

Can you hear me? ... I can't hear you ...

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Abstract

Monday 23 March 2020 was suddenly the last day for term one, four days early. I had hoped we would be back in the classroom early in Term 2. However, I had to learn how to teach online and navigate software programs. This paper is an account of my experiences.

Key words: COVID-19, coronavirus, flexible learning, online teaching, remote learning, synchronous learning

Introduction

I have been teaching for 42 years and I knew how to teach in the classroom and rehearsal room, but I did not know how to teach online. I needed to learn new skills. In the penultimate week of Term 1, 2020, advice from one music coordinator was: "It looks like Zoom is to be used and this information will be conveyed to parents." However, it wasn't and I'm glad I asked some of my students!

Last week of Term 1, 2020

I am a qualified teacher and work as a school instrumental music teacher in Department of Education & Training (DET) Victoria. I make it my business to know what is happening in all my schools. I do not hide in the music department and being 'known' in my schools at this time was invaluable. I missed all the professional learning provided by schools as an itinerant part-time worker. Term 1 holidays started for students on Tuesday 24 March 2020. I had one school that interpreted the instruction that way – and so did I. Normally we teach the day and holidays start at the end of that day. Clarification was issued – and it was too late for one school.

Confusion had set in and demands were being

made. "Take your computer to the techies when you come in". (I own it and it never goes to school.) However, I was told I was not required to come in, I could work at home. "You are receiving this email because ..." I had no idea how to do what was required of me. Lessons in one school were to be provided via Google Meet. I had never heard of this program. "Please send me clear instructions" (as I'm now working from home). Assumptions were made that teachers knew how to use computer programs; step one was often missing in the instructions.

Term 1 holidays

I immersed myself in professional learning, taking advantage of my professional memberships: ABODA, AUSOM, NAfME and joining the Midnight Music Community. The aMuse e-news was an invaluable source of activities provided by others. With the help of my computer club, I had learned to use Zoom. I had at least seven beginner students in one school who had yet to acquire an instrument. I downloaded as many resources as possible for those without instruments. I scanned fingering charts and opening pages of tutor books and put these on Google Classroom, as some students had not bought their book.

For each school, I prepared a sheet of paper and

recorded the programs to be used, usernames and passwords to access them, and processes and rules to use. I kept adding to it, making 'how to' guides for software programs that I had never heard of and was required to use.

Suddenly information that had been appearing on Zoom for one of my schools was no longer visible. It was inappropriate to email for help on Easter Day, so I asked on Easter Monday. My coordinator acknowledged that he had the same problem, however he could not help.

Term 2 – and we're off

I opened a Google Meet link (sent by email) for a whole school staff meeting online, 14 April 2020. Nothing happened. Why? I can normally click a link and go where I need; it works like that for Zoom. After five minutes I thought perhaps I needed to log into the relevant school Google account and there were other teachers. Why don't these programs all work the same? Meanwhile the problem with Zoom had not been fixed, I was to use this to teach in less than three days. Off to Google Classroom (the alternative). I can't wait any longer and I need learn how to set up meetings. I saw a banner on the index page once, 'click here to set up meeting'. I had to do this process multiple times, where has the 'helper' banner gone? I fiddle around and find the settings to repeat the steps.

Inconsistency

There was a lack of consistency within and across Government schools. The issues included:

- Multiple instructions about how to set up/log onto a program/record attendance in different schools, and all contradictory.
- Zoom was not approved for use by DET yet some schools are using it and others have forbidden its use.
- Some schools require the camera to be on for instrumental music lessons (others not – for legal reasons).
- Some schools will not permit video recordings

of a lesson by a teacher (unless permission is granted) however a video recording uploaded by a student is permissible!

Core business: Teaching

Initially I tried to maintain online synchronous learning as close as possible to my face-to-face classroom and timing. Very soon I was exhausted and not getting 'normal' school breaks. The problem was identified a few weeks in. Students and teachers were suffering, and schools took action in a variety of ways: shortened lesson times, added mini recesses, all online lessons to finish 10 minutes early, and special instrumental music lesson times within the online timetable.

A family area in the house was recommended for synchronous lessons with video. This was problematic with parents and other siblings not aware that noise leakage from private telephone calls, kitchen preparation, cleaning and talking was disruptive. Any family member wandering by had to be suitably dressed! Many of my students had their lessons in their bedrooms, with the occasional privileged to have a music room to use. Younger siblings would sometimes be present for the lesson, instead of the student, or would play in the room during the lesson. Not all have music stands for their music. They were reading from a flat desk, phone screens (when parents had emailed the relevant pages of the music left in another residence), and computer screens when I had added music to Google Classroom because they had exhausted their print supply. One of my students had an additional monitor at standing eye height. Inappropriate posture coupled with being unable to see music properly led to problems with sound production and learning new technique.

