

Music composition and creative processes: Arts education online during the Melbourne lockdown

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Abstract

This article explores the impact of the 2020 Melbourne lockdown on the creative experiences of pre-service teachers in an arts education course. It focuses specifically on the music compositions of three students. The face-to-face course was delivered in online mode due to the lockdown restrictions in Victoria imposed by the government in response to the COVID19 pandemic. The 10-week course was the only arts component of an undergraduate teaching degree at a major Melbourne university. Three music compositions and creative process narrations of the pre-service teachers are described from a teacher-educator viewpoint. A reflective lens is applied to render impressions of the works and processes. The commentary provides a springboard for discussion about four key impacts of lockdown on pre-service teacher creative works: circumstance, experience, motivation and creative process narration. The discussion could inform creative process teaching online and support the inclusion of creative work in online courses in the arts in non-pandemic times.

Key words: creative process, composition, pre-service teacher education.

Introduction

Creative process is a personal journey. Narrating the process of making an artwork enables the artist to share that journey with an audience. The lockdown impacted the artmaking experiences of generalist primary pre-service teachers in a 10-week arts education course in significant ways. The students created artworks with the function of supporting their wellbeing and self-expression. This article provides reflective discussion about the compositions and creative processes of three pre-service teachers. It refers to the impacts of lockdown restrictions imposed in Melbourne in response to the global pandemic (Australian Broadcast Commission, 2020). The composition commentaries are reflective (Wieringa, 2011) and written from my perspective as teacher educator. From the reflections I draw out ideas about creative process engagement for future online work in the arts.

The three compositions in focus are drawn from more than 100 artworks produced by the cohort of

pre-service teachers (PSTs). The artworks were the final assignment in the course, in which students were tasked with creating an original artwork in one of the five arts subjects from the *Victorian Curriculum F-10* (VCAA, 2015): Dance, Drama, Music, Media Arts and Visual Arts. Most of the PSTs chose to work individually with only a small portion working online in pairs. There were approximately 120 students in the cohort: four online classes of 30 students. The assignment was worth 30% of the total grade for the course. I use the term 'artmaking' to describe the focus of the assignment (regardless of artform or arts subject chosen) and I refer to pre-service teachers as PSTs or students.

Creative process was a key part of the artwork presentation. PSTs were required to present their work in-progress in Week 9 of the 10-week course. The assignment was submitted two weeks later, requiring a video introduction in which the creative process and other artmaking aspects were narrated. The reflection recalls both aspects in combination. In using the term

creative process I defer to Lubart's (2018) definition of it as a series of thoughts and actions involved in developing original work and Webster and Hickey's (2001) idea of creative process in music as the space between an idea and the final outcome.

Reflections on the three compositions

Composition 1: Transported through sound

Student A chose music composition for very practical reasons. The use of soundscape was simply the best way to depict the extreme longing she experienced during lockdown for one place: the beach. The cohort had listened to and created soundscapes during the course. Student A planned to depict 'her' beach (the site of the family beach house) and to emulate the experience of being there. She proposed to use the final product to lull herself to sleep or to seek relaxation during moments of sadness or stress in the lockdown. The motivation had gone beyond just completing an assignment with a clear sense of the intrinsic nature of motivation in creative work (Amabile, 2011). The goal of the task for this student was stunningly pragmatic – for her it was not about music education rather these were the required steps to create an outcome to support her own wellbeing.

Composition 2: Expressing the emotions of lockdown

Student B had basic piano skills gained from high school music education experiences. There was a piano in her home and it made sense to utilise it. Her aim was to compose a work to contrast life before and during lockdown. The outcome was a popular music chordal piece. It opened with melodic pre-lockdown reveries accompanied by smooth progressions in a major key. The depiction of lockdown began in about Bar 12, when the literal thunder clouds set in: intense dynamic change, hesitation, dissonance and unresolved cadences. It was so emotion-filled it was difficult to relax – definitely an intention. The function of the work became clear in her narration. For this composer, the cathartic playing of the piece day after day became the primary function of the work.

Composition 3: Thinking in sound

Student C composed a techno piece using basic music software he was previously familiar with at an entry level. Every sound in the composition was there to depict a feeling or event. This was not dissimilar to the process of PSTs who created visual artworks in which symbology directed the entire design. This composer developed layers of techno ostinato to depict a day in the life of lockdown. The approach was reminiscent of Webster and Hickey's (2001) concept of thinking through sound. Motifs occurred and reoccurred throughout the work as per the experience of daily life routines. Monotony was portrayed through repeating phrases yet there was a sense of being uplifted by simple acts such as phoning a friend, sitting in the backyard, using social media – all depicted by electronica without the need for sound effects. The composer's creative process narrative intimated concepts of form, timbre and texture. He described layering sound to highlight or reduce complexity of rhythmic patterning or to reveal timbral qualities for compositional effect and impact. Student C also referred to his love of techno and joy of creating the work.

