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Recasting embodied and relational teaching in the arts: teacher educators reflect on the potential of digital learning

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ABSTRACT

In this study, a group of seven teacher educators report on how they embarked on a process of collaborative autoethnography to uncover the problems and possibilities of teaching arts education using digital methodologies. Arising from the pressing need to pivot from in-person, campus-based teaching to online modes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the phenomenon prompted the authors to engage in critical and inquiry-oriented reflection on the experience. While the full group comprised teacher educators from across diverse disciplines, the current study focuses primarily on the idiosyncratic nature of teaching arts subjects such as music, drama and visual arts education to student teachers. Using qualitative analysis, the study identifies key themes and insights gleaned from critical explorations of the data. Although embodied pedagogies are considered no less valuable than before, the study reveals unexpected benefits that arise in the digital context, especially in arts education. In this frame, arts education is recast in a dynamic and unexpected fashion, despite the exigencies of the digital environment. Ultimately, the study points to important teaching and learning experiences, and new ways of framing dimensions of those experiences, that can inform future teaching worlds in the digital space.

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Arts education; digital learning; music education; collaborative autoethnography; drama education

Introduction

The current study is located in arts education in initial teacher education in a higher education institution that prepares students for primary contexts in Ireland. Arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, and similar to teachers in the arts the world over, staff were required to convert their teaching from in-person, workshop-based models of practice to fully online, synchronous environments at short notice, adapting the content, pedagogy and assessment approaches to address distance learners. Like many of our counterparts globally, gaining a grasp of the digital modes of engagement while adjusting to the absence of the normal routines of in-person teaching, access to stimulating materials, and

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the collegial relationships among and between staff and students that enhance learning, was considerable. Both the experience of, and reflection on, the process of pivoting from in-person to online has prompted us to systematically investigate our perceptions as teacher educators and make sense of our experiences through collaborative inquiry (Anderson 2006; Atkinson 2006). Ultimately, we seek to reframe our experiences and recast them towards a future filled with a heightened sense of digital possibility.

Perspectives

Discursive forms of teaching, such as the formal lecture, presented in a typical lecture theatre, are a widely understood format of teaching in higher education. The effectiveness of such approaches is lauded for their performative function, serving as evidence of student engagement, delivery of content and completion of the teaching-student compact. In more practically based arts subjects however, a number of elements of student learning are mediated through the development of shared understandings between teacher and student that are less amenable to standard delivery. Artistic practices are often idiosyncratic, and judgements are by nature more nuanced, as Eisner (2004) avers. The process of teaching relies on experiential learning (Dewey 1933), social interaction (Vygotsky 1997) and relational pedagogy (Buber 2002; de Bruin 2021) among other dimensions, and when conducted authentically, the resultant transformative experiences are visible and tangible. Consequently, teaching and learning in the arts can be a very dynamic, sensitising and enriching encounter. Moreover, any challenges that students might experience can be readily addressed through subtle adaptations of the learning objective or the material to achieve flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) or through shifting the classroom organisational structures from individual to peer learning, or from practical to theoretical discussion.

In digital teaching spaces, the many dimensions of teaching differ from regular teaching environments. For learners who subscribe to an online course in the first instance, there is a natural readiness to explore the medium. For those adjusting to the new digital environment at short notice however, the flow of information may be disrupted when distanced, off-camera attendees either may not, or cannot, reveal their presence. Likewise, eye contact can involve a mutually disengaging and distracting focus even when cameras are on and sound is delayed. Thus, the visual, aural, practical, gestural, relational or transformational learning cues on which arts educators rely, are obscured, and the breadth of learning opportunities is minimised.

Recent research points to the relegation of arts during the first wave of COVID-19 and the requirement for arts teachers to support 'core' (literacy and numeracy) programmes primarily. However, a key concern identified by teachers was student engagement. Across many studies, a lack of engagement was reported by teachers as the most critical concern in the spring of 2020 (Bray 2021; Spitzley 2020; Shaw & Mayo 2021). Equally, in further and higher education, Irish teachers indicated that they overwhelmingly missed the face-to-face interaction of physical classroom environments (Quality & Qualifications Ireland 2020). Elsewhere, in the Southern hemisphere, a study of drama teachers identified the struggle for many teachers in shifting their practice abruptly from face-to-face encounters to remote or online teaching. Here, teachers were restricted to particular learning platforms in order to ensure 'delivery' of learning. Due to the limitations

of infrastructure, many teachers were obliged to convert their otherwise embodied teaching to 'text-based resources' and 'theory-based work' that, while still located in drama practices, resulted in 'more writing for teachers and much more reading for students'. The authors summarise this experience as 'disparate, disembodied fragments of content distribution, and varied online exchanges' (Davis and Phillips 2020, n.p.).

