My placement experience during COVID-19: A balancing act as a pre-service teacher

Anna Joyce
Deakin University

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the landscape of Victorian education and has dramatically affected the practical experience of pre-service teachers (PST) throughout Melbourne. This self-study will reflect on the obstacles and opportunities I experienced during an online practicum, and discuss the complex challenges associated with the unexpected transition to teaching music online. The limitations of teaching practical subjects in a digital environment, as well as the disadvantages suffered by students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, are highlighted as significant issues caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The impact on student wellbeing and student engagement is also examined, and pedagogical considerations such as lesson structure, interactive tasks, and fostering collaborative participation, are cited as pivotal methodologies for a successful learning in an online context. While there were many educational opportunities presented by this unprecedented experience, reflective analysis revealed that the loss of physical connection and diminished interpersonal relationships proved to be significant impediments to effective teaching and learning in this environment.

I am a wife and mother of three living in metropolitan Melbourne. I completed my Bachelor of Contemporary Music (Southern Cross University) in 2003. Since graduation, I worked as a vocalist in the Middle East and in Europe and also as a recording artist in Sydney. My first teaching job was at the Australian Institute of Music, followed by four years in Thailand where I was an instrumental instructor and director of a 30-member music team. I commenced a Master of Teaching (Primary/Secondary) specialising in Music at Deakin University in March 2019 as an off-campus (online) student. I looked forward to continuing my studies in 2020, and undertaking final placements (practicum). However, with various COVID-19 restrictions in place, I was unable to undertake placements face-to-face.

I draw on self-study and narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) to share some challenges and opportunities I experienced when on placement in 2020. I discuss a few examples of my social interaction and engagement as a 'pre-service teacher' (PST). I acknowledge that my experience may be different to other PSTs in Melbourne.

Placement experience

During my secondary placement, I worked from home, observing and teaching online at a private co-educational school in Metropolitan Melbourne. I was required to be available for an average of four classes a day, five days a week working with Grades 7-12. As I have two school-aged children, I was balancing the requirements of placement with the demands of home schooling and caring for a toddler. Being a mother and PST was extremely challenging. It required a great deal of organisation, communication, perseverance and responsiveness. However, with the increased number of COVID-19 cases, teachers and students were required to

transition to learning from home. Schools had to suddenly adapt lesson plans and establish new assessment expectations for students. My role as a PST was largely undefined during this pandemonium. Undertaking placement online was a first-time experience for all stakeholders.

I felt limited in my ability to take ownership of teaching tasks in the online environment. I was not given much opportunity to draw on my prior knowledge as a vocal coach, performer and ensemble director. Performing together in the online space was not easy, I found this grievous. There was a lack of collegial culture, and I experienced a sense of loss in not having the chance to explore the school's resources and relational environment 'online'. I was unable to relieve the supervising teacher's workload online. Nevertheless, the teaching I did manage to undertake in consultation with my supervising teacher was helpful, highly informative and thorough. It provided me with good feedback in relation to planning, reflection and understanding learners.

All of my teaching opportunities took place with Year 9 students. This year level had a particularly high concentration of international students. Students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds are among the most disadvantaged by remote learning and are vulnerable to significant learning loss and feelings of isolation (Brown et al., 2020). Furthermore, students undertaking subjects with practical components such as music felt a social disconnect when making or responding to music activities with their peers during lockdown. The practical and collaborative possibilities were rather limiting, and I found the CALD students struggled to interpret tasks. A number of the international students arrived in Australia in 2020 to complete their schooling. They only had a short space of time getting to know their classmates and teachers before the transition to online learning took place. The difficult process of cross-cultural transition and language diversity made learning challenging for them. I found three in particular were separated from their families, creating further susceptibilities

towards feelings of isolation and loneliness. Teaching them online was a balancing act. It also meant taking on some responsibility to help them connect to teachers and peers where they felt socially supported and felt a "sense of belonging outside the home environment" (Korkiamaki & Ellonen, cited in Brown et al., 2020, p. 36). I prioritised developing strong interpersonal connections with my students while online through practical activities and using the chat space in the software program used at the school.

