

# Developing fully online pre-service music and arts education courses

Sharon Lierse

Charles Darwin University

## Abstract

Charles Darwin University (CDU) offers education courses for students who want to teach in Australian schools. The university is unique due to its geographic location, proximity to Asia and its high Indigenous population compared to the rest of the country. Many courses are offered fully online including music education for pre-service teachers. This shift has presented both opportunities and challenges. The study is an investigation of reviewing music and arts education courses to be delivered fully online using Participatory Action Research as the methodology. The four steps for the research are as follows: planning a change, acting and observing the processes and consequences of change, reflecting on the processes and consequences, and replanning to start the cycle again. The reflection and replanning stage of the course are especially important because courses need to be updated regularly to keep up with policy developments. It is anticipated that by the end of the year, the aspects of the course which have been successful and the ones which will require extensive reviewing will have been addressed. Through this process of rewriting, reviewing and reflecting, a fully online music education course will be able to be delivered successfully to music education students around Australia.

**Key words:** arts education, curriculum development, music education, online learning

*Victorian Journal of Music Education* 2015:1, 29-34

## Introduction

In 2015, the author was appointed as lecturer in music and the performing arts to pre-service teachers studying at Charles Darwin University (CDU). CDU is unique due to its geographic remoteness and its closer proximity to Asia even though it is an Australian university. The student population is a mixture of domestic students, students who identify themselves as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and international students in which the majority are from Asia. Many academic courses are offered online as well as face-to-face in which the trend has been for students to enrol in fully online courses. Consequently a student cohort may never get the opportunity to meet each other even though they may be in

same class for an entire degree. Charles Darwin University's main campus is located in Darwin, but there are many satellite campuses as well as some lecturing staff working overseas. The lecturer is located at the newly created Melbourne campus as a result of high enrolments from education students residing in Victoria. Due to the nature of the online delivery of courses, the university is attracting mature age students, especially those who were in the work force and wanting to embark on their second or subsequent careers. Therefore, the professional backgrounds of students is as diverse as their geographic locations. Additionally, most students are working in some capacity and are time poor.

There are many challenges in preparing teachers as music educators for the profession. Students

enrol in the course with a diverse range of skill sets and standards of musical proficiency. When there are additional variables of teaching a practical subject fully online, and to include Indigenous and Asian musics in a limited time frame, the curriculum and assessment needs to be both comprehensive and flexible. The existing music education course was in need of revision, and as a new lecturer, it was timely for the course to be reviewed. The plan is for the course to be revised, trialled and then delivered in a new format in 2016.

### **Literature Review**

University learning and teaching has undergone a transformation where the focus has shifted from teaching to a student centred approach (Biggs, 2001; Biggs & Tang, 2011, Hunt & Chalmers, 2012). These changes have resulted in a review of assessment to encourage students “to demonstrate varied understandings, showcase different skills and produce a range of learning outcomes” (Carless, 2015, p. 65). Lecturing online has become popular but is complex in its design and delivery. In the fully online environment Reeves and Reeves (2012) discuss how there needs to be an alignment of seven critical components which are; “objectives, content, instructional design, learner tasks, teacher roles, technology roles and assessment” (p. 127). Music education has undergone a transformation where technology is a vital element in its delivery. However, the subject itself has increasingly become under threat due to the crowded curriculum, the quality of teaching at some schools and the low value placed on the arts (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005; Lierse, 2006). There has been research on lecturing music units online and the associated issues with course design (Baker, 2012; Baker, 2013; Salavuo, 2006). The study will focus on how to redesign a music course for a successful online learning experience.

### **Methodology**

The method adopted for updating and delivering the new course is Participation Action Research. The four steps for the research are as follows: planning a change, acting and observing the processes and consequences of change, reflecting on the processes and consequences, and replanning to start the cycle again (Kemmis, & McTaggart, 2005, p. 595). The reflection and replanning stage of the course was especially important because courses need to be updated regularly to keep up with trends in the discipline and policy developments. This could also be achieved through additional feedback other than the standard university student surveys in the form of questionnaires for students (Kelly, 2003. Immediate feedback throughout the semester was provided by the students and teacher (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

### **Course Design**

There were two online music education units and an arts education unit in which the author co-ordinated. Each unit ran for a twelve week semester and was worth the equivalent of ten credit points of eight point equivalent full time study in the academic year. For early learning and primary pre-service teachers, an introductory arts unit provided students with an overview of the five arts subjects offered in Australia: visual art, music dance, drama and media art. In the secondary levels, there were two units; one for students in the middle years of learning, and the second for students who want to specialise in music in the final two years of schooling.

The units were taught online in a series of modules. For instance, in the secondary music unit classroom music was focussed on in one module. There were set and recommended Australian music education textbooks to support the content in which some books were also available in an e-book format. Content comprised PowerPoint presentations, lecture notes, youtube clips, discussion board and a student café section.

