Teaching the Arts in Testing Times: A Western Australian Perspective on COVID-19 Impacts.

Abstract

Expert secondary Arts teachers are highly trained specialists well versed in face-to-face individual and group teaching pedagogies. Given the highly personalised nature of Arts teaching practice, the shift to online teaching resulting from COVID-19 lockdowns presented many with challenges for which they had little or no formal training. Many teachers felt stressed, isolated and unsure about where to turn for help. As there are demonstrated links between stress and attrition, it is important to reflect upon the experiences of these teachers with the aim of developing future mitigation strategies. The research reported here synthesises the online teaching experiences of 15 expert Arts specialists in Western Australia and revealed that being a digital native was not in itself sufficient to ameliorate online teaching challenges. Rather, the study found that teachers with deep pedagogical practice knowledge and a reflexive/flexible approach fared better than those with high levels of technology familiarity. The importance of collegiality and mentoring in an online setting, along with a reappraisal of teaching priorities emerged as key findings and serve as a timely reminder of the importance of collaboration, especially in testing times.

Introduction

The rapid shift to online teaching in Australia during the 2020-2021 COVID-19 lockdowns had a profound impact on teachers, students and parents alike, and the Western Australian (WA) experience was no different from the rest of the nation (Beames et al., 2021). However, WA suffered far fewer periods of lockdown, largely attributable to the WA Government's closed-border policy which largely prohibited entry to WA starting from the commencement of the pandemic through to March 2022 (Watson & Singh, 2022). WA Teachers' experiences of navigating online teaching challenges were therefore different to those in other states because the breaks between lockdowns offered teachers the chance to test online teaching approaches over short periods, followed by longer periods of traditional face-to-face delivery. The resulting opportunities for reflection offer potential dividends in terms of online pedagogical evolution as well as teacher priorities and wellbeing. In short, WA teachers were shielded from the worst of the COVID-19 impacts but sufficiently exposed to online teaching to reflect on the experience.

Arts teachers in other Australian States, by contrast, fared less well. In Melbourne, in lockdown for more than 246 days (Wahlquist, 2021), high levels of teacher fatigue and distress were reported across all subjects (Dabrowski, 2020). Moreover, within the Arts disciplines which employ specialised materials and equipment, practical demonstrations, one-on-one "in the moment" teacher-student feedback and group work/student collaboration, the challenge of replicating online the quality of instruction provided in face-to-face teaching proved highly problematic (Burke, 2021) and stressful (Spacek, 2020). Given established links between stress and teacher attrition (Buchanan et al., 2013; Hong, 2010), it would appear reasonable to assume that Arts teachers would be vulnerable to attrition as teaching practices that traditionally sustain them evaporated (Kraehe, 2020). This article

reports on findings from a study into the impact of online teaching with 15 WA expert Arts teachers. In it, we focused on our participants' COVID-19 experiences teaching lower secondary students to better understand how capable Arts teachers navigated the challenges of online teaching in relation to pedagogy, priorities, and wellbeing. The study has the potential to inform Arts teaching practice and importantly what, if anything, can be retained and capitalised on to advance online Arts teaching pedagogy. Understanding how expert practitioners adapted their practice may reveal strategies and resources that other, less experienced Arts teachers can utilise.

In understanding the experiences of our participants, we first set out the Arts education context prior to COVID-19. We then consider the implications of the rapid shift to online teaching and the role of technology in facilitating the shift. From there, we describe the methodology employed in this study, the results of our investigation, and acknowledge our study limitations. We conclude with recommendations arising from the study.

