Virtual praxis: Constraints, approaches, and innovations of online creative arts teacher educators

Abstract

Higher education, and in particular, initial teacher education, has been significantly transformed through the introduction of e-learning. However, online teacher education presents particular challenges in the creative arts, which has traditionally developed student understanding through embodied and collaborative learning experiences. In this qualitative study, in-depth interviews were conducted with eight online arts educators in Australian teacher education programs to understand their perspectives and pedagogy in online arts coursework. Using Engeström's Activity Theory as an analytical lens, the findings highlight how participating academics navigated challenges and opportunities to facilitate authentic, praxis-focused arts experiences to prepare pre-service teachers for the classroom.

Introduction

Meaningful learning in the creative arts has traditionally involved embodied learning, centered on praxis—where knowing comes through "doing" (Conelly & Clandinin, 2000). The preparation of pre-service teachers for the classroom as confident and competent teachers of the arts has therefore placed great emphasis on practical engagement with the skills and processes of a variety of creative art forms (Kenny, Finneran, & Mitchell, 2015). However, the introduction of online learning, also referred to as e-learning, has vastly changed the tertiary educational landscape both in Australia, where this study is situated, and internationally. While this rapid shift to

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online learning has positively opened access to tertiary education for a more diverse range of students who may previously have been underrepresented in the tertiary sphere (Stone, 2016), it has nonetheless left many experienced academics feeling pedagogically unprepared, and lacking the skills to transfer their pedagogy from face-to-face instruction to the online context (Baker, Hunter, & Thomas, 2016).

The impetus for this research project arose from my own experiences as a creative arts education academic with over 14 years' experience in an Australian teacher education program. As my role expanded into offering my courses online around 2010, I struggled to understand how to translate my highly active and embodied approach to arts learning for online students. Active learning has long been considered central to authentic creative arts learning (hereafter "the arts"), and it has been widely accepted that arts skills and knowledge are most effectively developed through enacted, embodied experience. Dinham (2020) writes, "Like other areas of performative or practical endeavour… learning in the arts does not occur by proxy. You have to do it. You learn by doing it and you get better at it by doing it regularly" (p. 33). Further, it is repeatedly affirmed by researchers and educators that preparation of competent pre-service teachers necessitates their engagement in arts practices to build both teacher confidence and skills in facilitating arts education in the classroom (Dinham, 2020; Ewing & Gibson, 2015; Kenny et al., 2015). My experience when first delivering arts learning online, however, was that it felt much more like a disembodied approach to learning, with diminished opportunities to physically enact strategies and collaborative engagement that could help my students in developing skills for their future classrooms.

However, in concert with these challenges were potential benefits that I began to recognize early into my own experience as an online educator, including opportunities

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for innovative practice using collaborative technologies, and the possibility to generate innovative solutions to these new challenges. Equally, I recognized that online learning opened a range of socially significant opportunities through the provision of access to tertiary arts learning for many who were formerly unable to access it (Stone, Freeman, Dyment Muir & Milthorpe, 2019). As such, I began to recognize that online learning represented positive opportunities for pedagogical innovation, and inclusion of more diverse student populations. Given that online learning is now a fixed feature in the Higher Education landscape (Kentnor, 2015), I determined to innovate my own pedagogy for online learners through attempts for enhanced student interactivity in both synchronous and asynchronous mediums, seeking a way forward that worked within the limitations and affordances of available technologies. However, while I experienced "success" in terms of positive student engagement and feedback, my concerns always came back to the challenge of providing opportunities for kinesthetic, interpersonal and collaborative engagement with specialized tools, materials and spaces that I consider to be foundational for arts learning. Questions thus emerged for me regarding the experiences of other academics experiencing the same situation, and how they approached the challenges and opportunities of online arts learning.

This qualitative study thus presents the perspectives and experiences of eight creative arts academics, including myself, in teacher education programs across Australia, to understand how various academics navigate the challenges and opportunities of facilitating online arts learning for pre-service teachers, and how our respective experiences may help to form a more comprehensive understanding of the problem, and generate insight into the strategies and innovations employed in facilitating online arts learning in Australian Higher Education. The following question guided the research:

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How do tertiary arts educators facilitate online learning in the creative arts?

