E-LEARNING IN THE MUSIC AND VISUAL ARTS EDUCATION OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS: ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Arts education is one domain that has traditionally taken place in a face-to-face mode, and this research paper, part of an ongoing three year research project, explores teacher perceptions of the application of e-learning to Arts education. E-learning has had an enormous impact on higher education; however there has been only limited application of e-learning to Arts education, with this mode of learning presenting many challenges to Arts education academics in designing courses. This paper analyses quantitative and qualitative survey data collected from six education academics who taught in an undergraduate Arts education unit in an online mode in 2010 and 2011. The analysis of these data found that teachers viewed e-learning in Arts education as very different to face-to-face teaching, mixed perceptions about the equity of student opportunities in this mode; a perception (with one respondent dissenting) that the online unit was successful in preparing students to teach the Arts in schools; and, the critical importance of student engagement to their success in this mode. More extensive research of e-learning in Arts education involving more participants from a range of tertiary institutions is anticipated.

Introduction

E-learning has had an enormous impact on higher education, affecting access to higher education, modes and pedagogies of learning. Published findings from previous stages of this project have focussed on the experiences of pre-service teachers in e-learning in music and the visual arts, including: the use of different types of videos (Baker, 2011a); factors contributing to student success in the Arts in e-learning (Baker, 2011b); the application of a student engagement framework to e-learning in Arts education (Baker & Pittaway, 2012); and, the significance attributed to interaction by students learning in this mode (Baker, 2012). But what do education academics in these domains think about learning and teaching in an online environment? This paper, one output from a three year ongoing research project, explores the perceptions of six online educators in one Australian university regarding their experiences of teaching Arts education in one unit in an online mode between 2010 and 2011.

The unit entitled 'Arts Education: Music and Visual Arts' is a core unit of a Bachelor of Education degree offered in the second semester of first year for early childhood and primary pre-service teachers. The unit is offered in both face-to-face and fully online modes, and, in 2010 640 students were enrolled in the unit with 271 (42%) enrolled as fully online students, and in 2011, 475 students were enrolled, with 288 (60.6%) of these being fully online students. Students are encouraged to create their own understandings of key concepts and skills through an active engagement with course materials including through structured, tutor mediated discussion boards and with a series of in-house demonstration videos.

This research project, underpinned by constructivist ontology (Blaikie, 1993; Sarantakos, 2005) uses a multiple method approach to data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 1990)

through survey and interview, to better understand the phenomenon of e-learning in pre-service teacher Arts education. This paper draws on data from the second round of data collection in this project, using survey and interview methods with both pre-service teachers and education academics. This paper analyses quantitative and qualitative survey data collected from six education academics, of varying levels of experience in tertiary teaching, who taught in an undergraduate Arts education unit in an online mode in 2010 and 2011. These data have been analysed by inductive category construction using extensive data maps or matrices (Hatch, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Sarantakos, 2005).

The analysis of these data has highlighted four themes in respect of teacher perceptions of their experiences: a perception that online teaching is 'completely' or 'somewhat' different to face-to-face teaching in Arts education; mixed perceptions about the equity of student opportunities to learn when compared to the face-to-face mode; a majority perception (with one respondent dissenting) that the online unit was successful in preparing students to teach the Arts in schools; and, the critical importance of student engagement to their success in this mode. Linked to this final theme and of some interest were perceptions about the importance of monitoring student progress and overcoming transactional distance.

These findings provide the researcher with an additional lens through which to view data, and contribute to the understanding of more extensive data about student experiences. These findings coincide in many respects with those about pre-service teachers and the importance of student engagement to their success. This stage of data collection is preliminary to interviews with five of these online teachers that will augment this survey data, and facilitate the evolution of further survey and interview tools. Following these stages of data collection, including a third round of data collection in 2012, more extensive research into academic perceptions of e-learning in Arts education with more participants from a range of tertiary institutions is anticipated.

