

Teaching music remotely in regional Victoria in 2020: year like no other

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Abstract

This paper reflects the challenges and opportunities created by teaching and learning music remotely, due to the impact of Covid – 19, for students and teachers living in regional areas of Australia. How teachers can collaborate with students to build positive outcomes by providing creative opportunities and presenting and promoting diversity while also underwriting student and staff well-being. Remote teaching may become a regular part of school life as we know it in the future and as lockdowns persist, stress continues to impact and disengage many students. We as teachers have a responsibility to plan for and provide interesting and alternative ways to teach our students by offering subject material that helps engage and motivate them, acknowledging each students' genuine attempt and supporting what remains important to them during their remote learning days. These alternative ways can include celebrating and engaging in the aspects of music in the everyday lives of students and their families. By understanding the difficulties associated with remote learning in rural settings and supporting students and their families and pets, teachers and students can embrace and share the joys of experiencing living the country life, so important to all regional students and their families.

Background

I am a qualified strings teacher. I previously completed a Bachelor of Music, Graduate Diploma of Instrumental Performance and a Master of Musical Studies at the Queensland Conservatorium. As a violinist, I have 25 years' experience as a teacher, conductor and performer. I worked primarily on the Gold Coast (Queensland) before moving to Victoria a few years ago with my family. The perfect 'tree change' from the heat and chaos was a breath of fresh air for the mind and soul. Upon my arrival I was fortunate to be included in some community music activities, and was offered a teaching position at a college close to our new home. I was granted 'permission to teach' with the responsibility to register for studying a Master of Teaching (MTeach) program. I started the MTeach at Deakin University in 2017 as an off-campus student specialising in double music methods. This program has played an important part in my teaching and learning. My teaching position at the school involves classroom teaching from Year 6 to Year 12 (VCE music), orchestras, small ensembles and private string

teaching from Prep – Year 12. Many of the students are fifth and sixth generation Australians whose families are third and fourth generation sheep, cattle and wheat farmers. I found in this town everyone knows everyone, and local cemeteries tell tales of many first settlers of the area whose grandchildren and great grandchildren still carry their names in the town.

As a busy classroom music teacher and strings' pedagogue, husband, father and grandfather and part-time MTeach student, I reflect on my teaching and learning (Schön, 1983). Never has there been such a time where the joys and pleasures of music were more important than during the days of social isolation and consequential loneliness during COVID-19 lockdowns. I agree with Elvers (2017) that experiencing music could serve as an 'aesthetic surrogate' for social and emotional interaction.

The challenges of remote teaching

Living regionally can be challenging in many ways. I found communication is key, it binds us across long distances between town and homes, the

wider community and world. Basic connectivity uses devices that pose regular challenges for many who live on remote properties. With the onset of lockdowns, the problems of remaining connected were exacerbated with many parents and caregivers forced to take leave from employment to care for children as schools across Victoria closed for extended periods. It was easy for me, I live in town, less than a five-minute drive to work and my digital connectivity was fast and consistent. While my teaching and learning platforms were intact, I had concerns about my students.

Working remotely made me think about ways I could support my students as many families were affected by the pandemic. I asked myself: what type of learning experience would I want if I were to learn music across a remote platform? What role do I play as a teacher in the life of my students during these difficult times? Is music as important to my students and their families as it was to me – for most, probably not? I was also concerned about my boarding students who had returned to the countries of birth. These international students had to follow the local time table which meant they had to set their alarms to join classes at a different times. Many of them experienced poor internet connections. I questioned what I valued and considered most important as a music teacher. Was it pedagogical strategies and curriculum design and ideas, or was nurturing students well-being essential? I found meeting my MTeach music lecturers and peers 'online' helped me understand the content and contributed to my sense of wellbeing connecting with my music group.

During 2020, I particularly recognised different learning needs and the emotional and social stresses associated with lockdowns. I realised I had to be flexible in my teaching and expectations. Whilst the school used Microsoft Teams as an efficient and effective platform, my music students used email and downloaded videos and screenshots to a USB which they posted or delivered to my home letterbox. By reflecting on the needs of my students and changing what I offered, helped me reflect on what mattered in music education. Biasutti and Concina (2018)

support teacher self-efficacy as portraying teacher effectiveness. As a music teacher I found being enthusiastic and positive motivated my students, I felt it contributed to their sense of well-being.