Background

In Australia, Arts Education F-10 encompasses the disciplines of Dance, Drama, Media Arts, Music and Visual Arts which together comprise one of eight Learning Areas in the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2018). Since its inception, the Australian Curriculum Arts Learning Area (ACALA) has guided the range and achievement levels of each Arts discipline in each state and territory despite many adapting the Arts Curriculum (AC) to meet its particular community needs (Gattenhof, 2009). Nationally, the AC encompasses the domains of Arts Making (ideas generation; skills and production work) and Arts Responding (arts analysis and contextual considerations), informed by seven General Capabilities and three Cross Curriculum Priorities. In each state and territory, Arts education is regulated, and teaching, learning and assessment standards are monitored. While not included under the ACALA umbrella, post compulsory courses (years 11 and 12) are generally well resourced, and teachers are required to engage in moderation partnerships with other schools which are in turn monitored by each state regulator. The effectiveness of these arrangements is tested annually through external examinations or externally set tasks. By contrast, in lower secondary years and in primary arts education contexts, there are fewer supports and no external exams or mandated moderation partnerships. Historically, teachers working in primary and lower secondary settings create their own learning programs with reference to their state curriculum and source their own learning resources (Wittber, 2017). Accordingly, inexperienced Arts teachers, those working out of area or those with under-developed pedagogical knowledge can struggle unless connected with a mentor or able to access targeted Professional Learning (PL) support (Paris, 2008; Wittber, 2017).

Since 2014, Australian Arts teachers have been required by legislation to integrate technology into learning programs, as Information and Communications Technology (ICT) competence constitutes one of the General Capabilities of the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014). Moreover, technology is increasingly embedded in Arts disciplines practice, such as the use of image manipulation software in generating ideas in Visual Arts (Sabol, 2021). Despite this, and other than in Media Arts where learning is framed around technology integration, Arts teachers can lack expertise to meaningfully embed ICT (Gall, 2013) or can be afraid to (Kassner, 1996). For example, an investigation of technology usage among Queensland Music

teachers reported that only 51% used a small range of familiar applications, and that the range did not reflect the scope prescribed in the AC (Eyles, 2018).

Whilst some teacher PL is available, the day-to-day challenges of schools with varying technology infrastructure, budget constraints and competing time demands often translate to Arts programs framed predominantly around traditional "making experiences" comprising teacher demonstration / modelling and direct instruction rather than online interaction. However, the move to online teaching during the pandemic resulted in an awkward fit (Shaw, 2021) and it may be that many Arts teachers lack the knowledge, capacity, and support to succeed in exclusively online teaching settings (Burke, 2021). In "normal times", communities of practice afforded by the professional associations / social media Arts teacher groups constitute a significant mentoring asset (Kraehe, 2020). However, in challenging times such as the COVID-19 lockdowns, lifeline organisations themselves experience significant pressure, as they are predominantly run by volunteers. According to a survey by the NEiTA Foundation and the Australian College of Educators (2021), 75% of Australian teachers reported feeling stressed, had poor work-life balance, and as many as 84% had considered leaving the teaching profession in the preceding 12 months. This was attributed to extreme pressures generated by prolonged lockdowns and online teaching as well as the demanding nature of the profession itself. Although participants were not identified by subject, we posited these results would reflect the experience of Arts educators along with those of other disciplines.

Technology infiltration and online teaching
The pandemic and online teaching responses presented a once in a generation shared experience for all teachers and students (Lockee, 2021). However, the challenges faced by individual teachers varied according to their context and the extent to which technology had infiltrated their pedagogical practices pre-pandemic (UNESCO, 2020). The challenges posed by *Digital Disruption* transformed education practice but in markedly different ways across countries, school systems / sectors and subject disciplines. According to Riemer and Johnston (2019),

> Digital Disruption refers to advancements in digital technologies that occur at a pace and magnitude that disrupt established way of creating value within or across markets, social interactions and, more generally, our understanding and thinking (p. 4).

The infiltration of technology is manifest in learning management and assessment systems (e.g. Sector, Connect, Blackboard, and Turnitin), online communication platforms (e.g. social media environments, email, Zoom, Google Classroom, Canvas, and Microsoft Teams) and peer collaboration environments (e.g. Google Drives, Padlets, Trello Boards). Each of these is valuable in supporting student learning but their overuse has been linked to a deterioration in teacher personal wellbeing, especially among early career teachers, as they contribute to poor work-homelife balance and increased workloads (Johari et al., 2018; Marco Learning, 2020).