Literature

E-learning has had an enormous impact on higher education (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010; Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens 2012; Borup, West & Graham, 2012; Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2010; Commonwealth of Australia, 2002; Drummond, 2008; Epstein, 2006; Guri-Rosenblit, 2005; Herbert, 2007; Jones & O'Shea, 2004; Kerr, Rynearson, & Kerr, 2006; Muirhead & Juwah, 2004; Nagel & Kotze, 2010; Paechter & Maier, 2010; Riddiford, 2009; Rovai, 2004; Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006; Sherbon & Kish, 2005; Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004; Young & Norgard, 2006). Most notably perhaps this impact has been most prominent in the numbers of students accessing tertiary education in this mode (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002; Digolo, Andang'o, and Katuli, 2011, Riddiford, 2009).

Despite the spread of online learning in higher education there has been a limited application of e-learning to Arts education (Baker, 2011a), with this mode of learning presenting many challenges to Arts education academics in designing courses. The asynchronous nature of e-learning is one such challenge, particularly in units that are non-text based and that foreground active, constructivist teaching pedagogies, or when practical, hands-on engagement with materials is required, such as in the unit referred to in this paper. The two principal means of interaction and active student engagement in this unit are through demonstration videos and tutor mediated discussion boards. According to Boling et al. (2012), "In courses that offered little to no interaction with others, students reported feeling disconnected with their instructors, the course content, and their fellow classmates" (p. 120). Underhill (2006) maintains that "The pedagogy of constructivism and in particular socio-constructivism is underpinning much of the online learning and teaching developments currently being developed" (p.165), however these developments do not appear in literature in relation to e-learning in Arts education. The

incorporation of videos into the design of this unit was intended to bridge the gap between the tertiary classroom and the online learner, effectively bringing online learners into the classroom and asking them to learn actively by doing (see Donkor, 2010, 2011). According to Harasim (2000), "Active learner participation leads to multiple perspectives on issues, a divergence of ideas, and positions that students must sort through to find meaning and convergence" (p. 53). According to Bailey and Card (2009), there are eight pedagogical practices for effective online teaching, "Fostering relationships, timeliness, good communication, organization, effective utilization of technology, flexibility, high expectations" (p. 154). Each of these pedagogical practices were present to greater or lesser degrees in those data analysed in this paper, suggesting that the perceptions of respondents included elements of successful pedagogy.

The 2010 online iteration of the Arts education unit referred to in this paper was the first step into designing online learning by the researcher, and the first e-learning experience of all but two of the teaching staff. Much of the literature regarding e-learning pedagogy notes that teaching in an online mode presents many differences to the teacher used to teaching face-to-face. Harasim (2000) writes that "Instructors report major changes in their instructional roles as they move from face-to-face to online instruction. In particular, instructors and students become more interactive" (pp. 57-58). Harasim (2000) writes that online learning leads to new patterns of engagement stating that "Online course activity based upon asynchronous communication yields an entirely new learning pattern: highly active engagement" (p. 56). An altered learning pattern affects academic work, with Hislop and Ellis (2004) reporting that "in general, faculty perceive that they spend more time teaching online courses than their traditional equivalents" (p. 17), although their study found that this was not the case with the time spent in online teaching being "actually less" (p. 15). Harasim (2000) found that for academics their "major complaint was the high initial workload. A typical novice to expert learning curve was evident as instructors learned to deal with new technology and expectations" (p. 58).

Another finding referred to by Hislop and Ellis (2004) with relevance to academic perceptions of teaching in e-learning, is the perceived 'effort' required in this mode:

> While teaching online may not take more time, it may actually take more effort. In terms of actual effort, a larger number of shorter duration activities may increase the effort to teach by increasing cognitive overhead. Perhaps, more importantly, the more continual attention required by an online class may increase the instructors' perception of effort much more than the actual time expended (p. 29).

Another impact upon academic work in an e-learning mode is the importance of maintaining interaction with students also referred to as online presence. According to Rovai (2007), "The online instructor plays a crucial role in maintaining and sustaining students' motivational levels by planning structures and facilitating interpersonal events" (p. 79). Rovai also suggests that "The first strategy for facilitating online discussions is to develop and maintain a social presence in discussion forums" (p. 82). In a large multi-institutional study Shea, Li, and Pickett (2006) refer to "teaching presence" as a "core role of the online instructor" (p. 175). Woo and Reeves (2007) assert that "in Web-based learning environments, maintaining interaction is more challenging than in face-to-face learning contexts because of the time and space separation enabled by the technology" (pp. 15-16).