This overarching question was investigated more specifically by asking:

- *What do arts educators believe are the enablers/inhibitors of teaching the arts online?*

- *What strategies have academics employed in teaching the arts online?*

Engeström's Activity Theory (2018) was used as a theoretical framework to guide the analytical process and make sense of the data. The findings reveal that the participating arts academics approach their online teaching with a deep sense of artistry, innovation, and determination; harnessing the creative potential of mediating tools, and navigating complex demands and attitudes from their broader work context. Importantly, beyond providing a snapshot of how the participating arts academics approach their role, this research has identified a particular strategy in promoting practical arts learning: making strategic use of praxis-focused assessment as a means to drive embodied arts learning that might help to prepare pre-service teachers for the classroom through experiencing arts practices in action.

Literature review

Online learning practices have evolved significantly since its introduction in Australian Higher Education near the start of the 21st Century. Initially, online learning emerged as an extension of Distance Education, where educational materials were once posted to students who were unable to attend on-campus classes—usually due to living remotely. With the more ubiquitous uptake of internet technologies in individual homes, online delivery then permitted learning materials to be accessed via online repositories (Stone, 2019). Early iterations of online learning thus represented online distribution platforms for knowledge transmission through written materials, rather

than interactive learning environments (Bijk, Thomassen, & Renger, 2002). However, technological evolution has increasingly permitted innovative and interactive learning opportunities which have necessitated pedagogical innovation to promote student interactivity (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). Favorable benefits of these innovations have included increased student engagement, peer collaboration, interaction with staff, and a more user-friendly experience (Dyment, Downing, Hill, & Smith, 2018).

While evidence of innovative use of interactive technologies to engage students in active learning opportunities is regularly highlighted (Fox, 2018), there is also concern over a tendency for some academics to revert to "transmission" approaches to teaching (Knowles, 2015), characterized by teacher-centered delivery of content, rather than dynamic and interactive learning. Similarly, it is acknowledged that some domains of learning lend themselves more readily to online coursework than other domains that rely more extensively on physical and interpersonal interaction (Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards [BOSTES], 2014). In particular, concerns have been raised over the suitability for online learning for courses related to the arts. Barton, Baguley and MacDonald (2013) assert that arts learning has been "offered online without critical debate regarding the consequences of such an approach" (p. 83), and these concerns are raised by numerous researchers regarding the suitability of online learning for arts education (Baker et al., 2016; Davis, 2018; King, 2018).

Specific research into arts education online

Research into the delivery of arts courses online is still limited. The existing literature highlights that online learning is particularly challenging for the arts educator, based upon the paraxial nature of what is commonly accepted as quality arts learning practice (Baker et al., 2016; Lierse, 2015). Kenny et al. (2015) emphasize that active

arts experiences are an integral element for the preparation of pre-service teachers, who require "meaningful, 'real-life' student engagement in the arts in order to inspire innovative and imaginative approaches to teaching in schools" (p. 160). Similarly, Dinham (2020) asserts that authentic arts learning experiences should rest on the notion of "*art as experience* or *process*, rather than *art as product*" (p. 33), where genuine learning occurs through active learning, exploring, investigation and problem solving. Such active learning is rendered more challenging for the online learner, especially when the process of so many art forms requires collaborative physical engagement, or utilization of specialist materials and tools. It is therefore unsurprising that Baker et al. (2016)—when investigating the experiences of academics delivering arts courses online—noted that online arts learning represented "a divided, unsettled and challenging space with pockets of acceptance, but largely characterized by epistemological and pedagogical questions, doubts and uneasiness" (p.40).

A small number of published action research projects highlight how arts educators are attempting to engage students in active arts learning, and of the challenges they have faced in so doing. Cutcher and Cook (2016) developed strategies in their arts courses with online pre-service teachers based upon the online Community of Inquiry (CoI) model (see Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). They concluded that the cultivation of an online CoI was essential for interactive online facilitation, but that ultimately, this was best supported through face-to-face and studio activities through intensive workshops as adjuncts to online learning. While their findings are useful for informing an interactive learning approach for online educators, they reinforce the challenge of facilitating praxis if face-to-face learning opportunities are not made available.

Davis (2018) explored productive constraints and assessment as a means to understand cogent tools and tasks to stimulate practice-based learning and student

creativity in a fully online arts course. Her approach was to engage students in active learning through the establishment of assessable weekly 'challenges': active arts experiences students completed in their own time. Her assessment not only ensured all students experienced arts praxis, it also permitted risk-taking and experimentation in private, which students could share when content with the outcome. Davis noted that "this investment in learning through mandated 'doing' resulted in significant learning that many students valued." (p.349).