Rosen (2012) described the phenomenon of "*time deepening*", whereby extended working hours (e.g. after hours work correspondence/emails intrusion) and intensified workloads leaves many teachers feeling pressured to be more accountable for their productivity, and this intrudes into personal / family time. Mobile devices exacerbate the intrusion and promelgate skewed notions that teachers should be "on-call" at all times, which in turn may contribute to declines in personal

wellbeing (Rosen, 2012). For teachers yet to develop the confidence and self-regulation capabilities to manage the digital homelife intrusion, time deepening, work intensification, and the rapid technology transition can engender high levels of work-related stress (Burbules et al., 2020; Ugur & Koc, 2015). While links between stress and attrition have been well established (Ballantyne & Retell, 2019), digital disruption together with time deepening, COVID-19 and the rapid shift to online teaching presented a potential "perfect storm" of attrition forces. Their combined impact has yet to be fully understood but it would appear reasonable that all teachers would be under extraordinary pressure with fewer supports available to them.

Reframed Roles and Expectations
In Australia, Arts teachers' roles have shifted from content experts to facilitators of learning, reflexive to student needs in partnerships where knowledge is co-constructed with students (de Vries, 2021). For several decades, technology integration has played an increasing role and students often have greater technological familiarity (although often less digital literacy) than their teachers (Murray, 2011). However teachers have a deeper understanding of students' developmental needs and effective learning processes. The issue of access to and familiarity with technology was critical during the COVID-19 lockdowns but having access to technology and knowing how it works is different from knowing how to use it effectively in the online setting. The shift to online delivery with students working at home, often without supervision or access to specialist materials, combined with the pedagogical challenges of online teaching have emerged as key themes in the COVID-19 teaching literature (Lockee, 2021; Mutton, 2020; Thomson, 2020). Given the unfolding digital integration over recent decades, it might have been reasonable to have assume that:

- schools have had time to install and upscale the critial infrastructure needed to ensure continuity of teaching in online formats in the event of significant disruptions in face-to-face delivery;
- teachers have had the opportunity through effective PL and mentoring to not only familiarise themselves with the teaching potentials offered by technology, but also acquire capability in responding to the specific pedagogical demands of each technology;
- students have had the opportunity to use and master technology in their learning and time to acquire resources needed to work at home, and
- equitable access to technology regardless of socio-economic contexts could be assumed.

Despite this, Flack et al (2020) paint a poor picture of the teaching profession's preparedness for online teaching. In general, teacher familiarity with technology and their grasp of online pedagogical content knowledge appeared inadequate; the availability of remote mentoring and PL support was negligible or lacking; students' capacity to work unsupervised or unsupported at home and access reliable internet was found wanting; and a significant digital divide for students learning remotely emerged across a range of socio economic contexts which disrupted or truncated the continuity of teaching and learning (Flack et al., 2020). Against this bleak backdrop, we were keen to investigate how expert Arts teachers coped as we explored both the negative and positive aspects of online teaching for those in best position to cope. Further, given WA Arts teachers' limited experiences with prolonged lockdowns and online teaching, we were eager to examine their experiences upon reflection, rather than reaction, and to identify areas of transformational practice resulting from online teaching.

Research approach

In late 2021 we secured ethics approvals for our study framed around the COVID-19 teaching experiences of expert WA Arts teachers across Dance, Drama, Media Arts, Music, and Visual Arts in lower secondary settings. The research was informed by an acknowledgement that while the online teaching experiences of our experts may vary across different systems and sectors and that what worked in one setting may not work in another, commonalities and differences might emerge: 1) between the Arts and the general teaching literature, and 2) across Arts disciplines. We considered that there was good potential to synthesise shared understandings and strategies, particularly those aligned to success, because:

- each of our selected participants had achieved recognition as exemplary practitioners and were deemed to be excellent exponents of the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership professional teacher standards, and
- our participants were experienced practitioners with 10 or more years of continuous teaching practice and were most likely to have succeeded in the rapid move to online teaching.