While the above suggests that any form of online teaching might well be experienced as frustrating, demoralising and challenging to one's identity as a teacher educator, the rise in online courses for initial teacher education evident across Europe and in Australia (AIDTL 2019, 2021) coupled with the range of massive, open-access, online courses available across the globe would suggest otherwise. Moreover, from the founding of distance learning in the Open University well over a century ago, to the millions of online learners attending the largest university in the world – the [Indira Gandhi National Open University](#) that expressly seeks to promote distance education and democratise higher education 'by taking it to the doorsteps of the learners' (IGNOU 2021) – it is clear that online learning in various forms is here to stay.

Research questions

From a teaching and learning perspective then, this paper asks:

- (1) How can artistic/embodied/relational teaching in a real environment be maximised in the digital environment?
- (2) What can we learn from critiquing our own successes and failures to inform our future teaching?
- (3) How might our learning recast possibilities for arts curricula and inform teacher education pedagogies through digital modes of teaching and learning?

Methodology

Our approach is located in the qualitative paradigm, characterised by an interweaving of constructivist, participatory and pragmatic orientations (Cresswell, 2009). Here we seek to understand our lived experiences through collaboration, yet with a view to addressing the problems of practice in transcending pre-COVID times to post-COVID futures.

To engage in this inquiry, collaborative autoethnographic methods (Roy and Uekusa 2020) and elements of self-study in teacher education (Anderson, Imdieke, and Standerford 2010) were employed. Autoethnography adopts a deliberate social, critical theoretical and transformative agenda. Here the focus is on the 'self in context' rather than a mere autobiographical account and in this study, we seek to write in ways that are authentic, vivid, engaging and evocative, such that they illustrate the 'problems of practice' (Schön 1983) that we encounter. Moreover, to sharpen the inquiry framework for our work, we invited the perspectives of colleagues in digital learning and philosophy of education to serve as critical friends (Stenhouse 1975) and provide counterpoint to our emerging questions, suppositions and theories. Following Anderson (2006) and Atkinson (2006), we take an analytic stance in focusing

in particular on dialogue with informants beyond the self, and commitment to theoretical analysis.

Data generation

Following full ethical approval from DCU research ethics committee, over a three-month period in the spring of 2021, seven of us met via Zoom™ video conferencing platform for two hours each week to share and deconstruct our teaching and learning encounters, identifying points of convergence in the learning process and exploring counterpoints to the experience. The scheduling and recording of meetings were done in rotation, with transcripts organised into secure folders for later analysis. While our discussions were naturalistic and spontaneous, we took turns at selecting particular areas of focus each week. Although we provided mutual support and helpful suggestions regarding how to troubleshoot some technical issues in online teaching, the technical dimensions were not the primary focus of our discussion; rather, conversations focused on the complexity of online teaching; the negotiation of the teaching self in the online environment; conceptualising the learning experience for students, and the expression of relational and embodied elements as an artistic and/or pedagogical practice. At the end of the semester, we each undertook additional written reflections on the emergent themes, drawing from our fieldnotes, reflective journaling, document and artefact analysis, self-observation and the observation of others and based on our individual, disciplinary perspectives. These meta-reflections formed the basis for the current paper.

The process of recording our discussion, writing and analysis enabled us to distil key moments of learning, crisis, turning points and the generation of new insights in our arts teaching. While criticism of autoethnographic methods has focused on the privileging of the self, here five arts educators (Andrea, Francis, Michael, Regina, Una) juxtaposed critical reflection and learning as a group of teacher educators with views of others from outside our disciplinary areas, i.e. digital learning (Ping) and philosophy (Eileen). Following our shared research questions, we followed an inductive approach to data analysis and generated themes using Braun and Clarke's (2012) framework.

Although we were familiar with the texts that we had generated, the process of analysis was systematically undertaken during the summer through each participant re-reading all transcripts and meeting again to identify broad themes that arose during the weekly sessions. Following this, structured questions enabled each participant to organise her/his material under key topics. This process led to the identification of common themes and subthemes in the collective work which are presented in the following section that interweaves the qualitative, thematic findings with the analysis.

