teaching demands across Junior Class, Middle Class, Senior Class. In terms of quality, the content strictly adheres to the latest music education concepts. The textbook layout includes learning guidance and support functions, with lively formatting designed to engage learners (Freeman, 2008). Online learning resources are developed in coordination with the printed materials. For instance, the digital instructional guides provide condensed summaries of textbook content, while teaching cases are presented through music and dance demonstration videos to facilitate direct imitation and practice. These videos primarily consist of 5 - 15-minute micro-lessons, aligning with kindergarten teachers' preferences for video learning resources (Heng & Liang, 2017). The presentation of online courses also incorporates instructional design considerations.

3.2.4. Carefully Designed Teaching Activities with Clear Practical Requirements

The teaching activities in open education primarily adopt a blended model combining face-to-face tutorial sessions and online real-time teaching activities. Face-to-Face Tutorial Sessions are conducted by course tutors at local learning centers. Each tutor customizes their instruction based on their professional expertise and the learners' existing knowledge levels and needs. A key focus is implementing the practical requirements specified in each course unit. Online Real-Time Teaching Activities are delivered collaboratively by the core teaching team. The activities extend beyond textbook and online course content through supplementary modules such as music theory, piano accompaniment, Chinese/western music history, vocal training, dance, and music education activity design, discussions on practical issues in kindergarten music education, to address gaps in learners' music/dance knowledge. This dual approach ensures comprehensive support for learners' professional development needs.

3.2.5. Revamping Assessment Methods to Prioritize Practical Competency Evaluation

Traditional paper-based examinations, which primarily test rote memorization of textbook knowledge, have proven ineffective in developing learners' practical skills and fail to align with the learning characteristics of adult students. The reformed assessment system strategically allocates knowledge-based evaluation to formative assessments while emphasizing practical competency in summative

evaluations. This includes analyzing case materials to assess understanding of educational philosophies and teaching strategies embedded in music activities, designing instructional activities to evaluate planning and implementation capabilities, and adapting musical works for child-appropriate scenarios and movement expressions. By aligning assessment methods with course objectives, this new system effectively measures the attainment of learning outcomes upon course completion.

4. Reform Outcomes and Future Research Directions

Upon completion of the teaching reform, the newly revised textbooks and online teaching resources were implemented for four semesters, and remarkable teaching outcomes were achieved. Instructional supervisors have observed that the online courses, particularly the video resources, have significantly enhanced teaching quality. For learners, these video materials have transformed previously abstract musical concepts into visible, tangible forms. Students are now able to view and practice along with the videos repeatedly, and furthermore, guide young children to learn music through physical movements demonstrated in the videos. This innovative learning approach has not only increased learners' engagement and interest, but more importantly, has substantially improved their comprehension of musical works, thereby effectively fulfilling the course's instructional objectives.

The course teaching team will soon conduct the first teaching survey since the pedagogical reform. This survey aims to collect learner feedback on the quality and usage of printed textbooks and online learning resources, course teaching methodologies, assessment results, and overall learning satisfaction. By analyzing this feedback and incorporating the latest research findings in the discipline, the team will upgrade course resources accordingly, explore ways to integrate teaching staff and resources across provincial, municipal, and county-level learning centers and develop more effective teaching models specifically tailored for distance learners.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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