Our study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design involving interviews, with responses to COVID-19 online teaching the primary focus. Eddles-Hirsch (2015) notes "a key characteristic of phenomenological research is its rich, detailed descriptions of the phenomenon being investigated" (p. 252). To enable participants a degree of freedom in describing their online teaching experiences, interviews were framed around one central question:

> *What advice and insights could you share from your recent online teaching experiences in relation to COVID-19 lockdown in 2020-2021?*

Our semi-structured interviews developed organically from the central question as each interviewer probed for deeper understanding, and interviews ranged across all aspects of the COVID-19 teaching phenomenon.

Participants

Fifteen experienced Arts teacher participants were purposively recruited via WA Arts Professional Teacher Associations and established professional relationships with research team members. Expert teachers were screened against the following inclusion criteria: 1) Level 3 / Senior Arts teacher or a Head of Learning Area (Arts), 2) had been teaching continuously for more than 10 years within their discipline, and 3) were experienced educators who had achieved recognition of high-level expertise through promotion / awards. All participants worked full-time across Catholic, independent and government school sectors.

Interviews

Interviews were undertaken on an individual basis and ranged from 40 - 60 minutes each. Each interview was recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. Initial coding indicated three researcher-designated themes relating to challenges, affordances, and potentialities, which we defined as follows:

- Challenges were phenomena that presented serious obstacles to effective teaching and learning;

- Affordances were phenomena useful in achieving or approximating good teaching;
- Potentialities were phenomena which had not been part of pre-COVID-19 practice which emerged in response to the COVID-19 emergency, and which appeared to have potential value in post-pandemic practice.

We considered a strength of our study was the decision to match discipline specialists within our research team with relevant discipline specialists in our participant pool. This, we posited, would allow an *emic* (insider) perspective and evaluation of the "place / fit" of participant experiences being described without conflicting with our phenomenological orientation. Our approach acknowledged, by way of example, that our team's music specialist would be best placed to ask relevant additional questions during the interviews with the music teachers rather than our visual arts specialist, because they best understood practices valued in music. Moreover, during the data reduction phase, we considered the team member with discipline specific expertise would better understand the sub-text and intended meaning of statements made by discipline participants than would be the case if one of the other researchers coded that data.

In justifying this approach, Olive (2014) notes that in education settings the emic is often more valuable than the etic (outsider view) where a range of participants' experiences considered as emic understanding supports the framing of a narrative that establishes coherent relationships between the 'parts' of the experiential story. Olive (2014) observed:

> In educational research, the emic perspective typically represents the internal language and meanings of a defined culture. The scope of said culture can be quite broad—for example, a researcher may study the culture of an entire school system or just one building or one particular classroom or a small group of individuals who share a common characteristic. Regardless of how a culture's scope is defined, an emic perspective attempts to capture participants' indigenous meanings of real-world events and looks at things through the eyes of members of the culture being studied (p. 4).

At the conclusion of the data reduction phase, the research team re-examined the results together to ensure any bias was acknowledged and its impact minimised in framing results and identifying practices within specific disciplines or across the Arts as a whole.

Results

Our results are presented in the form of "voices" whereby the experiences of participants are presented verbatim to ensure their discrete discipline perspective is preserved and not diluted within the larger Arts education context. Results are presented under the three researcher-designated themes of challenges, affordances, and potentialities.

Online Teaching Challenges

Participants across all disciplines reported broadly similar challenges relating to the instability of technology platforms, lack of assistance in the rapid move to online, and issues surrounding platform quality. In instances where professional learning (PL) was available, the technology simply did not fit the Arts teaching context. Technology issues became an unwelcome distraction. Further analysis revealed three sub-themes which appeared specific to Arts disciplines. These encompassed:

- variable quality of Arts supervision / support arrangements for students learning at home,

- lost social engagement and wellbeing opportunities for students to engage and perform collaboratively with one-another, and
- the lack of reliable internet access and computing hardware in students' home environments along with poor technology skills among students and parents.