Procedure and sample

This research project is grounded in the constructivist ontology (Blaikie, 1993; Sarantakos, 2005) and uses a multiple method approach to data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 1990). The use of more than one method of data collection is a multiple method approach, and Denzin and Lincoln (1994) refer to qualitative research as being inherently "multimethod" in

focus (p. 2). Patton (1990) maintains that the use of multiple methods of data collection is to be regarded as a source of methodological strength within the qualitative paradigm (see also Sarantakos, 2005). This paper analyses quantitative and qualitative survey data collected from six education academics who taught in this Arts education unit in an online mode in 2010 and 2011. Five academics have also elected to participate in the next stage of data collection through individual interviews. This approach to sampling, wherein participants are selected according to their potential to inform the research question is known as "purposeful" sampling (Patton, 1990; Hatch, 2002).

Over the two years of this course, ten teaching staff have been involved in teaching the unit in an online mode, excluding the author, all of whom are contract staff. In December 2011, these ten staff were emailed to participate in this survey, including those who no longer teach into the unit. This paper presents an analysis of data collected from this survey. There were six respondents (66.7%), please note that response to individual questions varied, with some questions only being responded to by five teachers. A mix of experience in teaching was recorded amongst these respondents, with one teaching less than 5 years, two less than 10 years, one 11 to 20 years, one 21 to 30 years, and one in excess of 30 years. Only two respondents (33.3%) had taught at university level before. There was also a mix of ages with two respondents (40%) being 21-29 years of age; and two respondents (40%) being 40-49 years of age, and one respondent (20%) being 30 – 39 years of age. All of these respondents were concurrently teaching in the face-to-face mode of the unit.

Data analysis and discussion

Survey data collected from the six respondents have been analysed by inductive category construction (Hatch, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Sarantakos, 2005) by which data are entered into matrices, identified, coded, and searched in order to isolate and understand emergent themes, and the relationships between these themes. Hatch (2002) writes that the inductive approach "proceeds from the specific to the general. Understandings are generated by starting with specific elements and finding connections among them" (p. 161).

Hatch (2002) states that "inductive data analysis is a search for patterns of meaning in data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made" (p. 161). Qualitative and quantitative data were entered into extensive data maps, charts, or "matrices" (Miles & Huberman, 1984) that provided a framework for analysing themes and the relationships between them. The quantitative data collected with the survey were used to inform the analysis of qualitative responses and to provide a working hierarchy of value by the number of responses to theme areas according to the inductive analysis

The inductive analysis of these quantitative and qualitative survey data has highlighted four themes in respect of teacher perceptions of their experiences: a perception that online teaching is 'completely' or 'somewhat' different to face-to-face teaching in Arts education; mixed perceptions about the equity of student opportunities to learn when compared to the face-to-face mode; a majority perception (with one respondent dissenting) that the online unit was successful in preparing students to teach the Arts in schools; and, the critical importance of student engagement to their success in this mode. Linked to this final theme and of some interest were perceptions about the importance of monitoring student progress and overcoming transactional distance through demonstration videos.

Theme 1: Differences between online and face-to-face teaching

As may be seen in Table 1, all respondents maintained that teaching online is either 'completely different' or 'somewhat different' to teaching a face-to-face mode. Of itself this is perhaps not

surprising; but all respondents were also asked to describe the nature of that difference. Including responses to this question, throughout all qualitative data, there were fifteen comments in total regarding the differences between teaching Arts education online and face-to-face teaching.