Lierse (2015) and Allen, Wright, and Innes (2014) similarly attempted to engage online learners in praxis in their respective music and visual arts courses through assessable practical tasks. Allen et al. concurred with Davis regarding the positive outcomes of this approach, and that students appreciated the nature of the assessment to prepare them for their future role as Visual Art teachers (p.14). However, they equally acknowledged that students tended to focus overly on assessment, meaning that engagement in tutorials diminished. Both Lierse (2015, p.32), and Davis (2018, p.345) acknowledged that students often found their respective praxis-focused assessment overly time consuming, and Lierse also raised a range of technical complexities that arose with uploading and accessing video and audio files. Combined, the research from these projects highlights that mandating arts praxis through assessment can be beneficial in overcoming the limitations encountered online, but that attendant challenges then arise. Given such challenges, and the repeated indications that arts learning requires situated and embodied learning opportunities, it is understandable that some consider arts learning to be incompatible with online platforms (Baker et al., 2016; Lierse, 2015).

A range of complexities with the implementation of fully online arts courses is raised in the existing literature, particularly regarding engaging students in practical arts

learning. In teacher education, this is a noted concern, with expectations that pre-service teachers will have developed applied understanding in all domains of learning as an element of classroom readiness. Limited research into the experiences of arts academics highlights both acceptance and uneasiness, coupled with a determination to innovate on pedagogical practice to ensure learners have meaningful opportunities for practical development. However, scope remains for the development and evaluation of online delivery models and courseware in creative and performance-based disciplines. As such, this project seeks to contribute to understandings regarding how some academics are approaching the challenges and opportunities set forth by a widespread move to fully online tertiary courses, of pedagogical innovations they have employed, and insight into future areas for research and practice.

Methodology and methods

In this research, I utilized a qualitative approach to gain nuanced insights into how participating academics approached the facilitation of online arts coursework in Australian teacher education programs. Semi-structured, one-hour interviews were conducted with eight higher educators across seven Australian universities regarding their perspectives and experiences of facilitating online arts courses. Given my role as an arts education academic who facilitates online coursework, I engaged as a co-participant, recording my responses to the same questions posed to the participants. By recording, and thus "making visible" my responses to the research questions, this process permitted a more transparent critical engagement with my values and experiences as an online arts educator, and the extent to which these may influence my perspectives and interpretations of the various participants. My perspectives as a co-participant have been interwoven throughout with those of the participants. Collectively, participants all represented former classroom educators, who

possessed extensive background knowledge in one or more of the five curriculum art forms and who were currently delivering arts learning typically across all five art forms to pre-service teachers. Except for one participant, all had more than 4 years' experience in facilitating arts learning online.

All interviews, including my own responses, were audio recorded and transcribed, and participants offered the opportunity to review these before analysis. Permission to conduct the research was obtained from my institutional ethics body, and participants provided informed consent before participation.

Engeström's Activity Theory as a framework for analysis

Guided by Engeström's Activity Theory (2018), an interpretive analytic approach was undertaken. Interpretive analysis requires the researcher to engage with qualitative data as an active participant to give meaning to data. Hatch writes, "It's about making sense of social situations by generating explanations for what's going on within them. It's about making inferences, developing insights, attaching significance, refining understandings, drawing conclusions, and extrapolating lessons" (Hatch, 2002, p. 180). Interpretive analysis was considered to be a cogent analytical lens for this research that would permit the reflection of the complexities and multiple meanings often embedded in the individual experience of the participants, including those of myself as a co-participant in the research. Activity Theory was the conceptual lens that was used to focus the interpretations in this study.

Activity Theory asserts that human action can only be understood when considered within the social and cultural context in which it occurs. The theory views an activity as a unit of analysis by breaking up the features of an activity into analytical components. These components and their relationships are reflected in Figure 1. Primarily, the