In terms of adequate supervision, physical safety was an issue in Visual Arts:

> … there are certain things that, from a practical and safety point of view, I couldn't do… things like, you say to them, "Use glue guns at home." Some of them probably don't have glue guns, but I don't know what their power points are like. I would hate to think that some kid gets electrocuted. Or cutting stencils with blades; I can't. There's things that in class you would do, where you can enforce safety rules, but you're always in that class to supervise it taking place, whereas at home, you can't do that…most of my kids, their parents were working. (Visual Arts teacher)

Lost social engagement and isolation was particularly detrimental in the music context where group performance participation is a cornerstone:

> The lack of personal connection and contact with the students, particularly the critical age of Year 8s, it's really worked out very badly for them. I'm hearing this a lot. It reinforces that the power of what we do is through personal relationship and personal contact and direct experience with each other. (Music teacher)

Lack of reliable internet access emerged as problematic in the Drama context, and contributed to an increased workload:

> Yeah, that was a hard one for us, and it was a little bit of a shock. Because of our low socio-economic area, a lot of our families don't always have computers or internet access. So that was a big challenge. We ended up having to create two sets of work, one online, and a written package. The students that didn't have access to internet and a computer, they had some written packages and documented things that they needed to do. (Drama teacher)

However, access to technology was sometimes less of a problem compared to students and parents being able to use it effectively. This was the case across a number of Arts disciplines which often employ discipline-specific software:

> We didn't have a lot of online teaching experiences because our kids don't have access to technology. We discovered where the gaps were for our kids. We assumed it was access to technology or being able to use it, and the gaps actually were in bizarre places. So, for example, we asked parents, do you have access to technology, so that we knew what kind of learning we were going to provide, and they all said no. But then when we dug a bit deeper, we understood they didn't know how to use the technology they had. (Drama teacher)

Other challenges included the perceived low status of Arts subjects and that it was not a priority area for school hierarchies, perceived online teaching skills deficiencies among Arts teachers, and additional staff workloads, including for those delivering PL to colleagues. Some participants' schools adopted blended learning approaches with students commencing project work at school in

conjunction with "arts kits" for home use, with online instructions supporting the arts activities under the supervision of parents (despite parents often having little/no arts or technology expertise). In some instances, pre-existing programs were simply abandoned in favour of "doable" substitute tasks which were often more theoretical in orientation and aligned to arts responding rather than practical arts making tasks. The following excerpts extrapolate some of these challenges:

The low status of Arts subjects was typified in the following Dance context:

> Unfortunately, my main problem was my school didn't really encourage remote teaching. With dancing, it's health and safety, that's different apparently to sitting on a chair, which we can do at home. I was a little bit discouraged from it. (Dance teacher)

In terms of prohibitive workload, one Drama teacher was particularly emphatic:

> It was shit, it was shit. It was shit! It was so exhausting when I did one on one (contacts with students). That was three hours of ten-minute calls, back-to-back. It was exhausting… Yeah, I found it really, really difficult. (Drama teacher)

Additional workload was also incurred in PL delivery to colleagues:

> I spent two weeks doing PDs teaching staff how to use a computer and how to screen record. I didn't even change any of my own teaching and planning other than thinking, there's some things I had to adapt. (Visual Arts teacher)

The reported challenges across disciplines varied, with Music and Drama participants noting difficulties associated with skill building and student feedback, Dance noting communication issues and Visual Arts participants noting the difficulties in sustaining student interest. While fewer problems were reported in Media Arts, participants from this discipline still reported problems sustaining pedagogical practices. In summary, expert teachers reported the biggest challenges related to technology stability and Arts digital literacy, as well as increased workloads, stress, and frustration.