Using Google Classroom, students had control of each lesson in that only they could manipulate their microphone and video. Those learning in groups became adept at instantly turning off their microphone as soon as they had played a piece or answered a question. Perhaps this was the result of learning in class groups of 25 students. The normal

flow and follow up questions of a lesson often involved a request to turn on the microphone. They had learned to communicate with head nods and shakes or 'blank looks' if they the request was a little difficult. And even turn off their video. If students thought they had completed their lesson they could 'dismiss' themselves, without teacher control. Until disabled with updated settings, students could send mindless 'chat' (viewable to all) and disrupt the concentration of all students in the lesson.

For a variety of reasons some students never joined Google Classroom, and some left their instrument and music at school for Term 2 and Term 3. Others have 'lost' their library-issued music tutor book. Others needed school instruments allocated in Term 3 (for classroom music) and they are learning from home. These students had to come to school and collect before stage four restrictions began. There are students who did not have a remote instrumental music lesson.

How different (or similar) are the lessons?

Excluding technology issues of sound and freezing, some of the issues include:

- Students cannot play together, either the same piece or ensemble. I cannot play with them. I can still demonstrate and I did.
- A student who has a solo lesson continues to do so.
- Students who play like instruments in a group lesson play solo. There is always a time in every face-to-face group lesson when I need to hear an individual student solo.
- Students who play like or unlike instruments and of a different standard continue to play solo. They can practice whilst the others are having 'their' lesson – however this time they are on mute.
- I still needed a mental note of how much time each student has had to play/direction from me.
- Students who have done no practice can still not come to their lesson!
- Students can still be late to their lesson – and the reasons can still be the same (forgot, doing other schoolwork).

Challenging aspects of online teaching were:

- Teaching instrument technical challenges (e.g. playing in the next register).
- Instructing beginners to set up an instrument correctly (without bending keys), setting a reed, embouchure.
- Showing beginners hand and finger positions on their instruments.
- Diagnosing why the sound on a wind instrument would not work and providing home-based repair advice
- Students being in control of their own sound and video in a lesson, and arrival and departure for a lesson.

How I did online synchronous teaching

My 'home' teaching space must be set up and packed up each day. At the beginning of the day, I gathered all required music and put it where I could reach it. My flute, clarinet and alto saxophone were set up on a multi-instrument stand. Music stand set up. Laptop set up with external microphone/headphones and external web camera (for teaching) and iPad (for note taking) in position. Additional power supplies were powered on and a battery available to charge hardware if needed. Where time permitted, I would put away as I went to keep my workspace tidy.

Duties that I left to the end of each day that would normally be done during each lesson:

- Mark the school roll, shift attendance screenshots to thumb drive (off my hard drive).
- Expand rough lesson notes – for each student – record on iPad.
- Add to Google Classroom these notes for each student for next lesson/reminders of aspects to work on (I can't write in their books/music).
- Add to Google Classroom resources for each student (information/music/technical work)
- Email students who not signed on to Google Classroom or had missed lessons.

Additional at the end of each day:

- Charge wifi modem.
- Charge iPad.
- Charge laptop.

My welfare:

- I did not get a hot drink/bite to eat at recess (preparing for the next lessons).
- I struggled to get a hot drink at lunch due to the reduced time allowance.
- Morning tea and lunch (at home) are not ready made. At school they are prepared beforehand and taken with you!
- I'm expected to be online before students (otherwise in one school they can take control of the meeting; school program settings).
- I have to navigate technology issues (and sometimes unable to teach).

Coda

From the end of term one to the end of term four 2020, I kept detailed records in my teaching chronicle of what I did and when, regarding any

matters to do with online teaching. I had to make this work, I had one option, there was no other option. I miss Charlotte's cat – asleep on her bed supervising her clarinet lessons. Having to be let in and out of her bedroom. At times, downstairs as there was cooking taking place and she had gone to see what she could get ... FOOD!

... And the student is NOT on mute!

References

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Amanda Watson (PhD) has more than four decades of school teaching experience and is an Instrumental Music Teacher with the Department of Education and Training Victoria. Her research interests include music and arts curriculum development in schools, values education, and professional standards for music teachers in schools. Amanda is a member editorial board for the *International Journal of Music Education*, *Australian Journal of Music Education* and *Victorian Journal of Music Education*.