Thematic analysis

Sensory disruption and student disengagement

In our early conversations as autoethnographers, we spoke of shared concerns in relation to our experience of cognitive dissonance as we taught. Artistic modes of teaching and learning rely on embodied and relational experiences to convey meaning in multiple ways (Eisner 2004). Previous campus sounds of student laughter, the hustle and bustle

of entry to classrooms, preparation flutter, and the anticipation of playful interaction with materials were replaced by iterative piano notes to mark the entry of students to the Zoom™ waiting room, a doorbell sound as they entered the main room, or a cadence as they left. These aural markers were interpreted as corporate indicators of impatience, anticipation and disengagement. Likewise, in the early days of adjusting, the sight of students was often fleeting as cameras were quickly switched off. We thus found ourselves looking at names on black screens, or multiple black screens, or just looking at ourselves on camera. The latter generated a hyper-consciousness of what an online teacher was supposed to be, and served as a distraction from the notion of student presence even if conveyed as invisible attendance. The absence of other sensory experiences of touch, taste and smell in the institutional context, related to materials such as musical instruments or art equipment added further to the abstract and disembodied quality of the teaching and learning experience.

In our reflective sessions, Ping noted that promoting student participation in the online learning environment is a long-standing research topic that has obtained much attention (Czerkawski and Lyman 2016; Yang, Lavonen, and Niemi 2018). Requesting students to turn their cameras on when attending an online lecture is regarded as a common approach to facilitate students' participation and attention. For example, the DCU Good Etiquette in Online Learning (2021) recommends that students turn on their camera. On the other hand, asking university students to keep their cameras on has caused students to worry about their appearance, privacy and technology access. For instance, Castelli and Sarvary (2021) indicated that over 40% of undergraduate students were concerned about their appearance and 26% of them worried about their privacy. Moreover, the Irish National Digital Experience Survey (2020) found that HE student digital device ownership is not universal. Therefore, there are some universities that have allowed students to make their own decisions regarding the use of the camera in online settings.

Creating an atmosphere through video and audio

As a lecturer in visual art, Michael chose to turn on his own camera before a lecture to allow students to observe how the preparation of materials works. Eileen, a philosopher, noted the importance of 'setting the scene for a lecture' and observing how the students respond to the invitation regarding what has been set out before them. Ping, a lecturer in digital learning, also observed that this would convey to students the importance of preparation: a message that serious work needs much planning and careful consideration beforehand.

Working in music, Francis also logged in early to classes, playing carefully selected popular music, and greeting students as they entered. In this way, the lecture could begin as it might on campus, allowing students to comment on choices in music in an informal, friendly way before the more formal tone of the lecture began. However, he recognised that it was not possible to create experiences in the online classroom in same the way they are experienced in the live classroom but was determined to find ways around this. During this time, he felt that being a problem solver was an interesting challenge that nurtured his own creativity. He thus spent time working through a multi-track recording app (Bandlab™) to develop a group singing experience for his students.

Developing mutual trust and confidence as teacher and learner transcends the online environment. As teacher educators, we gradually grew to understand that being mute and invisible could enable the learner to achieve higher levels of engagement with cognitive elements, even if other embodied, sensory and more nuanced dimensions of artistic practice – such as exploring vocal qualities in singing – might be undertaken privately. For student teachers, enabling them to participate in music-making in online environments with the microphone off could help them overcome what Hennessy (2000) terms, ‘the red feeling’, i.e. self-consciousness in relation to their singing voice, where a camera is on, but a muted microphone or a breakout room can afford privacy for student practice in class time with others.

For Andrea, awareness of the students’ long days online was a concern for her and she sought to maximise opportunities to attune to their need to engage with the process of making art, tempering her own desire to ‘lecture’ with a need to respond to the students’ own work.

Caring for students and considering their experience of being online all day made me prioritise active engagement, cutting down on lecturing time in favour of sharing main points and making the presentation as explicit as possible.

I communicated with students a few days in advance of our weekly class, outlining possible accessible materials for use in the art making processes. I adapted, depending on the energy of the group for example demonstrating a few techniques at intervals throughout the class. Making more time to see them engage in their own spaces and systematically checking in, while emphasising the importance for students to draw from their own ideas and experiences. The most challenging aspect of teaching online, was trying to find a way to be responsive to the work in progress and giving feedback in an online setting. (Andrea, transcript, spring 2021)

Virtual interactivity

For Una, working in the field of drama education, her successes in the online environment related to moments when she was in role.

Initially I didn’t take on roles in the online space. Instead I used the online environment to teach about drama, not through drama. As my comfort with the medium increased, I was much more likely to work in role which is closer to how I teach face to face. I realised that it would still be evident that I was ‘someone else’ (which is fundamental to drama) through my voice, body language (or the half of me that was visible), and the words that I used. (Una, transcript, spring 2021)

What continued to be missing from Una’s perspective, however, was a shared sense of imagined *place*, a dimension which needs to be built up collectively. Collective imagination does not exist online when participants do not share the space and there are too many distractions in participants’ own surroundings. In drama, context and belief are usually built up through the teacher establishing where it is the group is imagining who they are, and who it is that they are pretending to be.

