



Discovering aesthetic space online?

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In this concise paper, I present an account of my recent experience designing blended-delivery pre-service teacher education in drama and dance. The challenges of space and the role of the teacher in arts pedagogy are examined and reconceptualised in order to develop learning experiences that have greater equivalence across delivery modes. The question of “can we create drama and dance together without ever being in the same room?” is explored.

Keywords: performing arts education; preservice teacher education

The challenge

“If drama educators cannot or will not find ways to work with technology, students will find other places to express their creativity outside the drama classroom.” Michael Anderson (2005, p120). This paper describes one teacher’s exploration of the terrain of online arts education, fuelled by the desire to ensure drama and dance education was accessible to as many pre-service teachers as possible. Whilst this paper does not advocate that the online context is an ideal one for teaching performing arts education, it explores a commitment to provide the best possible experience to online students.

In 2008 Massey University College of Education launched a new pre-service teacher education programme, offered in both online and internal modes. While Massey University has offered teacher education programmes by distance for many years, this programme posed a new challenge – blended delivery, using *Moodle* as the online environment. Blended delivery is a term that is variously interpreted. Given that this new programme did not require distance students to attend contact courses, in a sense it never approaches a true “blend” but rather offers a dual-mode of delivery. Internal students do however experience a blended delivery. The challenge of reconceptualizing the programme in a blended delivery mode came as both cohorts were to share the online environment, study materials, and there was a goal of equivalence in regards to the tasks and the learning trajectory for both cohorts.

Due to the structure of this new programme, those of us who specialise in disciplines outside of literacy and numeracy were required to work in collaborative writing teams (often for the first time). For teaching staff in the college this development meant not only writing new papers and mastering new technologies, but also discovering new pedagogies. The challenge increased as we worked to design courses addressing several disciplines within the framework of curriculum integration. My work involved designing learning experiences and materials to introduce primary teachers to dance and drama education in this blended delivery mode. As any arts educator might, I (eventually) decided to approach the task as I would any other creative journey – to suspend my judgment and preconceived notions of what was or wasn’t possible and attempt to connect these new tools and online pedagogies with arts pedagogy and processes.

Learning experiences in performing arts education are often teacher-facilitated, student-centred and involve social processes that require students to work with others to communicate through movement, sound and visual image in a three-dimensional space, responding to stimuli imaginatively (Ministry of Education, 2000). The learning intentions for this introductory course included building understandings of the place of these art forms in society, of the basic theoretical concepts related to both disciplines and engagement in practical experiences of individual and collaborative art-making. The challenge for me centred around the problem of how to increase the student-centred and experiential dimensions within the learning design (compared to that which had traditionally been offered online) and to find solutions to the problem of space. How can we make dance and drama together without ever being in the same room!?

How could I build distance students' practical knowledge of these subjects? How might I encourage and enable distance students to participate in an experiential process of learning through practical art-making?

Problem-solving my course design began with attempting to find ways to mediate space/distance while engaging in arts pedagogies. This required some deconstruction of my role, and the nature of learning in face-to-face contexts in order to discover how I might create equivalent learning experiences online. Learning in these disciplines involves kinaesthetic (embodied) experiences, the exploration of story and creative work, in order to build an understanding of how these art forms communicate meaning (Ministry of Education, 2008). For internal students, exploring both disciplines (dance and drama) means attending classes in a special room – a large space without windows; a private space with curtains, lighting, music, and seats for an audience; a space of possibility, with a history of performance. As I explored the *Moodle* online environment, I found it provided a range of possible solutions to the difficult issue of space. A number of virtual spaces existed: discussion spaces for the development of ideas (collaborative and individual) and reflective practice including forums, journals, wikis and chat rooms. Alternative “spaces” for social exchange include email and MSN. Forums and databases enable the sharing of documents, photos and videos and offered some possibility for presenting and viewing work. Alongside the Moodle environment, technologies such as audio software, digital media software and digital cameras were readily available to students along with websites such as www.Youtube.com that provided opportunities for accessing a range of resources. In these virtual and private spaces, I could see glimmers of possibilities for aesthetic learning experiences. The following discussion unpacks initial approaches taken in both discipline areas.