Online teaching affordances
As with challenges, commonalities emerged in relation to the value of online resources such as online video content, and facilities such as breakout rooms. However, four sub-themes emerged in relation to reframing relationships. These included:

- greater opportunities to connect with other teachers online to share ideas, seek and offer advice, and access mentoring support,
- the opportunity to see students in a new light and develop a deeper appreciation of their circumstances,
- greater responsibility, control of the direction and form of student learning, and
- understanding/discovery that an approach framed around 'flexibility' served as a major contributor to success, and fewer things taught well was more successful than trying to cover everything that had been included in pre-pandemic programs.

Some participants reported navigating COVID-19 more effectively than they had imagined and felt more empowered and technologically capable than prior to lockdowns. Importantly, all participants reported that concerns for students' emotional wellbeing outweighed strict adherence to learning

programs; each stated that making time for checking in with students was more important than content delivery. The following quotes illustrate these sub-themes.

In relation to online communities of practice, one Visual Arts teacher noted:

> Definitely create a network, link with city schools. Don't feel like you have to be an expert at everything, because I'm still learning a lot and I hope I'm teaching my students to be lifelong learners, and lifelong art appreciators if they're not practitioners. That's what keeps my teaching fresh and vibrant, I'm finding new ways to do things. (Visual Arts teacher)

Adaptability was reported as a key to developing confidence and competence with new skills, as described by one Media Arts teacher:

> As a teacher now, if I was sick for a day, I'd do my class from home, and it wouldn't impact students as much. Before I didn't feel as confident with the technology, and now it's, like, how can I maximise this, and how can I use it when I need it now? Yeah, it's forced us all to become a lot more competent with those technologies. (Media Arts teacher)

Changing emphasis in relation to student welfare was typified in the following comment from a Dance teacher:

> Sound was an issue with WebEx initially, which is a problem for dance. Some students didn't have consistent internet access and computers, but when they logged on, they actually engaged really well, "Oh, there's your dog," and all of these little conversations, which made it a nice experience because it felt realistic. It wasn't like the classroom, which for some kids, if they're already nervous, is alien. They have the choice whether they switch their cameras off or on. Most of them might have it off for a bit and then suddenly, they're like, "Oh, we can join in, we'll switch it on." (Dance teacher)

Seeing students in a new light forced a re-evaluation of teaching priorities, as evident in the following Music teacher quote:

> I've probably become a better teacher for seeing that you can't teach by remote means very well. No matter how well you set up online things for them to interact with, written activities and things they can do on a computer. It's the interpersonal, which is so powerful. (Music teacher)

The need to be flexible was best conveyed by a Visual Arts teacher:

> … realising that I just needed to relax, and that a drawing could be done on any surface… cereal boxes, any range of materials, send children out into the garden and collect five objects and come back and draw that with whatever drawing objects you have. That was a big shifting point where sometimes you just go off-script. And we do that anyway on a normal teaching day, but much more so in the online learning environment. (Visual Arts teacher)

In summary, while all teachers acknowledged the value of online resources, the biggest affordances revolved around a reappraisal of relationships, both between teachers, and teachers / students. Whether a product of greater agency and reflective capacity among expert teachers or heightened empathy among Arts teachers, affordances offered teachers a chance to reassess their priorities.

Online teaching potentialities

Overall, few described lockdown pedagogical solutions as enduring elements of practice, and challenges overall outweighed positive affordances of online teaching. This was particularly the case for two of our teachers with lower pedagogical knowledge. Despite their high technology capability, both struggled to adapt face-to-face pedagogical practices and content knowledge into an online format. This suggested that years of teaching experience and flexibility/reflexivity may be more important success criteria than technological familiarity or user capability. In our study, expert participants with many years of teaching experience and pedagogical knowledge combined with good technology skills fared best; being a digital native did not, in and of itself, assure success.