Many students had inconsistent internet connections, and in some cases, students were driven by a parent to the highest point on their farm to try to connect to the internet. Asking students what was memorable in their remote musical learning offered me a framework for formative feedback. While the subject content remained important, the personal and familial elements provided engaging learning episodes. Working in a farming community during lockdown meant we often had baby lambs, piglets and calves joining the lessons. In the throes of winter, these animals could not be left outdoors so it was not unusual to see a lamb curled up in a dog bed, or piglets squeaking on a spare bed, or a calf on the back seat of a car joining the online class.

Memorable teaching opportunities

Working from home during lockdown meant students had to familiarise themselves with a new platform. It also meant me reassessing how I taught and what I taught which included the everyday lives of my students in relation to their environments and families. A memorable activity was teaching students audio and visual recording techniques using devices such as iPads, smartphones and computers. Tom, a Year 7 student put his laptop in the middle of a field and rode his motor bike past using a camera to measure the distance it took before the sound distorted. He thought it was a marvellous excuse to get out of the house and onto the bike all in the name of music and math education. A lip-syncing exercise designed at engaging Year 8 music students to their favourite songs while using technology to capture the images showed some very interesting and amusing results. An award-winning young horse woman, Zoe, effectively featured her horse Pete by lip syncing to a One Direction song. Her technique for success was giving Pete carrots to encourage him to move his lips in time with the lyrics. Neve, another student had her baby pigs oinking to a soundtrack

in her lip-syncing activity, their nostrils were flared while their attention was short, however the result of the exercise gave a happy and proud Year 8 girl a positive means to express herself and her piglets through the dulcet tones of Smooth Criminal by Michael Jackson. These memorable opportunities gave students the ability to explore their creativity outside the walls of a classroom. It gave them the chance to listen and perform as a social and sonic experience (Acuouturier & Canonne, 2017).

The chamber music program continued rehearsals during lockdown. Although students were reluctant to rehearse using Teams as a platform, I found they achieved some good results. Students took turns with one microphone switched on and the remainder of the microphones muted, all playing together but separately. During lockdown, the VCE group performance (quartet) entered the Musica Viva's 'Strike A Chord' competition. This seemed like the obvious preparation tool for the VCE group performance examination. In the process, the quartet won a scholarship to play for a prominent chamber musician in Melbourne, they were all able to access her teaching using Zoom as a platform.

I felt the strain of teaching, studying and performer during 2020. Nevertheless, I was presented with a memorable opportunity to perform on violin and cello to pieces of art at the regional Art Gallery. The gallery is normally a hub for tourists and local people, however, it had seen no-one but the curator for months. I felt privileged to wake up the works of art that included old masters and Indigenous works to the sound of strings. This wonderful experience of performing has resulted in approximately seven minutes of footage that will be archived as an historical document and will also be displayed as a loop at the gallery.

Conclusion

This has been a year like no other. I found I had to refocus my thinking about teaching and assessments. Although learning outcomes and expectations were constantly adjusted, I found senior management reminded staff that 'less

was best'. My preparation time had doubled and frustratingly my teaching time had diminished with shortened lessons. This was most frustrating. Nevertheless, the feedback from students across a plethora of platforms (emails, Teams chats, One Note messages and mobile phone) and families were overwhelmingly positive and often humbling. Upon reflection, I will continue to include new opportunities into my music lessons so that students can share their remote experiences by turning daily chores into musical events which will include song writing, video recordings, composing and performing. I found students worked enthusiastically when family stories, family members and pets were included. Connecting with others and being part of a team sharing teaching strategies with colleagues I found beneficial when teaching remotely. Making time to collaborate with colleagues across subject areas was an enriching teaching and learning experience. During this challenging and equally fulfilling year, I found communication was key to balancing work, study, and family life as I wore different hats. I look forward to graduating from my MTeach program as I continue to teach and perform in my regional area. Being included in the daily lives of so many students and often their families was most rewarding in a year like no other.

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