Four impacts on creative work due to lockdown conditions:

1. Circumstance

Lockdown was a key circumstance that impacted the creative process of the PSTs. It was also heavily present in the redesign of the course. It is useful to acknowledge the implications of environment on creative work (Davies et al., 2013) and the geographical concept of place (ACARA, 2017), which are integral to the topic but not elaborated here. In a geographical sense the PSTs found arts-moments within their home routines (Student C's day in the life of lockdown) or found arts experiences that 'transported' them out of those experiences (Student A's longing for the beach). In essence it was art about the daily routine or art to escape it.

Transforming a face-to-face unit to an online experience was done in a spirit of compassion. In

online learning conditions, the geography of the learner is the home environment. For the PSTs who had enrolled in a face-to-face degree, the preparation for online learning was minimal. The students were fostered to gain familiarity and a sense of routine with the self-paced nature of online learning and of the experience of learning from home. These ideas can be incorporated into creative process, which is also a self-paced and individualised experience and echoed in the composition choices.

2. Experience

Pre-service teacher artworks reflected familiarity with artforms and new explorations of them, within the boundaries of materials availability at the time of lockdown. The movement towards familiar ground was shown in Students B and C's selection of music composition and chosen instruments. The prior experience choice is useful to highlight as a way for online educators to encourage PSTs to further develop their confidence in one artform for future classroom teaching. In the cohort of PSTs, those who chose dance particularly utilised previous dance skills or traditional dance learnt either as a child or through in-culture experiences. PSTs who worked with drama gravitated towards monologue with topics of previous experiences rather than of the current events (such as lockdown). There was a sense of comfort in the familiar both in material and subject choice, perhaps a chance to relive that experience through the artmaking process. Those who selected new experiences entered exploration of an artform as a new addition to the ordinary daily routine. These new explorations were often visual arts or media arts and included drawing, painting, sculpture, graphic design, short animations and photographic series.

The course provided students with arts explorations before the artmaking assignment. Students were purposefully engaged in artmaking in every week through short practical activities occurring regularly (in 2–3 artforms per week). Responding to art was a feature of every week. Videos of the process of making artworks were utilised to discuss creative process, formative assessment and skill building in

the arts. Exemplar topic titles and concepts from previous years were shared with students in Week 7 and tended to provide 'permission' for the current cohort to work with deeply personal choices as had been the case, interestingly, in previous face-to-face iterations of the course. The redesigned course also aimed to: nurture creativity in a safe space (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2010), promote diversity of self-expression through open-ended tasks; gain awareness and confidence in the use of arts language; explore artist and audience concepts (VCAA, 2015); and promote student-centred and authentic learning such as in music (VCAA, 2018).

3. Motivation

Intrinsic motivation within the creative process was amplified for students during lockdown. The requirement to complete an artwork created an impetus for self-expression of emotions through the arts. The impact of motivation was at times a type of 'salvation'; arts engagement as a cognitive survival measure in the face of lockdown restrictions. In the three compositions described, the intent or impetus for the artwork often reflected the artist's intrinsic motivation to pursue the process. Student A's aim at realistic representation of the beach resulted in a highly-specific guided musical meditation to transport her mentally to her favourite place. Further to motivation, minimally discussed in this article yet worthy of future exploration about this course, were the experiences of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014), time for creative process to unfurl (Fasko, 2001) and arts as incubation in creative processes (Wallas, 1926), which were also motivators of PST artmaking.

4. Narration

In Week 9 the PSTs excitedly gathered online to present their in-progress artworks and describe the story of their creative work. The narration of the creative process is best done at the time it happens and with a degree of honesty. It can be useful to consider a framework for the artmaking story – such as problem finding and problem-solving experiences (Runco, 1994). The PSTs described their subject and topic choice in a way that was cathartic for the

artists and fascinating for the audience. During the individual presentations, the online chat function was flooded with peer-to-peer comments, insights, suggestions, ponderings and connections. The presentations provided a plethora of arts ideas for the future classroom – students were asked to note down the artform, topic and the method for all 30 fellow students. The students were asked to contribute feedback to one another in preparation for future teaching.

Conclusion

Creative process was integral for generalist primary pre-service teachers in an arts education course delivered online during the Melbourne lockdown of 2020. Three compositions and related creative processes were reflectively described from a teacher educator perspective. The compositions included: a soundscape of a longed-for place, a popular-music chordal piece for piano and a techno piece to depict a day in the life of lockdown. A reflective discussion followed to show the impact of lockdown on the compositions and to share other observations about the creative work of PSTs. The first impact was circumstance, discussed with respect to lockdown conditions. The second was experience, reflecting the ways students utilised prior arts learning or engaged in artmaking in new ways. Motivation was the third impact. It was often intrinsic and related to self-expression to support lockdown mental-survival and wellbeing. Finally, narration of the creative process was explored as an impact as it supported the completion of the artmaking task and provided essential peer-to-peer learning about artforms (and creative work) as tasks for future arts teaching. The composition reflections and impacts frame the creative process as an important learning experience in the arts for PSTs. It is highly recommended that creative work be incorporated into online arts education courses to promote in-depth arts and creativity learning.

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