activity under study is viewed as a relationship between the *subject* (the person being studied), the *object* (the intended outcome of the activity), and the *tool* (the mediating devices to facilitate the action). In the context of this research, the "activity" was understood as teaching the arts to pre-service teachers online; the *subject* represented each participant in the study; the *object* referred to the tasks and learning situations the academics developed, and the *tools* included the technologies and pedagogical strategies used to facilitate learning.
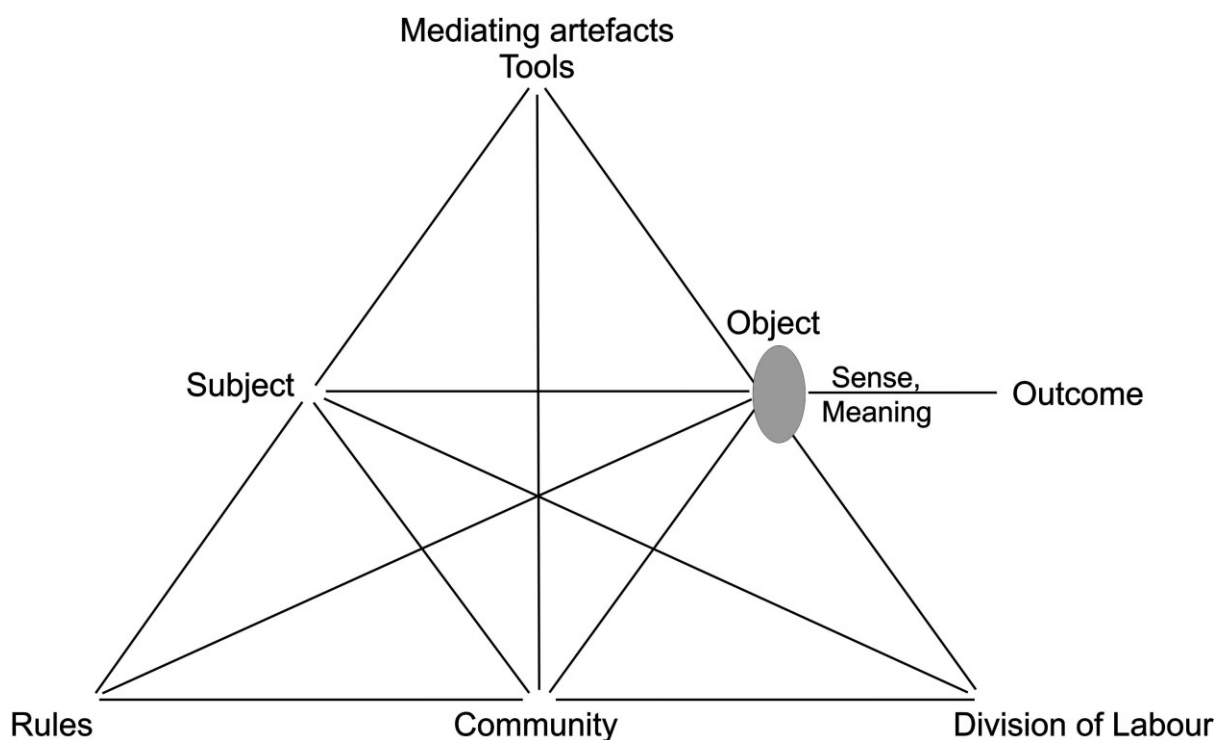
Mediating artefacts
Tools

Object

Subject

Sense,
Meaning

Outcome

Rules

Community

Division of Labour

Fig. 1. Engeström's Activity Theory Model (1987, as cited in Engeström, 2018).

In addition to these primary analytical components, Engeström (2018) recognizes the ways in which additional components of a learning situation impact upon work activities. First, *subjects* operate within conditions (or *rules*) that influence and dictate how they act within any activity. In the context of this research, I sought to understand what mandates may impact upon how academics facilitated arts learning. Recognizing *division of labor* provides an opportunity to evaluate how activity is not conducted in isolation, but is influenced by a community of actors. Finally, *community* is the

relationship between *rules* and *division of labor,* where "groups of activities and teams of workers are anchored, and can be analysed" (Hashim & Jones, 2007, p. 5). These final two components provided an opportunity in this research to consider how elements of community and support may be impacting the facilitation of arts learning online.

The process of analysis commenced with a reading of all transcripts to gain a sense of the "whole" which conclusively confirmed that all participants considered arts praxis to be central to quality arts learning. Alignment between the experiences of participants and the literature, outlined previously, therefore demonstrated that the core "activity" of participants was the engagement of online students in authentic praxis-based learning to underscore future classroom practice. Activity Theory was then utilized as an analytical lens to gain insight into how this "activity" took place, and how mediating tools, rules, culture and context were interacting to achieve or impede this goal. Data were thus interpretively coded according to the following themes, which emerged from the components of Engeström's model:

- The purpose to which academics direct their activity (*subject-object dialectic*)
- Learning technologies and resources (mediating *tools*)
- The rules, culture and context (*rules, community* and *division of labor*)

These will now be explored.

Results

The purpose to which academics direct their activity (subject-object dialectic)

The relationship between the teaching academic and their intended activity of teaching the arts online is referred to in Activity Theory as the *subject-object dialectic.* The overarching goal expressed by all participants, myself included, was the rigorous

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preparation of pre-service teachers for authentic arts learning in the classroom. Participants were motivated to achieve this by engaging students in arts praxis, and cultivating student interactivity.