The dance experience

The introductory Dance education course involved students developing practical knowledge in dance – actual experiences in movement: exploring the elements of dance, undertaking choreographic study, viewing and responding to dance and locating dance in society as an art form (Ministry of Education, 2008). Course materials were provided online and for internal students, practical exploration happened in a face-to-face setting along with group discussion and viewing of video clips – all facilitated by the teacher. Effective arts pedagogy when building an ensemble-based learning environment focuses on participation and acceptance of ideas initially rather than inviting critique too soon - to do so may hinder the risky business of creative self-expression students are engaging in (Neelands, 2009). For distance students, the same practical tasks were given, however these were tailored for solo exploration with options given for those who could access others to join in this practical movement work. Audio CDs of music were provided so that students could move to larger spaces than their study; so this practical work happened in private spaces – in the lounge, or on the lawn in some instances. Wary of setting the emotional stakes too high so early in the game (first year students in Week Two Semester 1), I did not require students to record their experiments in a way that published them moving (e.g. through video) although some form of accountability was desirable. Instead, students made dance “maps,” shared digital photos of these online and reflected on their learning in forums. Whilst internal students did present to others in class, these were brief moments, not recorded or published outside of the safety of the group.

Encouraged by my first year experience, we did record and share the performance work of internal students in an online database when dance was revisited in the second year course. By now these internal students had become comfortable with themselves and each other and *wanted* a record of their performance work. Interestingly enough, while not required to do so, several distance students also submitted video and photo records of their own dance work – a number of which included family members or groups of neighbourhood children, enthusiastically experimenting with body shape, energy, space and structure and bringing dance alive in three-dimensions. In the second year course, the learning focus shifted to classroom pedagogy so the video examples provided a wealth of information for both cohorts. I took the plunge and videoed myself in action as the teacher facilitating the work. In this way pedagogy was further modelled for distance students and video editing enabled me to identify and highlight specific aspects of pedagogy. Through this editing, a resource was created that all students were later able to revisit.

The drama experience

Drama was included in an 8-week multi-disciplinary module integrating English, Drama & Hauora (Health). The time allocated to Drama was three weeks of course time only. Drama education as defined by the New Zealand curriculum involves: learning about drama (and theatre) as it functions in society; developing practical knowledge in drama through working in role and creating dramatic spaces; using drama elements, technologies and conventions to communicate meaning; developing ideas in drama; and

presenting, viewing and responding to drama works (Ministry of Education, 2008). This introductory course needed to touch on these aspects in some form.

By making the distinction between theatre (bound by the notion of performer and audience sharing the same 3D space) and drama education, potential solutions to the problem of delivering drama in a blended mode were generated. According to Judith McLean (1996) three conditions are essential in order for the aesthetics in drama to occur – dialogue, experiential learning with teacher/students working as co-artists and critical reflection. My task was to utilise virtual and private spaces and technologies in order to create these conditions. One of the central ideas I wanted students to understand was the way drama communicates through visual and aural images – as opposed to communicating through spoken text which is the emphasis drama within the English curriculum tends to have. In order to create McLean’s these conditions, the work in Drama involved both synchronous and asynchronous tasks. Synchronous tasks were used due to the collaborative nature of the activities including work in role and developing ideas for the group project – allowing dialogue, experiential learning and co-artistry. Asynchronous tasks were used during individual work in role and when viewing & responding to work (critical reflection).

All students worked with the children’s story, *Matatuhi* by Robyn Kahukiwa within English sessions prior to Drama. This text was now explored dramatically in both the face-to-face setting and online. Having gained an understanding of how performers communicate when in role, students were asked to work in role as characters in the text. Students wrote and shared a diary entry in role, expanding on the experience of one of the central characters. They also worked with a partner to improvise a conversation in role, and generated a written record of this to share. Such improvisation work, the use of conventions to facilitate this and the exploration of stories in this way is fundamental to drama work (Johnstone, 1979; Neelands, 1999; Booth, 1994). Many students used email or “chat” to generate this text. Subsequent student reflections on this work suggest that understandings deepened for both on-campus and off-campus cohorts. Other technologies such as teleconferencing could be investigated in future so that students do not need to produce drama in the form of written text. This may also allow increased impact and immediacy for others viewing the work – a key feature of learning in drama in the classroom (Neelands, 1999). That said, there is a sense of needing to pace the demands on students (and teachers) in regard to mastering a range of technologies as well as providing adequate support for their physical work in role before this is “published”.

The final piece of collaborative drama work asked students to work in role, using visual and aural images to explore a theme of conflicting perspectives on a chosen situation or issue. Given the constraints of time, I asked for a thematic collection of images and the use of “Vocal Masque” – a theatre form which draws on text from a range of genres to create a form of vocal collage (Cameron, 1999). For internal students, this meant physically working in role in the three-dimensional space. For online students, this meant creating or sourcing relevant digital images and creating a collaborative vocal collage in a multimedia presentation, facilitated by a range of scaffolded synchronous and asynchronous tasks.

Asynchronous tasks included generating text ideas & visual images, making individual recordings for the vocal masque, responding to discussion, offering ideas for images & ordering these to give shape to the work. Synchronous tasks were needed to facilitate the collaborative process, especially given the time frame we were working in. Using collaborative spaces such as chat, *Skype*, email and forums, students could negotiate roles, work in role, finalise their script and make time to “meet”. The use of (freely available) software such as *Audacity* and *Photostory* enabled students to mediate space and to successfully collaborate to create the multimedia digital presentation. Students also critically reflected on their group’s work and viewed and responded to the work of others.

