Reflections on swings and roundabouts teaching music in initial teacher education programs: '2020 a year like no other'

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Abstract

In 2020, the global pandemic impacted all aspects of life, including higher education. Many universities shifted their programs from face-to-face to online teaching and learning. In this paper, I draw on an autoethnographic narrative to share my story of working in initial teacher education programs as tertiary music educator at a metropolitan university. My story is not unique; it focuses on how I managed and coped with the sudden changes. It also highlights some challenges and opportunities I encountered. The 'swings and roundabouts' that emerged from my year adds to the growing body of international research on music teaching and learning during an extraordinary year. Lessons learnt will help navigate a better 2021.

Key words: autoethnography, initial teacher education, music education, online teaching

Introduction

The year 2020 was met with the huge disruption to life across the globe, including education systems (UNESCO, 2020). With the spread of COVID-19 impacting all aspects of life, many educators across educational settings had to hastily transition from face-to-face (F2F) teaching to online/remote teaching. For many, this unforeseen and enforced changeover presented a range of challenges and constraints for individuals and organisations (Carrillo & Flores, 2020). The higher education sector in most places around the world shifted to online learning or distance education since the pandemic began (Czerniewicz, 2020; Toquero, 2020).

I work in initial teacher education (ITE) as music educator at a metropolitan university in Melbourne. I am Unit Chair (UC) of core arts education units within the Associate Degree of Education (ADE) Bachelor of Education (Primary) (B.Ed. primary) and the Master of Teaching (MTeach) program. I draw on an autoethnographic narrative (Clandinin &

Connolly 2000) to share my story of laconic 'swings and roundabouts' of a year like no other (Connolly & Clandinin, 1990). There is limited published research about the experiences of tertiary music educators in Australia teaching music to ITE students during lockdown in 2020. A decade ago Horspool and Yang (2010, p.16) made the point that little has been written about "how music can be taught online in higher education". My paper adds to the growing body of research beginning to focus on managing change during the pandemic. It also highlights how music can positively contribute to wellbeing.

Methodology

As a qualitative research methodology, autoethnography focuses on the researcher's voice and personal experience (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010). My autoethnography is a form of narrative that uses the first-person voice (Siddique, 2011). My voice is a "personal accountability, [an] active voice, presenting a truthworthy narrative,

which contains the pitfalls as well as the strengths" of my lived experience (Dyson. 2007, p. 40). My narrative is situated within my everyday work of practice (Jasper, 2005; Creswell, 2015). It serves as a way to improve and adapt my practice, and to understand the broader context where I can make a difference (Bulman & Schutz, 2004; Thomas, 2012).

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011, p. 279) found that personal narratives are "the most controversial forms of autoethnography". While my narrative provides an understanding of self, it also allows the reader to learn from my practice and to make sense of their lived experience as music educators during the pandemic. I use the metaphor of 'swings and roundabouts' to convey the broad implications and some "big picture issues – emerging from the specifics and circumstances" teaching music within ITE programs during 2020 (Dyson, 2007, p. 42).

Theoretical perspectives

Remote teaching is not new, however, the pandemic has given rise to more educational sectors delivering lessons via electronic devices that require internet connectivity. Not all homes have reliable internet, technologies or instruments to aid learning (Daubney & Fautley, 2020). This posed a problem for some students in regional and rural Victoria as well as in certain metropolitan suburbs. Students encountered internet dropouts/outages due to a weak signal, which added more stress to studying online (Nichols, 2020). This aspect of effective connectivity experienced by music students (generalist and specialist) and sessionals (casual staff) was significant. While the decision to go online was made suddenly by management in response to government restrictions, the unequal access and affordability of the internet and data usage was not considered for students and staff (Czerniewicz, 2020).

Managing the change

As Unit Chair (UC), I had to swiftly complete paperwork for approval to handbook entries due to the sudden shift to online learning. The unexpected change from F2F to online study placed much strain on academics, sessionals and professional staff in relation to upgrading digital technologies. In addition, managing workload and supporting students and staff who experienced mental health concerns was equally draining. Teaching online was not a new phenomenon for me as my workplace has been a major Australian provider of distance/online education for 40 years (Stacey & Visser, 2005). The university provides the same learning resources and equivalent experiences to on-and-off campus students (Holt & Palmer, 2010).