Engaging student in arts praxis

All participants shared a conviction in the value of praxis: embedding rigorous theoretical knowledge of the arts in practical learning experiences. As a secondary goal, most espoused the significance of developing an awareness of "authentic arts", which intentionally develops arts knowledge and skill, creativity and aesthetic sensitivity, self-expression through various art forms, and cultural appreciation (Dinham, 2020, p. 30). Importantly, active learning was viewed as integral to authentic practice: "I really wanted them to see the value in becoming arts practitioners… to having the confidence to walk into a classroom and know what a particular type of arts making was about what they were asking their students to do" (Eleanor).

However, most participants held similar concerns to my own: "that online learning is very much reliant upon learning *about* the arts, hearing about how the arts are facilitated in classrooms, without actually *experiencing* what it's like to be involved in those art forms" (Katie). Participants noted how, in online courses, "discovery doesn't happen the same way" (Abigail), and how "…you're not getting the process of the interactive and the experiential learning happening … not getting those senses, that hands-on interactive collaboration" (Nell). Similarly, the transformative power of the arts and deeply felt sensory and somatic experience were perceived as lacking:

> There are things you can't put into words, things you can't capture on video, that are integral to the way we communicate through the arts. And, it is those inspiration moments, the... you know—someone who's in tears for a certain

reason because something touches them so greatly… you're not going to get that... powerful effect online. (Anna)

Alongside this shared challenge, there was a determination to "find a way" to engage learners in praxis. This goal then led to the adoption of mediating tools to overcome the challenge, as will be explored below.

Cultivating student interactivity

The cultivation of an interactive environment in which students were safe to explore and contribute was repeatedly raised:

> [I] try and get them more involved in that online space … We created an environment where people felt free. They could take risks and talk about things… and I think teachers are really responsible for doing this: encouraging that sharing and discussion of experience (Theresa)

Bringing their "whole self" into the online teaching experience, and being engaging, interactive and emotionally connected were valued dimensions of connecting with students.

> I thought this was all about the technology and stuff and I'd forgotten that I've actually still got to relate… I've still got to actually be who I am. I'm still going to give that "teacher moment"… … And when you don't have the same senses, you've got to maximize some of the other senses [when] we're not in the same room. (Richard)

Not all participants felt that they were achieving this goal. While it was clear that all participants held the goal of connecting with their students and engaging them in meaningful learning, this was not always seen as achievable:

I just try to challenge myself to make it as effective as I can. I still don't think that you can learn the most important parts of arts education online, which are the dispositions, the way you feel; the way you connect with other humans. (Anna)

Overall, it was evident that the participants believed that online learning required a different approach to on-campus pedagogy. For me, this included harnessing my students' imagination, when shared physical experiences were not always possible:

I've had to really reimagine my approach to teaching the arts online and with a focus on engaging first of all the imagination of my students. So really trying to communicate the joy and the passion that I have regarding the arts and the transformative potential that they have for classrooms. (Katie)

Overall, investigating the *subject-object dialectic* revealed that, for the participating arts educators, their deep valuing of the arts helped to shape their goals for learning, and in particular, their motivation to engage students in praxis that might prepare them for their future classrooms. While for some, this presented an opportunity for creativity and innovation, others were weighed down by the loss of opportunity. In many respects, I identified with both sentiments.

Learning Technologies and resources (*tools*)

The goals of the participating arts educators were mediated by a range of *tools*, most notably learning technologies and digital resources. A significant range of mediating tools was discussed, alongside the opportunities and challenges presented by the tool use, and how this impacted the attainment of their goals for student learning. These included tutorials, assessment and authentic learning in the community, forums, digital content, and ubiquitous technologies.

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Online tutorials

All academics offered online tutorials. Most had access to platforms for video tutorials that permitted a range of features, including two-way video, screen sharing capabilities, typed chat, a whiteboard function that permitted interactivity with the screen using drawing tools, and breakout rooms for group-work. In alignment with my own experience, the tutorials were extensively identified as a valuable opportunity for students to contribute interactively to their learning and socially connect:

> … the students always express in the [end-of-semester evaluations] the collaborative nature of those sessions and the fact that that makes them feel connected; that they can ask anything in those sessions; that they can talk about their learning in those sessions. (Leighton)

Importantly, online tutorials were an opportunity to engage students in practical learning experiences creatively reinterpreted for the online context:

> I read the story [Margaret Wild's "Fox"], and I talked to them about the [drama] strategies… I said, "Now, I need everyone on their camera. I need to see. It's Drama, so I need to be able to respond." So, everyone turned their camera on, which was great. Then we all did the warmups, and I could see them doing the warmups… "Now someone's going to be the little bird". And one of the girls, she got right into it… She put a thing over her head like black chiffon and she pretended to be a little bird… (Theresa)