Table 1 *Perceptions of difference*

Please rate how different teaching the arts online is to teaching in a face-to-face context

Answer Options	Response %	Response #
1. It is completely different	50.0	3
2. It is somewhat different	50.0	3
3. It is different	0.0	0
4. It is similar	0.0	0
5. It is the same	0.0	0
answered question		**6**

One comment highlights the difference between synchronous and asynchronous learning, with the respondent writing that *the F2F students have the advantage of teacher and peer presence - at a specific point in time - to help motivate them.* This is one of the most important distinctions between online and face-to-face learning, referred to by one respondent as responding to *emergent teaching moments.* In one way or another almost all of the comments regarding difference were to do with issues arising from asynchronous communication and teaching. One such comment refers to the 'energy' of the face-to-face teaching mode and the difficulties in recreating this in an online context, writing that *with teaching and making visual art being such a tactile, visual experience, it is a challenge to recreate some of the special 'energy' that manifests when creating or teaching art with/to someone else, or a live class.* Another respondent refers to problem solving in online learning, writing that *It is hard without working directly with students solve problems or provide suggestions about particular tasks. Teaching face-to-face gives opportunity to respond and give feedback to students as issues arise. Teaching face-to-face encourages group participation easily.*

Another respondent writes about both contact and problem solving, stating that *the interaction and discussion between students and tutor as well as between the students themselves in the face-to-face classes is so valuable. The sharing of their experiences, problem solving methods, developing some technical skills, as well as seeing how ideas can be developed and communicated are often inspirational to participating members of face-to-face classes.* One respondent writes about the difficulties of asynchronous teaching writing that *teaching in the Arts is about doing. It is highly subjective and full of all sorts of interpretations. In a face-to-face situation much of this can be discussed, learning experiences can be repeated or altered slightly to enable wider learning or greater depth of understanding.* The nature of Arts participation appears to be a critical issue to these respondents, and is expanded upon in the following section.

Theme 2: Perceptions of equity

From the outset of the unit design process, central in the minds of designers was the University requirement to ensure equity in provision to all learners. Part of the planning process involved seeking creative solutions to a pedagogical requirement to enable learners to actively engage in Arts creation, to explore the Arts in a hands-on way, and thus gain meaningful understandings of the nature of the Arts in an online environment. One way in which this requirement was

addressed was with the development of in-house demonstration videos, featuring teaching staff working with the Arts and former graduates, demonstrating skills and techniques in creation. These videos were further augmented by the requirement for students to complete these activities themselves, and to post in structured discussion boards about their experiences. Whilst acknowledging the differences between e-learning and face-to-face learning, these interactive learning tools were designed to address the issue of equity in provision, and to provide online students with the tools necessary to be successful in the unit.

The analysis of data has revealed that the theme of equity is actually very closely aligned with the theme of engagement. Respondents continually relate the opportunity to be successful in the unit to levels of individual student engagement. Whilst acknowledging that engagement is also important in face-to-face learning, the importance of engagement in e-learning is foregrounded by respondents. In some responses success was linked directly to their level of engagement, such as this respondent who states that *fully online students have an equal opportunity to learn but only if they choose to fully involve themselves and participate completely in the unit.*

The question of student engagement and student success applies equally to both online and face-to-face modes of learning; unless a student engages and participates in their own learning they are unlikely to succeed in either mode of learning. But these data suggest that this is more important in an online context. In response to a question about equal opportunities to learn, one respondent states that *Yes I believe they* [fully online students] *do* [have an equal opportunity to learn], *however they do need to be much more independent and intrinsically motivated to learn.* Another respondent writes about this in respect of student choice writing that *another issue is student participation online. I feel that students can choose to not fully participate in the online forum and thus not develop a deep understanding.* This highlights one of the difficulties of online learning, being that it may be easier to 'hide' in an online context, and this increases the importance of academic monitoring of student progress and presence.

Theme 3: Perceptions of success

As may be seen in Table 2, all but one respondent (20%) maintained that the online iteration of the unit was 'successful' in preparing students for using music and visual art in their future classrooms. Perhaps of most significance in response to this question was a lack of high end response.

Table 2 *Perceptions of success*

How would you rate the success of the online iteration of this unit in preparing students for using music and visual art in their future classrooms?