My first-year students undertaking a core arts education unit and the mid-year intake of music specialist in the MTeach program missed out on experiencing F2F music teaching as all classes went online from the third week of the semester one in mid-March. As UC to core arts education units, ITE students in their first year of study (B.Ed., ADE and MTeach) found the switch to online learning new and exciting, and they felt staff were most supportive; nonetheless they also found learning online a stressful experience during the pandemic. Many students undertaking the B.Ed. (primary) and ADE found it difficult to connect theory to practice in their first year without the embodied experience. Nevertheless, Zoom served as a useful platform to model what was possible. By using 'sounds from home' (including electronic devices, and western and non-western instruments), students were introduced to the Victorian music curriculum, they learnt about the elements of music and created soundscapes within three weeks as the unit was shared with dance, drama and media and visual arts. Teaching music online to first year students was not ideal. Nonetheless they managed to work independently and in groups on music activities. I found attendance significantly improved using Zoom as students did not have to travel to campus. For those who may have had some work, all teaching was recorded through Zoom to cater for students who missed classes. The URLs were sent to the students' email directly, giving them the opportunity to view classes outside of their 'timetabled schedule lesson time'. Music students across the ITE programs

found the recordings useful as they were able to review and revise the lesson, making the links between content and pedagogical knowledge. The Zoom recordings also assisted those students who experienced 'dropouts' or had limited data usage as they were able to access links when convenient. I found some stories of job loss, having to move out of accommodation and relational breakups most distressing. Some students said they had no money to pay for internet usage and one reported walking to a nearby public place that offered free WIFI to watch the Zoom class.

The third-year B.Ed. music students had experienced F2F music classes in their first year undertaking a core arts education unit and were fortunate to have had two weeks of F2F teaching at the start of 2020. Thus, they were familiar with some of the classroom instruments when continuing the unit online. Through Zoom, they gained new knowledge and understandings about some music approaches (Orff, Kodály and Dalcroze) for example, experiencing these through singing, moving, playing on instruments and composing through Zoom. In addition, all weekly content was placed online for students to access. Students worked in break out rooms using Zoom to compose songs and raps using Chrome Music Lab for example. They produce excellent group compositions despite many not having classroom instruments. Their assessment tasks such as the group compositions could be included in their teaching portfolio.

Research in Australia shows that many generalist students lack confidence to teach music education (Jeanneret 1997; Russell-Bowie 2010; Joseph 2014; Ballantyne, Barrett, Harrison, Temmerman & Meissner 2008), therefore building skills and competencies is essential whether one is teaching F2F or online. Studies about music engagement has shown how music positively contributes to wellbeing (Alessandri, Rose & Westley, 2020; Clift et al., 2010; Lamont, 2011; Steyn et al., 2016). This rang true for students, sessional music staff and me. Experiencing periods of strict lockdown in Melbourne did not positively contribute to wellbeing, nevertheless many students said they used the time to play and compose music.

I cannot equally attest to this as I had other 'swings and roundabouts' to manage as academic.

Staying afloat

Teaching music to students undertaking the B.Ed., ADE and MTeach meant preparing instructional videos, which proved time-consuming and stressful (Özgür, 2020). I used Kultura and some of my sessionals used the video capture in PowerPoint for example or a camera to pre-record instructional videos. In some instances, Skype was used though I mostly used Zoom. Performing together was not feasible in real time due to the time lag coupled with unexpected internet dropouts (Burke, 2020; Joseph, Nethsinghe & Cabedo-Mas, 2018), this aspect of music making was challenging. While listening to all students singing together in real time was not possible, students were able to sing with their microphones on mute which was not ideal. Nonetheless, the class felt connected and had a sense of belonging as the music group, with the weekly meetings and kept them afloat.

Music classes were taught synchronously and asynchronously. This meant that I had to mentor and work closely with sessional (casual) staff on how to use the university's learning management platform. While the university ran professional learning for sessional staff, most sessionals did not attend; they preferred going over things with me one-on-one. As UC and full-time academic I did not have a formal role to mentor sessional staff, rather I offered sessionals across the arts education area, support and assisted colleagues wherever possible. In this way staff and students experienced a connection with and felt a sense of belonging to the School of Education while teaching and learning from home (Madison, Knight & Watson 1993). There were times when staff and students suffered ill-health, loss of job, death of a family member, loss of accommodation and relationship breakdowns that all impacted on their ability to manage their work, complete assessment tasks or attend Zoom classes. This meant added stress and strain on myself in my role as UC and full-time staff member. I dealt with an

abundance of extensions from students. They found it overwhelming studying from home during two strict lockdowns in Victoria. The university allowed three-week extensions without the need to provide supporting paperwork. Some staff unexpectedly suffered ill health and were on sick leave thus 'keeping things afloat' rested on those left standing. Showing pastoral care, and offering help to full-time staff, sessionals and students positively contributed to feeling supported and cared-for (Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020).