Similar to Theresa, I sought inventive ways to use synchronous technology to facilitate active learning for my online students:

> I talk students through principles of choreography in dance and ways that they can engage their learners in developing their own choreographed dance

pieces... I get the students to create a couple of simple hand movements in response to an artwork … in breakout rooms… so it's non-confrontational. And they come up with a couple of movements and then we meet together back as a whole class and we build a choreographed dance piece by piecing together all the different movements from the different groups... (Katie)

However, while the online tutorials provided opportunities for active engagement and interaction, they were not always well-attended. Tutorials were typically recorded and accessible for those who did not attend, although the general consensus was that these non-compulsory sessions were not always well-accessed. Abigail was among a number (including myself) who lamented that the majority of students were missing opportunities for engagement, and struggled to encourage more extensive participation: "…it's the ten [percent] that arrive, that come. It's the other 70 that don't do it. How do I make them come?" Thus, while online tutorials presented an excellent opportunity to engage in praxis-focused learning, many students could still complete the course without engaging, and thus, without benefiting from the embodied learning these opportunities often attempted to facilitate.

Praxis-focused assessment

Of all the tools to engage students in arts practice, praxis-focused assessment was deemed most effective for ensuring that *all* students participated in active learning. Typically, this involved establishing a range of practical arts experiences which students needed to document either through photography or video, which then formed the basis of pedagogical reflection. A few participants took a similar approach to Leighton: "We've…worked assessment tasks out where they have to record themselves completing tasks in music and visual arts using mobile phone technology.

And then they use that as a starting point to reflect on links to curriculum and on links to elements and processes".

Importantly, those academics who mandated praxis-focused assessment demonstrated a clearer conviction that their students were experiencing meaningful arts learning. Those, including myself, who had merely provided arts tasks as a part of the weekly learning found there was no assurance their students had engaged in practice, and as such, potentially missed significant opportunities to have all students engage in practical learning.

Authentic tasks in real-word contexts

A number of the participants described course requirements for their students to engage with authentic contexts. This engagement was typically an assessment requirement, ensuring that learners participated in (and had the opportunity to benefit from) the experiences. Examples of authentic experiences included a micro arts teaching activity, conducted with children in the student's family or broader network, or embedded in school practicums, which was filmed and uploaded for assessment, alongside pedagogical reflections (Nell). Similarly, Eleanor's students were required to facilitate a group-organized visual arts workshop in the local community, such as under 8's week celebrations. Even when physically separated, online groups collaborated using online web conferencing:

> …the campus students do [Under 8's week] here (on campus), others
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> do it in schools…. If they're not all together, if they do need to deliver it
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> individually, they can, and that can be with the neighborhood kids... they
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> absolutely love it. (Eleanor)

These innovative opportunities were rationalized as a means to engage their students in praxis-focused learning in order to cultivate "classroom ready" arts teachers who understood the power of the arts for learning, had experienced it in context, and were able to make conceptual connections between this experience and theory. Again, the uptake of these experiences for all students was contingent upon their being mandated through assessment.

Forums

Most participants mentioned online forums (or discussion boards) as part of their online practice, and these were typically used to stimulate social and cognitive engagement, and build community. Making these interactions genuinely personable was a way to build trust and elicit more productive interactions:

> To build that community … I introduce myself with not just text, but I put an image up there, which is a very personal image … to personally connect with them… I get them to put their story up there as well. So, share an image. Tell us about yourself. Tell us how you're feeling about the arts in particular… And I find that, that then sets up protocols for them talking to each other and also me talking to them. (Eleanor)

Forums were also a place to engage with critical learning. Anna posted "a question every week. They have to provide their answer and respond to two of their peers each week…They always say how much they enjoy that." However, it was noted that having a legitimate reason for forum engagement was vital: "…if they don't see any value to the discussion board participation, they won't do it. Fair enough I'm not sure that I would either" (Leighton). In alignment with my own experience, forums in general were

thus seen as a useful adjunct to other learning tools, and provided an opportunity for students to ask questions, support one another, and seek assessment guidance.

Digital content

Many participants referred to their presentation of key content through the use of multi-modal digital content. This typically provided the core content for courses around which all learning was facilitated. Digital content included multi-modal modules that provided written content, embedded throughout with links to online sources, images, and streamed content to support and illustrate core concepts and skills. Leighton's approach reflected the effort many put into developing comprehensive and engaging resources: "I started to do my own videos demonstrating things with a glockenspiel or a xylophone or whatever it might be, or just singing. And that led me down that track… of video supporting learning".