Answer Options	Response %	Response #
1. Extremely unsuccessful	0.0	0
2. Very unsuccessful	20.0	1
3. Successful	80.0	4
4. Very successful	0.0	0
5. Extremely successful	0.0	0
	answered question	**5**
	skipped question	**1**

The dilemma of online teaching in the arts is highlighted by one respondent who writes that *This unit can be highly successful however it depends on the involvement and participation by the students as to how well prepared they are. If a student has actively watched the videos, done*

their reading and engaged in activities with their support group then they will be well prepared. I worry that some students were not involving themselves fully with their support group. One respondent stated that *I am not convinced that students will feel confident, inspired and/or motivated enough by the online iteration to use particularly music activities in their future classrooms.*

Theme 4: Perceptions of student engagement

One of the most commonly referred to themes that emerged from these data is the perception of the critical importance of student engagement, sometimes also referred to as 'participation' or 'motivation'. Baker and Pittaway (2012) highlighted this as a critical area of online learning in music education. One means of encouraging student communication with peers and with tutors is through the use of discussion boards. As may be seen in Table 3, respondents viewed these as a successful means of communication. Three respondents (60%) regarded discussion boards as a successful means of communication, and one respondent (20%) regarded these as a 'very successful' means. However, one respondent (20%) regarded these as 'very unsuccessful'.

Table 2 *Perceptions of discussion boards as a communication medium*

How would you rate the success of discussion boards as a means of communication in the unit?

Answer Options	Response %	Response #
1. Extremely unsuccessful	0.0	0
2. Very unsuccessful	20.0	1
3. Successful	60.0	3
4. Very successful	20.0	1
5. Extremely successful	0.0	0
	answered question	**5**
	skipped question	**1**

More significant are the qualitative comments received, which are more mixed, and which highlight the need for student participation in these discussion boards. The dilemma of online discussion boards in this unit thus far lies in their voluntary nature, and one respondent highlighted the natural concomitant of this situation, stating that t*his answer varies a lot across individuals. For the students who engage and invest in their learning, the discussion boards are rewarding for them and I believe very successful, however those students who give very little (discussion board input) inevitably get very little in return.* It is possible to argue once again that this is no different to a face-to-face situation. However in a face-to-face situation a student may sit in a class, contributing little to a discussion, but taking much in. In a discussion board this is also possible, just because a student does not contribute to an online discussion doesn't mean that they are not learning. According to Sutton (2001, cited in Woo et al., 2007), this is referred to as "vicarious interaction", which "takes place when a student actively observes and processes both sides of a direct interaction between two other students or between another student and the instructor" (p. 227).

The importance of student participation, motivation or engagement is similarly highlighted by two respondents who write that *so much relies on the individual student's commitment,* and that t*he success of discussion boards is often dependant on the individuals in the group*. Another respondent highlights the value of discussion boards as a means of disseminating information, stating that *mass communication was very successful as you could pass information quickly and easily to all students. It was then the responsibility of the student to check the discussion board.*

However, in an online context where discussion boards are critical to engagement, dissemination of information is only one aspect of the equation that makes up student participation.

In response to a question asking respondents to describe the ways in which they encouraged student engagement in an online context the issue of engagement was explored in more detail. There were six comments regarding ways of encouraging student participation, which ranged from making *Direct contact where necessary (with students who have not posted)* to the importance of providing rich responses, one respondent stating *Rich description. Emotive responses (positive!) to connect with students*. Other respondents focused on the importance of discussion boards and the ways in which these are used, stating that *I encourage online students to participate through active discussions and conversations*.

The value of full engagement is noted by one respondent who highlighted some positive learning behaviour amongst online students, stating t*he online discussion boards work well where the student shows a positive commitment to regular participation - with the tutor and also with others in the class. Occasionally students will post photos of their achievements, which I think is a great idea. Not only is it 'proof' of their participation in the weekly practical activities in the visual arts, but also it provides a basis for further discussion of ideas, problem solving etc.* This is a very important observation, and offers an indication of one way in which engagement may be further encouraged, and a direction for future research.