Concluding discussion: swings and roundabouts

The year 2020 for many music educators across educational settings would have been like no other. Many music educators like myself used a range of tools (Zoom, Kultura, discussion spaces, email and telephone) to teach, and to connect with students and staff. While technology supports teaching and learning, all technology had to be swiftly learnt, requiring support, and also leaving students to self-regulate their learning (Johnson & Merrick, 2020). Coping with 'change fatigue', managing technology issues, and connecting with students in diverse places, still meant quality music teaching had to be maintained. Teaching online is different to F2F teaching; it requires a different teacher presence (Lowenthal & Lowenthal, 2008). I found teaching in the online environment allowed for flexibility, offering some reserved students the opportunity to use the chat as a medium to ask questions or to work in a breakout room with fewer students. Through Zoom and Skype, I was able to offer synchronous classes, and by using the Cloud, I was able to conduct asynchronous online classes (Subekti, 2020). In addition, Zoom video conferencing meant I was able to invite musicians, music teachers, and academics into my music class as experts. Students found this most valuable and informative. Whether the class were offered synchronously or asynchronously, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication for example were essential

components in meeting the unit learning outcomes and graduate learning outcomes.

One of the setbacks during prolonged lockdowns meant that some B.Ed. and MTeach students postponed their placement (practicum). For many students, F2F placement and the experience of teaching in a school did not take place in 2020. Those who did manage to go on placement had to rapidly adapt to the school's learning management system, working with their supervising teacher while completing unit work (Daubney & Fautley, 2020).

A positive outcome of the pandemic was that students experienced online teaching and learning first-hand and were better prepared for online placement. Their actual experience of learning online has hopefully given ITE students an informed perspective of ways they could teach and assess in their future classrooms. The stress of the pandemic, and undertaking units online meant many students requested additional extensions. While this was expected, it also meant teaching staff marked for weeks on end and results for those students were uploaded later, which was time consuming in terms of paperwork.

Working from home in 2020 was met with a range of swings and roundabouts for students, sessionals staff and myself. As the months went by during 2020, more sustainable mechanisms from the university were put in place that enabled varying support for students and staff (Shirley, Hargreaves, Washington-Wangia, 2020). I found sending motivational emails, or posting uplifting messages to the CLOUD site and calling students helped boost their confidence and self-esteem, as students may have felt disengaged. It positively contributed to building relations with students, making them feel supported (Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020). With many uncertainties facing higher education in Australia due to COVID-19, I will continue to offer flexible modes of delivery in 2021.

Final thoughts

I acknowledge that this paper offers one voice, a limitation in itself. Therefore, generalisations about

other academics and institutions cannot be made. Further research needs to be undertaken in order to ascertain whether flexible pedagogical models can improve student learning outcomes that relate to technological content knowledge and technological pedagogical knowledge. Teaching during lockdown, using synchronous and asynchronous modes of delivering has opened up new ways in which I could teach as well as mentor staff and students. The shift to blended forms of learning lends itself to modifications in relation to what we teach, why we teach, and how we teach, keeping in mind being responsive to changing times (Toquero, 2020).

My year of 2020 'swings and roundabouts' has better prepared me for new opportunities and challenges. I look forward to working with professional organisations again where F2F workshops can be offered to ITE students. Returning to my work site and having some face-to-face interaction with students and staff post COVID 2020, is equally welcome. As we continue to live and teach in a COVID-normal world, online ITE programs may become popular, therefore tertiary music educators are called to document best processes that can improve and inform online practices within ITE programs. I recommend ongoing partnerships with music professional organisations in education settings and for music ITE students and music educators to undertake ongoing professional learning to keep abreast of emerging technologies and pedagogies. As we move into a post-COVID world, having conversations with other music educators is essential as we can support each other during this extraordinary time.

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