That said, I did notice online that when I asked a participant to engage in role with me, they did so in a way which was sometimes more effective than it might be face to face. I had no option but to ask them (never more than four at a time worked) to unmute, and then explain the pretext of the situation. It seemed that because in that moment the direct nature of the

(slightly forced) interaction meant that they were more in the moment with me and unable to check or be affected by the reaction of the 'room' or hide from me. The groups who were more relaxed or experienced (such as specialisms) would audibly react through laughter etc. and this would improve the social environment of the session, enabling better learning as a result. Some groups would remain silent though, which would have a negative effect on the group. (Una, transcript, spring 2021)

All members of the team found ways of using the chat function in Zoom™ to generate interactivity to questions and express views. Francis found that having the students think, reflect, compose and then write their response simultaneously served as a non-competitive way of sharing views, or as quick assessment-of-learning that maintained teacher and student focus alike.

Simulating classroom experiences

As COVID-19 denied students' opportunities for school placement experiences, staff went to great lengths to source alternatives. For Regina, this involved foraging through online videos for authentic examples of music teaching with which student could identify and from which they could build pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman 1986).

In many cases there were online examples of teaching a particular concept from genuine classroom contexts. I would never have sourced these had it not been pressured into it by the Covid situation, and would have relied on 'still' images or our own retelling or a classroom re-enactment/experience. But ironically, because of wanting to make the experience as vivid as possible, we sourced these online clips. They were all very realistic, authentic experiences and so rich in learning. In that regard, the students noticed different things from the practices in the classrooms, whether it was a teacher's instruction, or the pupils' responses, or unintended responses. It also helped to clarify the teaching objective. As staff, it gave us a common starting point for discussion across all our groups. (Regina, transcript, spring 2021)

From isolation to global community

For Ping, sharing incidental events with the students was also important.

I like to share my daily life as an immigrant and how I learn Irish culture and appreciate the kindness from people around me. I believe this way could help my students realise the diversity in the primary classroom and develop awareness to the cultural diversity. Like making friends, we would share our stories to help understand each other. (Ping, transcript, spring 2021)

For Regina, the experience of searching for digital resources for choral music also contributed to an unexpected sense of a global community. This began with the observation of a Facebook user openly sharing an evolving collection of free, open access digital resources for music that was being added to and co-edited as she scanned it. For her, it was humbling to be able to witness the co-creation of materials among the global music education community that might otherwise rest behind an expensive paywall. Here, participants all had equal editing rights, and these were respected.

Choral resources curated by Pleithman (2020) and likewise, jazz resources by Binek (2020), have marked the opening of a world of possibility in shared, digital spaces that augur well for future collaborations and mutual learning. Other searches now lead to digital art communities and online festivals, showcasing still and moving images. Such

resources are relevant in an expanding digital environment for the arts and resonate with The Arts Council of Ireland's RAISE initiative (2021).¹ Similarly, in the UK, the value of digital performances has also been advocated (Kidd, Nieto McAvoy, and Ostrowska 2021).

As the range of techniques and strategies gradually expanded, our confidence with the medium grew. In considering how we might engage with digital futures, we now recognise how our practices have been unintentionally transformed, but transformed nonetheless in four different dimensions through: (1) Digitising the subject matter and materials as we sourced and created digital print or audio-visual materials including still and moving images, interactive games and multimedia; (2) Digitising the pedagogy through our own online, synchronous teaching, demonstrations, discussion and explanations; (3) Digitising the assessment through opening up opportunities for digital submissions of artistic artefacts in various modes; (4) Digitising the teacher and the learner through mutual engagement in the online space as well as through curation of video material from a range of teaching contexts to simulate in-person observational

Table 1. Digital futures for arts education.