The knowledge that for some students, the digital content may be the extent of their engagement with the course gave weight to the importance of the quality of these materials. Richard noted it "…speaks to the importance of the online material. Because you have to assume that's all somebody has and anything that pulls from that is additional [or] supplementary". The provision of engaging resources that delivered both conceptual insights and practical arts experiences in action was thus extensively utilized, and formed the core of all participants' approach to online arts learning.

Ubiquitous technology (Blogs, wikis, websites, virtual galleries, mobile phones)

While not universally discussed, some participants shared their experimentation with, or use of, a range of ubiquitous technologies to engage students interactively. These included having students create blogs, websites, and virtual galleries to showcase their own activity, which had a positive effect on engagement and motivation: "I think

that strengthens what happens with the online group as well, because they are seeing those really wonderful outcomes of some of their peers and they're admitting that theirs hasn't gone as far, and then pushing that little step further" (Eleanor).

Ubiquitous mobile phone technology was another useful tool, permitting the uploading of photo and video footage for assessment or sharing with peers. While not universally used, these technologies were very positively discussed by those who had made use of them.

Final thoughts on learning tools

While the above demonstrates how fundamental technologies and resources were for the participants in attaining their overarching goal of developing pre-service teachers both conceptually and practically, Richard provided a more foundational perspective:

> I don't think it's about the tools because I think that any good educator can make do with whatever. I think *we're* the resource in that context. So, having the right tools, I don't think is the way… I think it's more about the learning design and how it's been imparted and used and referred, rather than the platform or the App or the cool little something that's just come out that you can download. (Richard)

His perspective—that pedagogy drives the use of tools—and not the other way around, was visible across the participant group whose use of tools was primarily motivated by their values as arts educators and their goal of authentic, praxis-focused engagement.

The rules, culture and context (*rules, community* and *division of labor*)

Engeström's (2018) model helps to identify that the core elements of *subject-object dialectic*, mediated by *tool* use, are influenced by elements of *rules, culture* and

context. These broader influences, in turn, influence the subject-object dialectic and ways that mediating tools are employed. Notable elements that participants raised as impacting upon their online teaching practice included the marketization of Higher Education, student attitudes, a culture that did not value the arts, and the availability of support.

The marketization of Higher Education

Across the participant group, the decision to offer arts courses online was a university mandate. Attitudes toward this decision varied. Akin to my own feelings, some acknowledged a positive "trade-off" of face-to-face learning for the widening participation and flexible learning. Others, however, felt there was a loss of quality for students, which I equally appreciated. Systemic decisions had typically been made without consideration of the suitability of online learning for their arts courses. Leighton was aware that this was a market-led decision; not a pedagogical one:

> Our Associate Dean Learning and Teaching at the time was introducing this (online learning), and there were clear market pressures to do it… There was a real push to maximize our capacity to attract new students… My first experience of what was being told I had to do it…

Anna was equally aware that decision-makers were not always considering the suitability of specific courses for online offerings:

> It's not their fault, but I think... administration leadership, [and] other colleagues [need to develop an] understanding that the arts are different in really good ways. And, that... this move to online learning, overall, is not going to suit the arts. It's not going to suit everything.

Richard's experience, however, suggests that his administration was aware that the arts presented challenges online, and arts courses were therefore viewed as a "test case":

> One of the first jobs I did was an audit of units from a teaching and learning perspective … at a stage when at this university all units were being presented for the first time in an online environment.... And the belief at the time was that if arts can do it, then other people should find it more simple.

While some participants lamented this "ruling" to deliver arts learning online, asking questions like "How can you give [comparable] experience if you're not in the room with me?... Tell me, how do you see that happening?" (Abigail), others, myself included, accepted or even embraced the opportunity, seeing it as "an opportunity to start to learn about a new way of doing things" (Leighton).

An attendant challenge stemming from the economic rationalization of educational decisions was unreasonable expectations about the quality of work required in unsuitable timeframes: Eleanor was among many who noted this: "…that's the key [challenge], is the amount of time it does take to do it well. So, I'm very stressed … having two units that I'm delivering to quite a lot of students".

Further systemic challenges arose from a lack of technological provision or support for some: Anna felt, "I can increase their arts learning, and their knowledge base, and get closer to the skills that I would on campus if they gave me access to that technology" (Anna).

Leighton experienced similar support issues:

> [I]nitially the level of support that was available was really stable. We had a dedicated person in the faculty for … technological sort of components of

support. I guess now we've gone through iteration after iteration of online learning and … all of those over the shoulder supports have gone.