Lecturers arranged collaborate sessions where staff and students could communicate in a video, audio, text and media format. Students were invited to participate in real time in a collaborate session, or listen to them at a later date if they were not available to attend.

A requirement of each unit was to include strategies to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Unit content also needed to be relevant for international students and provided scope to include their own perspectives in their studies.

In Australia, the national curriculum is governed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority as well as the six State and two Territory based curricula. These systems present a system of complex and interrelated policies. Moreover, government policy was frequently modified in which this required regular updates.

The course content was both specific and generic. Topics were introduced with the modules with readings and practical examples. It was then up to the students to research the content within their own specific context. For instance, in an ensemble module, a student could apply this to teaching jazz improvisation in South Australia in comparison to a unit of gamelan for an international student from Indonesia.

### Assessment

The assessment tasks had been set and pre-approved by the university. Usually, the assessment was designed in two parts: a mid-semester assignment worth approximately half of the semester grade, and a final assessment at the end of the semester. The range of assessment tasks included portfolios of work, performance reviews with a reflective component, lesson plans, youtube clips of their own performances, a discussion of theories and curricula and school policy documents. The students were not assessed on their online discussion or contributions throughout the semester, but only on their submitted assessment tasks.

### Reviewing the current online course

This was the lecturer's first experience of lecturing music fully online. Previously mediums used by the lecturer for delivery were; face-to-face format in a lecture, tutorial or seminar format, and blended learning where there was extended face-to-face sessions followed by online classes. The advantage of face-to-face and blended mediums was the opportunity to meet the students first and have discussions and engagement in real time. Issues were explained and dealt with up front. The lecturer also had a clear benchmark where students were up to, and course content could be adjusted accordingly in relation to their specific needs.

When preparing the content for online lecturing, assumptions are made which were then adjusted in response to the students. For instance, in a secondary level music unit, there was an assumption that music education students were literate in Western music notation. Unless there was an assessment on the topic, or an online discussion on teaching music notation in the classroom, the student may not have had these requisite skills. This was further complicated by students who were highly accomplished in folk or Indigenous musics and had learnt through oral traditions. There was no self-assessment of unit content or a checklist of skills required to be a competent music educator.

In the early years and primary levels, students learn much of the teaching and learning through doing. For instance, soundscape exercises, playing a range of percussion instruments, singing songs and music and movement can best be learnt with their peers. Trialling activities encourages discussion and reflection before teaching these in a classroom with young children.

In order to plan a change, the university students' reaction to the unit was gauged. There was much interest and activity in the course material at the beginning of the semester. Students would ensure that they participated in an online collaborate session. What was evident was the focus on the assessment task and what they were required to do to gain high marks in the unit. They were strategic

in their learning. This approach was aligned with the profile of a student where they were time poor and completed what they needed to go well in the unit. If an unassessed activity was difficult to access online, or was time consuming such as a long video or reading research papers, it was unlikely that the whole student cohort would complete these tasks if follow up was not required. Therefore, it was strategic to use the first three weeks of learning in group and collaborative sessions when their motivation was high and the stakes were low.

Students accessed additional resources online. This approach was "hit and miss" depending on what they found and whether the information and quality of the materials was relevant. Moreover, if the student was unfamiliar with the topic the information could be misguide them. Generally, students preferred to use online resources unless a set text was compulsory, economical to purchase and readily available.

The existing content provided information and examples of each module sourced from a range of existing texts and the internet. In the arts unit for the early years and primary school, the textbook was an explanation of skills used in studio art. There other four art subjects in the Australian Curriculum were not mentioned. There was no set text book for the two music units.

Each unit touched on the Australian Curriculum and some aspects of State and Territory based curricula, but as these have been under constant change and review the past few decades were not discussed in depth. Teaching students with special needs, differentiation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were also not included in the current units.

### **Reviewing the assessment tasks**

Assessment tasks in the performing arts often required more time than the students anticipated, often had additional costs involved, and were complicated to assess fairly. For instance, a three minute musical performance uploaded onto a video format could involve weeks of rehearsals,

music lessons and acquiring the resources to film the student. If the student was a keen amateur with basic recording equipment or an iphone, it was challenging not to discriminate against an advanced performer who had access to the sophisticated recording equipment with high quality sound. Some students had difficulty when uploading videos in the assessment dropbox, or the software was not compatible for the lecturer to access their work.

Easier ways to assess the students were lesson plans, discussing educational policies and theories, methodologies, concert reviews and reflection but the practical skills were not evident. Moreover, the university did not provide instrumental music tuition within the unit.

Students found assessment tasks easier to complete with exemplars of work available online as well as an assessment rubric. Questions posted online were to clarify how closely the assessment task aligned with the exemplars and whether the exemplars were considered excellent pieces of work.

### **Recommendations for the next semester**

To ensure deep learning and musical skill attainment by the students, the units could benefit from changes. The best time for discussion and engagement between the students was during the first three weeks of semester before they became busy with assessment tasks. Examples of group music activities could be posted online where the students could trial these in their home town with colleagues. Collaborate sessions could then be in the form of a flipped classroom where they complete the task before the online discussion. Skill sets for music could be posted within a module where the student could use it as a form of check list.