Another area of interest from these data is around the question of 'teaching effort'. Teaching online is often referred to as more time intensive than face-to-face teaching, and this is partly borne out by these data. As may be seen in Table 3 four respondents (66%) described the level of effort required to encourage online students to engage and participate as 'substantial', with one respondent (16.7%) stating that 'a little effort was required', and one respondent (16.7%) stating that the level of effort was 'the same as in face-to-face teaching'. The finding that the majority of respondents perceived teaching online as requiring more effort than in a face-to-face environment is certainly consistent with the findings of Hislop and Ellis (2004) who found this to be a common perception, despite not being borne out by their data. These perceptions offer a rich ground for further research in this project.

Table 3 *Perceptions of effort*

Select the response that best describes the level of effort required by you to encourage your online students to engage and participate in this context.

Answer Options	Response %	Response #
1. An inordinate effort is required	0.0	0
2. Substantial effort is required	66.7	4
3. A little effort is required	16.7	1
4. The same amount of effort as in face-to-face mode is required	16.7	1
5. No effort is required	0.0	0
answered question		**6**

Monitoring student progress in online learning

Monitoring student participation and progress seems to have been highlighted by most respondents as an important issue in online teaching, and one that is perceived as challenging and different to face-to-face teaching. One respondent states this simply as *Uncertainty about student engagement with art making as not all students will share online,* and another as *not hearing, or viewing artworks by students, or groups organised by students online.* This is likewise referred to as a *lack of opportunity to respond to students' artworks as they create them*

by another respondent. When one compares the immediacy of the face-to-face environment in providing feedback to students on their arts creations this would seem to be an area of inequality in the unit. If a student attends a face-to-face class their arts creations form part of the class discussion; whereas, there was no requirement for this in the online environment beyond the provision of opportunities to post these in the discussion boards. The requirement of such postings may offer an interesting direction for subsequent iterations of this unit, but also presents a conundrum regarding the voluntariness of online participation.

Overcoming student isolation using videos

As may be seen in Table 4 four respondents (80%) described the success of the demonstration videos as 'very successful', with one respondent (20%) agreeing that these were 'very unsuccessful'.

Table 4 *Perceptions of demonstration videos*

How would you rate the success of the videos provided for students in this unit as learning tools?

Answer Options	Response %	Response #
1. Extremely unsuccessful	0.0	0
2. Very unsuccessful	20.0	1
3. Successful	0.0	0
4. Very successful	80.0	4
5. Extremely successful	0.0	0
answered question		5
skipped question		1

As stated earlier one of the means of addressing student engagement and reducing student isolation was the development of in-house demonstration videos. Baker (2011a) highlights the value placed on these videos by students, these data highlighted perceptions of academics about the value of these learning tools. There were four positive comments about these videos, often highlighting their value as a means of bridging the gap to the classroom. One respondent stated that *these really help to address the lack of physical and visual stimulation/engagement for visual art learners* and another stated that they were an *excellent means of bringing students into the learning context*.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted important themes in teacher perceptions of e-learning in Arts education. These perceptions provide the researcher with an additional lens through which to view data, and furthermore contribute to the understanding of more extensive data about student experiences in the same area. These findings coincide with those about pre-service teachers, the importance of student engagement for student success (Baker & Pittaway, 2012), and the usefulness of videos in e-learning in Arts education (Baker, 2011a). The respondents' perceptions of the differences between online and face-to-face learning in Arts education, in particular the issues to do with the 'energy' of the face-to-face environment, have highlighted a future direction for both course design and research. The critical role of student engagement in success in this mode of learning, when aligned with the potential to engage students using posts of student art and music creations, and the success of videos as a means of bridging the gap to the classroom, offer interesting directions for further course design and research.

As noted earlier this stage of data collection is preliminary to interviews with five of these academics that will augment these survey data, and facilitate the evolution of further survey and interview tools. Following these stages of data collection, including a third round of data collection in 2012, more extensive research into academic perceptions of e-learning in Arts education involving more participants from a range of tertiary institutions is anticipated. It is hoped that through further course design and research initiatives the phenomenon of e-learning in Arts education will be better understood, and that consequently this mode of learning in this domain will be more widely understood and adopted.

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