Teacher-learner relationships are pivotal to successful learning and have been empirically evidenced as potently connected to student outcomes (Hattie & Clarke, 2018). I found building a strong teacher-learner relationship within a short time frame challenging. In an online context, establishing connections that seek to understand individuality, privilege, cultural identity and communicate acceptance was extremely difficult. I agree with Drane, Vernon and O'Shea (2020, p. 11) that educators should "ensure regular human interactions, enable social caring measures, and address possible psychosocial challenges that students may face when they are isolated". In order to address this vulnerability and aid the maintenance of strong teacher-learner relationships, my supervising teacher and I devised new ways to increase student engagement in our classes.

Addressing student engagement and interaction in an online context

There is no doubt that developing rapport and eliciting social interaction during my placement was a significant challenge. Due to the conspicuous nature of the online format, the normally social and chatty students were reticent to engage. Getting them to respond to questions was difficult. In a recent study, Xu et al., (2020) found teacher facilitation of online classes was not sufficient for eliminating student disconnectedness and lack of social interaction. I had to rethink how I taught in this context, which required an intentional focus on lesson structure, interactive tasks, collaborative

participation and a close enquiry into student wellbeing. After thorough reflection of my first lesson, it was evident that I needed to make pedagogical adjustments to create formative tasks that were enjoyable and practical. As the distraction of technology is far too alluring for the idly listening student, I structured lessons that were enjoyable, promoted aptitude and or independence, and were sufficiently challenging and engaging (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). My lessons included short excerpts of explicit teaching, followed by opportunities for practical application. For example, during a theory lesson on minor scales, the first scale was explicitly taught using visual and aural data sources followed by students using music creation software to record their performance of this scale. This structure was repeated for the remaining scales, which along with providing constructive feedback proved to be successful. This structure I found reinforced the music concepts that were taught. It allowed immediate application of knowledge and provided formative assessment data that could be used to inform my future teaching and learning practice.

Another challenge was adapting the students' ensemble participation to a viable online replacement. To address this limitation, students used a pop song to work in groups using music creation software (Soundtrap). The self-directed nature of the project allowed students with strong agency to create freely without the boundaries of a fixed timetable or resource. I observed that a number of students thrived undertaking this project. This opportunity for developing ownership over learning and applying new concepts is central to the process of student-engagement (Cameron & Bartel, as cited in Grant & Lerer, 2011). Engaging in meaningful and authentic contexts with immediate and relevant feedback helped students reach their learning goals in the online environment. I found that some students, including the CALD students, required more concentrated scaffolding. This process of instructing ensemble members and breaking down the task was exceptionally difficult for them. It also required me to learn how to carefully plan and present information in a different way. In this way, music and personal curricular requirements were partially addressed and met.

Final remarks

As a wife, parent and PST, COVID-19 has hugely impacted my sense of wellbeing. Trying to study, work from home and be a wife and mother was a balancing act. I did not expect to be remotely teaching in my final year of the MTeach program. While much can be learnt from the student-centred nature of remote learning, my placement experience revealed that the loss of physical connection and diminished teacher-learner relationships was a hinderance to successful teaching and learning. In saying that, I also found opportunities to explore and broaden my understanding of how students cope and manage their learning online. I hope to foster student wellbeing in my music teaching as this aspect I feel is essential to students learning (AITSL, 2018).

Studying online as an MTeach student and undertaking placement online has positioned me to better monitor and embrace the socio-emotional requirements of my future students. I have learnt to cultivate and prioritise deep interpersonal relationships. My role as teacher, PST and parent has given me a unique perspective on teaching. I look forward to putting theory into practice in 2021, and hope that my teaching will be multidimensional, collaborative and student-centred, where the students and I can create a sense of belonging and connection through music.

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