	Practices of the teacher or learner	Examples
Digitising the subject matter and materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sourcing and creating digital print or audio-visual materials including still and moving image, interactive games and multimedia Creating and curating materials as personalised or themed collections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PDFs, ezines, ebooks audio recordings of spoken word, music, sonic art, radio pieces, dialogues, duos, podcasts, audio documentaries slide shows, photostories, video recordings, short films, film excerpts, gallery collections, apps
Digitising the pedagogy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enabling a/synchronous engagement with digital material, individually or collaboratively Using audio only tools, live or recorded; Using video tools to demonstrate, consolidate or expand content Teaching live online, through speaking, demonstrating, role-playing, making music Generating synchronous interaction or collaboration in duos, trios, groups/ensembles searching/originating/extending Using video conferencing tools, live or recorded; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> G-suite docs, sheets, slides wikis PadletTM; MuralTM podcasts, audio documentaries, or audio performances Music apps: AcappellaTM, BandlabTM H5P interactive video ZoomTM, Google MeetTM, Microsoft TeamsTM - and breakout rooms Voice memo FlipgridTM Trickle or cascade responses to a question in Chat Share screen and annotate ZoomTM poll, V voxTM, MentimeterTM Use PDF or Word submission Embed digital images Use quiz function in Moodle to test or achieve mastery Use MaharaTM ePortfolios for multimedia submissions including video
Digitising the assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital file submissions for assessment with text, images, embedded links to video, websites Digital testing or mastery of material Using multimodal e-portfolios of learning Gathering feedback through creating and issuing digital surveys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YouTubeTM, VimeoTM or subject-specific sites Early years settings Classroom teaching Community-based teaching Studio teaching Individual, small group, ensemble, whole class teaching
Digitising the teacher and the learner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Experiencing classroom teaching vicariously Extending the teaching and learning relationship across space and time Fostering student agency, creativity and individuality as a learner with local, regional, national and international identity 	

experiences and critique, and exemplifying these ideas through various online strategies, tools and applications (see [Table 1](#)).

Conclusion

As we continue to grapple with adaptations to face-to-face teaching, and consider the techniques, strategies and pedagogies that we have developed through online engagement, we look to the horizon with a clearer sense of our mission. Drawing from our experiences in both in-person and online modalities, we can certainly recognise a number of key features that are important not just for arts educators, but for those in other areas as well, as our study has shown.

Our findings suggest novel ways in which teaching can be recast and re-embodied in ways that create new meanings, while remaining true to our teaching objectives. Moreover, we see the impact of the digital mode as extending beyond the institutional life-world of the student, to impact and connect with their situated, local and regional identities. Finally, we reflect on the experience of transformation for ourselves as our practices are recast into the digital future where our work, together with that of our students, is reframed within a global community of interactive, inclusive and diverse educators.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was sought and obtained for this study. All participants were furnished with Plain Language Statements detailing what involvement in the study entailed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. This study was deemed 'low risk' as it involved consenting non-vulnerable adults who voluntarily participated in this research and were free to withdraw at any stage.

Note

1. At the start of the Covid pandemic, the RAISE team created and shared 'The Top Ten Things Arts Organisations Can Do for their Stakeholders during the Covid-19 Crisis' from creating online content to communicating in new ways through digital platforms. The RAISE organisations became creative in creating content online and engaging with audiences and supporters in a virtual world, in addition to moving their Festivals, Programmes and fundraising activities online.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Notes on contributors

Regina Murphy is Head of the School of Arts Education and Movement at Dublin City University Institute of Education where she teaches at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Her research interests lie in inclusive contexts for music education from early childhood through primary school and the particular role of the teacher as a change agent. She is also the principal investigator of the Creative Schools Evaluation, a national initiative of the Creative Ireland Programme 2016–2022 and the Arts Council of Ireland.

Francis Ward is a music educator and ethnomusicologist based in the School of Arts Education & Movement at DCU Institute of Education. A former Irish Research Council scholar and Fulbright Scholar, Francis' research interests include music education and social inclusion, multicultural music education, and the transmission, teaching and learning of music in digital and online environments.

Una McCabe is an Assistant Professor in Drama Education at the School of Arts Education and Movement in the Institute of Education, Dublin City University, Ireland. Her PhD study at University College Cork was an investigation of drama as a method of sociodramatic play training. Her research interests and current research projects include drama, play, creativity and the arts.

Michael Flannery is an Assistant Professor in Visual Arts Education in the School of Arts Education and Movement, Dublin City University (DCU). He is a qualified primary school teacher and completed his PhD in visual arts education in Ireland's National College of Art and Design (NCAD) in 2010. His teaching and research interests include teacher education, visual arts education, cross-curricular learning and creativity.

Andrea Cleary is Assistant Professor in the Institute of Education at Dublin City University. As an educator, she is shaped by her background as an artist and designer. Research interests include art and sustainability in initial teacher education and practice-led research. Andrea is currently undertaking doctoral studies at the National College of Art and Design focusing on process led art and reflective practice as a mechanism for sustainable personal transformation of the artist, teacher and students.

Eileen Brennan is a lecturer in the History and Philosophy of Education at the DCU Institute of Education, Dublin City University. She studied Philosophy in Dublin and Paris and has written widely in the field of hermeneutics. A former editor of *Études Ricoeurianes/Ricoeur Studies*, she has translated a number of books and papers by contemporary French thinkers.

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