As participants reflected on their experiences, a few described aspects of online teaching which they considered valuable post-pandemic. These included sharing resource materials within online collaborative environments and collaborating with teachers in other locations (brainstorming, sharing, mentoring, general affirmation support, targeted advice) through online forums. For some, appreciation of the sheer number and scale of high-quality resources which had "exploded" during the lockdowns was a revelation and they were now avid consumers and contributors to their Arts education online resource repositories. The following highlights general experiences in relation to emerging online resources repositories. One Visual Arts teacher stated:

> The best thing about this global COVID-19 experience is the amount of good resources available online like YouTube videos about art terminology, elements and principles, art tutorials. Don't be scared to access what's available. You don't have to come up with new ideas all the time. There's no need to reinvent the wheel. It's okay to tell students that you're not an expert, because you're not an expert at every sub-discipline within visual arts. (Visual Arts teacher)

By contrast, one Media Arts teacher noted the value of repurposing existing resources:

> When I teach, I tend to use a visual supplement like a PowerPoint or a Keynote. Some of them are ten years old, but all I've done is just changed it to match the new curriculum. It's not about reinventing the wheel. (Media Arts teacher)

In terms of communities of practice, one Dance teacher stated:

> I thought this was going to be appalling, but it actually ran easily. I reached out to lots of people, and I went, "What are you using? How do you ..." [laughs]. Other dance teachers, even other dancers. I remember going over to Melbourne and asking a ballet teacher friend of mine "I've seen on social media you're teaching your classes online, how do you do this?" Reach out, and not necessarily within your school. Definitely beyond that! (Dance teacher)

For one Visual Arts teacher, this took an international flavour:

> *One big advantage of the COVID-19 stuff is that you now can get online, p*rofessional learning communities. I have connected with teachers in Canada, Queensland and New Zealand and you just learn these things that you take into the classroom. Classrooms in schools become like a little fishbowl, it's hard to see out sometimes. (Visual Arts teacher)

In summary, the main potentialities revolved around online resource sharing and online communities of practice. Few participants described permanent pedagogical practice changes despite opportunities for reflection and consolidation, and this was common across all five Arts disciplines.

Discussion

In this article, we have reported the collective challenges, affordances, and potentialities of the COVID-19 online teaching experiences of a selection of expert Arts teachers in WA. Surprisingly, where we had imagined that the fewer periods of lockdown in WA might have allowed time for deeper reflection, more considered planning, and better preparation for subsequent lockdowns, instead we found deeply ingrained fault lines in existing educational structures which rendered the periods of respite between lockdown largely irrelevant. These included:

- ongoing poor technology connectivity and platform instability which impacted teacher online pedagogical content knowledge / professional learning opportunities and student engagement,
- heavy workload burdens and competing demands on teachers' time and resources leading to stress and a feeling of helplessness, especially among our less pedagogically secure participants,
- low priority for Arts teaching and inadequate communication between teachers and school contexts around how best to respond to challenges; many teachers felt they were left to figure out what to do as they went along;
- a digital divide for students [and teachers] which was manifest as unreliable access to internet, little/no access to devices, and insufficient PL and support, and significantly
- a paradigm shift from "how to teach" in subjects where teacher demonstration, one-on-one interactions and ready availability of materials and equipment had previously been the mainstay to online equivalencies (YouTube clips rather than demonstrations) which lacked the personalised feedback/relevance dimension that direct student engagement allowed.

The affordances reported in this study surround the importance of collaboration, openness, flexibility and adaptability, and a recognised need to focus more on student wellbeing than content delivery. All of the above was mediated by confidence born from years of teaching for our expert teachers. Those with high agency and experience fared better irrespective of technology familiarity and capability, as they drew upon their experience to devise alternative pedagogies. We speculated that because the pedagogical content knowledge repertoire of our experts was broader, they were better able to repurpose knowledge and resources for online teaching than less experienced teachers. Technology was certainly fundamental in online learning but was also a contributor to the difficulties. Indeed, while most participants initially struggled to ensure effective online teaching, this was attributed more to issues and challenges surrounding platform stability and overall connectivity. Further, despite the fact that Arts teaching has been heavily reliant on face-to-face personalised teaching approaches, our expert practitioners were able to adapt and adjust over time. When considering our participants overall experiences, it becomes apparent that it is the support processes designed to facilitate effective online teaching rather than pedagogical issues per se that require direct attention from systems and sectors. Accordingly, we make the following recommendations to systems and sectors for future practice:

- schools need to ensure their teachers have access to appropriate infrastructure (devices / hardware) and technology support needed to teach online (including trouble shooting when programs and hardware fail),
- teachers need access to mentors and PL training framed around online teaching pedagogical practices (i.e., online teaching strategies) as well as familiarity with delivery platforms such as Webex, Zoom, or Teams,
- Teachers need time to develop online teaching material and support from organisations with expertise. While communities of practice expanded in response to online teaching practice, these took time to develop their resources and a more systematic approach is required which focuses on pedagogies as well as materials, and
- Most importantly, systems and sectors need to be aware that the most vulnerable teachers may not be older, experienced teachers less fluent with technology, but rather early career digital natives who need guidance in how to adapt for effective online delivery.

While recognised experts participated in this study, two reported struggling to cope and lamented the inadequacy of their online teaching 'pedagogical' repertoire. They found lockdown and online teaching particularly stressful and indicated that much of their online content would need to be retaught when students returned to classes. As stress is a driver of attrition particularly among early career teachers, the heightened pressures, and stressors our experts described were of particular concern, especially given looming world-wide teacher shortages (Worth et al., 2018). The experiences of our participants overall indicated that as a profession, we were largely unprepared for online teaching, despite technology being mandated in the Australian Curriculum since 2014 (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014). It was the generosity of our teachers who gathered in online communities to fill the void left as traditional mentoring, teaching and learning became unviable, and it was their flexibility / reflexivity born through agency that allowed them to cope.

As technological pedagogical content knowledge evolves and the profession navigates seismic events like the COVID-19 pandemic, the experiences of our Arts teacher participants has emphasised that whilst technology has an important role to play in success, it also generates challenges. More importantly, their experience underscores the reality that it is the interpersonal relationships sphere of practice that may hold the key to online teaching success. Through their powerful voices, our participants remind us that lower secondary students are *children* who despite the superficial appearance of independence, maturity and technological proficiency, more often than not simply "use" technology, which is not the same as being digitally or visually literate. Nor does that "user status" guarantee that in a crisis continuity of access is assured. Moreover, for vulnerable less experienced teachers who have yet to master their craft, the need for mentoring and supportive communities of practice has never been greater. Here, (and in future testing times) the online environment has been shown to have an important role to play in providing space and scope for communities of teachers to come together and support one another by sharing experiences, offering advice, collaboratively problem solving, and through the provision of resources. The need and value of connecting through online discipline-based communities of practice may therefore be the enduring legacy of COVID-19 for educators everywhere and an essential support for those in the early career phase.

Conclusion

We freely acknowledge limitations associated with the findings reported here: our study involved only 15 individuals. We appreciate the danger in generalising purely on these findings. However, studies such as this reveal the alignment between challenges, affordances, and potentialities in trying times. Further, the emic perspective each member of our research team has brought to the study raised interesting and / or unexpected issues specific to Arts teaching practice in relation to the central research question.

Elliott Eisner, twentieth century Arts education luminary still considered by many the 'Einstein' of contemporary visual education observed that "Art is the literacy of the heart" (Eisner, 2003). The humanity of this sentiment is both beautifully poignant and deeply resonant at a time when COVID-19 has isolated us and obliterated opportunities for many to meet their human need to connect, collaborate, grow, and create together. The big "take away" from our study is perhaps, therefore, the understanding that the online environment (with all of its foibles, challenges and inadequacies) offers a potential yet to be fully understood conduit for connection – between teachers, and teachers / students – especially in testing times. The challenge for policymakers and stakeholders is to consolidate what has been learned and capitalise on the strengths of both face-to-face and online learning in the Arts so that connection and collaboration (for teachers at least) can continue seamlessly irrespective of location or situation.

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