The primary and middle school years units now has a set textbook which is Australian based, up-to-date and reflect the Australian and State or Territory based curricula. In the early years and primary

level, *Teaching the arts: early childhood and primary education* was selected as it was directly related to the Australian curriculum, user friendly for students who had never engaged with the arts, and divided each arts subject into standalone chapters.

In the music units for the secondary years, Dorricott's *Listen to the music* was selected due to its wide range of musical styles and genres selected and its direct connection with the Australian curriculum and assessment. The series has been updated with multimedia examples, relevant to a secondary school setting.

The music unit at the senior secondary level does not have a set text book. After lecturing in the unit, it was more appropriate to select texts and resources based on the individual needs of the student.

Each module of work ensured that topics of differentiation, students with special needs and students from different cultural backgrounds were included. This was achieved by posing these questions on the discussion board.

Assessment tasks can take a year for changes to be approved at the university level. Therefore, the assessments tasks could be 'tweaked' such as dividing a large assessment task into two minor tasks or adjusting the due date to better streamline the learning. A long term change ideally would be for two minor assessment tasks early in the semester based on their practical skills. These could be in the form of uploading a short exemplar of their work with lesson plans and a reflective component. The final assessment would be more research and academically focused.

## Conclusion

The experience of lecturing arts and music education units fully online has revealed both the opportunities and challenges in this new educational environment. Through the process of rewriting, reviewing and reflecting, the units were critically analysed in order to improve the learning experience. Students who otherwise would not

have access to learning can now be educated online with a range of resources and support materials. However, in music and the performing arts the ability to engage in a group provides the opportunity to trial activities and engage in deep learning and understanding. Assessment tasks have also been reviewed to reflect the demands of the units and the needs of the students. Each semester, the units will continue to be reviewed to ensure that the students are receiving the most relevant and up-to-date content and curriculum in a demanding yet enjoyable subject.

## References

- Baker, W. J. (2012). Fully online learning in a pre-service teacher music education unit in Australia: Student perspectives. In W. Sims (Ed.), *Proceedings of the International Society for Music Education 30th World Conference on Music Education*, Thessaloniki, Greece, 15-20 July 2012, pp. 45-51.
- Baker, W. J. (2013). Student use of demonstration videos as learning tools in fully online arts education. In J. Wright (Ed.), *Regional and global cooperation in educational research*. Proceedings of the Australian Association for Research in Education National Conference, 2-6 December, 2012, Sydney, pp. 1-10.
- Biggs, J. (2001). The Reflective Institution: Assuring and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. *Higher Education*, 41(3), 221-238.
- Biggs, J. B. & Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for quality learning at university*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Carless, D. (2015). *Excellence in university assessment*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Commonwealth of Australia. (2005). *National review of music education: Augmenting the diminished*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.
- Dorricott, I. (2015). *Listen to the music student book*. (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). South Melbourne: Cengage.
- Hunt, L., & Chalmers, D. (2012). *University teaching in focus: A learning centred approach*. Camberwell, Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Kelly, D. (2003). Planning and Running Events. In P. Kahn & D. Baume (Eds.), *A guide to educational development projects* (pp. 40-60). London: Routledge.

- Kemmis S. & McTaggart, R. (2005). Participatory Action Research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln, *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 567-605). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Lierse, S. (2006). The National Review of School Music Education: What is the present state of music education in schools? Australian Association for Research in Education: Adelaide.
- McPherson, G., Davidson, J. W. & Faulkner, R. (2012). *Music in our lives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Reeves, C., & Reeves, P. (2012). Designing online and blended learning. In *University Teaching in Focus: A learning centred approach*. Camberwell, Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Roy, D., Baker, W., & Hamilton, A. (2015). *Teaching the Arts: Early childhood and primary education*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Port Melbourne, Victoria: Cambridge University Press.
- Salavuo, M. (2006). Open and informal online communities as forums of collaborative Musical activities and learning. *British Journal of Music Education*, 23(3), 253-271.
- Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. (2015). Overview. Retrieved from [www.ausvels.vcaa.vic.edu.au](http://www.ausvels.vcaa.vic.edu.au)

**Dr Sharon Lierse** is Lecturer in Education at Charles Darwin University at their newly created Melbourne campus. Her role encompasses the management of education in the Victorian office, lecturing fully online in music and the performing arts and post-graduate supervision. Prior to her appointment at Charles Darwin University, she was Associate Professor in the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris in Malaysia. Here she set up an orchestral program, developed a research seminar series for post-graduate students and was founder and Managing Editor of the *Malaysian Music Journal* (MMJ). Dr Lierse has also lectured in tertiary learning and teaching at the University of Tasmania, and has been the Manager of Professional Learning at the Australian Council for Educational Research. She has also had extensive experience as an educator in schools and studio teaching.