The role of the teacher

Several dimensions of the teacher’s role were highlighted by the experience of facilitating this creative work online, all of which have parallels in the face-to-face environment. These include attendance, scaffolding, pacing, clarity and management of group work. Using synchronous tasks in the drama module did prove to be a challenge initially. A number of distance students were working up to three weeks behind in the course and needed to be “present” for current collaboration. As the teacher facilitating this work, this meant consistently following up of those who were not active online during the early stages of the process. Expectations of students needed to be affirmed, in relation to when work was to be completed and what “attendance” meant.

Scaffolding and pacing the learning sequence was also important. In internal classes, activities are often scaffolded in order to build cumulatively and the timing of various activities is managed by the teacher. In

the online environment, a similar progression of scaffolded activities was designed, with careful attention to instructions regarding the time to be spent engaging in these. Distance students must manage their own time and therefore may labour at tasks meant to merely stimulate ideas and whet the appetite if a breakdown of timeframes is not provided. The following are examples of timing and process instructions for three different tasks:

- *Suggested Timeframe*: 15 minutes to map the character (This is not a work of art! It's a visual map)
- ...this should be an improvised conversation rather than a planned scripted scene...
- *Suggested Timeframe Distance Students*
WEEK 14: Early in the week Ideas & deciding on a theme & roles for group process; Collect & post possibilities for text & images
Thursday/Friday: Selecting & sequencing script; Begin sequencing images; Allocate & record MP3's using Audacity & email to group.

Clear instructions were, of course, vital when asking students to engage in creative tasks. Without clarity, progress may be halted until interaction with the teacher occurs or students may labour unprofitably. In regard to the drama work this meant that specific details of the situations for work in role were needed to assist students to build belief in the roles and scenarios. The downside of these detailed instructions is the large amount of text generated. Future investigation into the use of audio and video instructions will reduce the over-reliance on written text and may help to increase the sense of teacher presence – an area that warrants further exploration in the context of teaching arts online. Modelling is another strategy to build clarity for students. In face-to-face classes, this may happen through teacher modelling, student volunteers or prepared media. For the multimedia task a number of dimensions were modelled. Assisted by a group of students, I developed and recorded a range of vocal warm-ups and an example of a vocal masque. Examples of *Photostory* movies were also collated in a YouTube site dedicated to the course.

The complexity of the multimedia task for distance students was minimised by allocating roles to group members. Four members recorded an individual audio recording via *Audacity* and emailed this to one individual whose job it was to compile it into a two-minute audio track. Everyone submitted and negotiated the sequencing of visual images but one person was responsible for inputting these into *Photostory*, along with the finished audio track. The second time we delivered the course we incorporated orientation tasks that had students dealing with digital images and *Audacity* from Week One. We also made it known across the programme that these technologies were being engaged with - in this way it is hoped that the investment of time and energy in grappling with these technologies will serve the students in a range of contexts and avoid further technology overload.

The final work was shared in the Moodle site accessed by both internal and distance students. An analysis of forum postings suggests that learning outcomes for distance students were different and yet equivalent. For example, reflections on practical learning experiences in dance reveal distance students attended to learning about the body in motion, whereas reflections from internal students tended to focus on the social dimensions of the work and the positive impact the work had on their learning community. Potential benefits for internal students occurred as the opportunities for personal engagement with course material and reflection spaces increased. Further exploration is required to establish how, in future iterations, the exchange of knowledge between the two modes might serve to deepening the aesthetic learning experience for distance students.

Conclusions

Engaging in the challenge of delivering dance and drama education online has required an examination of the teacher's role in facilitating an aesthetic learning process and the reconceptualisation of collaborative and performance spaces. This exploration of virtual and private spaces has led to the discovery that these do have potential to satisfy the essential conditions that characterise arts pedagogy, along with the discovery of technologies that might allow "equivalent but different" artistic collaboration to occur. Discovering ways to develop the potential that exists when these two delivery modes are blended, and harnessing the power of these learning experiences across on-campus and off-campus cohorts is an area for future development. Whether or not these experiences are sufficient to equip pre-service teachers to go into classrooms and facilitate relevant performing arts experiences for children is uncertain, but as long as teacher education enters this blended, online territory, the need for arts educators to undertake such "risky" ventures is certain. While performing arts educators might be first to argue that our disciplines can never be taught by distance, perhaps it is we who are best equipped to suspend disbelief

and enter the creative chaos to discover the pedagogies that are likely to characterise tertiary education in the future.

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