Collectively, while participants acknowledged the challenges raised by some of the economically founded decisions which impacted their work, they remained true to their overarching motivation to facilitate authentic arts learning, and put additional effort into overcoming this challenge through mediating innovations.

Students

The students themselves heavily influenced online facilitation. Clear evidence of efforts to make learning engaging for students has already been revealed as part of all participants' overarching motivation. While there were many references to student engagement, there were also insights into how various student attitudes to learning, dispositions, or expectations sometimes made the attainment of the goal for teaching more challenging: "The other challenge is when those students just don't want to talk to you... If no matter what you're saying to them, they're not responding, it's very difficult to give them the support they need" (Eleanor).

> … a lot of online students … say, "I chose this one online because I don't want to engage. I don't want to engage with other people. I just don't have time."... and they just chose it online … so they don't have to come to campus and engage with other people. (Anna)

Some participants attempted to mediate this with increased effort to engage with those students to ensure adequate support, while others simply acknowledged the agency of their learners: "They're all different, so why are we making a general kind of call on people? … [I]t's flexible learning. They've paid; they know what to do. They're adults" (Theresa).

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Lack of valuing of the arts

Most participants referred at one point to the ways they felt that the arts were not valued, and how they needed to regularly advocate for the significance of the arts and for adequate provision in their program. A number who had worked long term in Higher Education, myself included, noted how time allocations had been significantly cut:

> Around 2015, I went into the coordinator of the program and I said, "We only have 12 hours of creative arts happening in this course. Why is it so little?" She said, "Well, it's actually going to get littler [*sic*]." Then she dwindled that program right down. You don't get many hours in the creative arts at all now. (Nell)

> …you go back nine, ten years ago, when students got a whole semester of music, and a whole semester of visual arts, and a whole semester of drama. And now they get two hours, if they're lucky. (Abigail)

Abigail felt that this lack of valuing the arts was also evident in some students, who viewed the course as insignificant:

> … way less than half or a third of [students] actually, religiously come online each week and have a chat or an engagement. Because, and I think part of the problem is that... they think it's a bludge. They think "Oh, thank God. It's *just the arts*."

Theresa saw these attitudes also extending into schools:

> I think one of the challenges we have as well is with the schools and some teachers: the lack of time for the arts and pushing it down. And here we are saying how important they are and how integral they are to the curriculum.

A culture in which arts learning was seen either as "fun frills" or less valued in a holistic education than "top tier" learning in literacy and numeracy thus made the goal of developing authentic arts appreciation in students more challenging.

Support and collaboration

Beyond the challenges that were raised, participants also spoke about support structures and opportunities for collaboration that were (or could be) a significant dimension of effective online arts practice. Peer review was found to be beneficial:

> …we looked at each other's work and picked it apart and tried to think about ways that we could improve our teaching and learning practices. That process resulted in me looking at that unit afresh from the point of view of: "How do I engage students before anything else? How do I make them want to do this?" (Leighton)

Seeking advice from colleagues was also a helpful strategy for Eleanor, who felt that arts educators, "need to be confident in asking other people who are experts in online teaching, who have done it for a while, for some ideas." She equally recognized the value in acknowledging the experience and capacities of students, particularly when navigating some of the technological challenges of online facilitation:

> I don't have a problem with actually having students giving me some advice at times as well, and I think that's important to not be the owner of all of your problems but to share those, and that again is part of that community of learning.

When asked what advice she would give to other online educators, Theresa advocated for professional development as a productive support: "…don't think professional

development is beneath you. It's really important to do that. And the university has a lot of support with online learning and teaching and strategies and all sorts of things".

An online Community of Practice was a support strategy suggested by some:

> It would be lovely if... if all of us who are in this space actually got together and nutted something out. And it wasn't this uni against this uni… It would be really interesting to see the different ways of doing stuff... [I]t would be really nice if we were more united in trying to explore ways of making this work. (Abigail)

Responses highlighted that support was generally made available by the various universities; however, the onus was ultimately upon the academics to actively seek it.

Discussion

Using Engeström's (2018) Activity Theory as an analytical lens has provided a framework and language to describe key features of the participants' approaches to online arts learning. While subtle differences existed across the group, including my own perspectives, there was nonetheless a strong sense of shared values and activity. The following model represents the findings (see Figure 2), adapted from Engeström's model. This highlights how academics approach their work; how their personal and professional values inform their activity; how this is mediated by a range of technologies and pedagogical strategies; and how this interacts within a larger system of rules, culture and context.
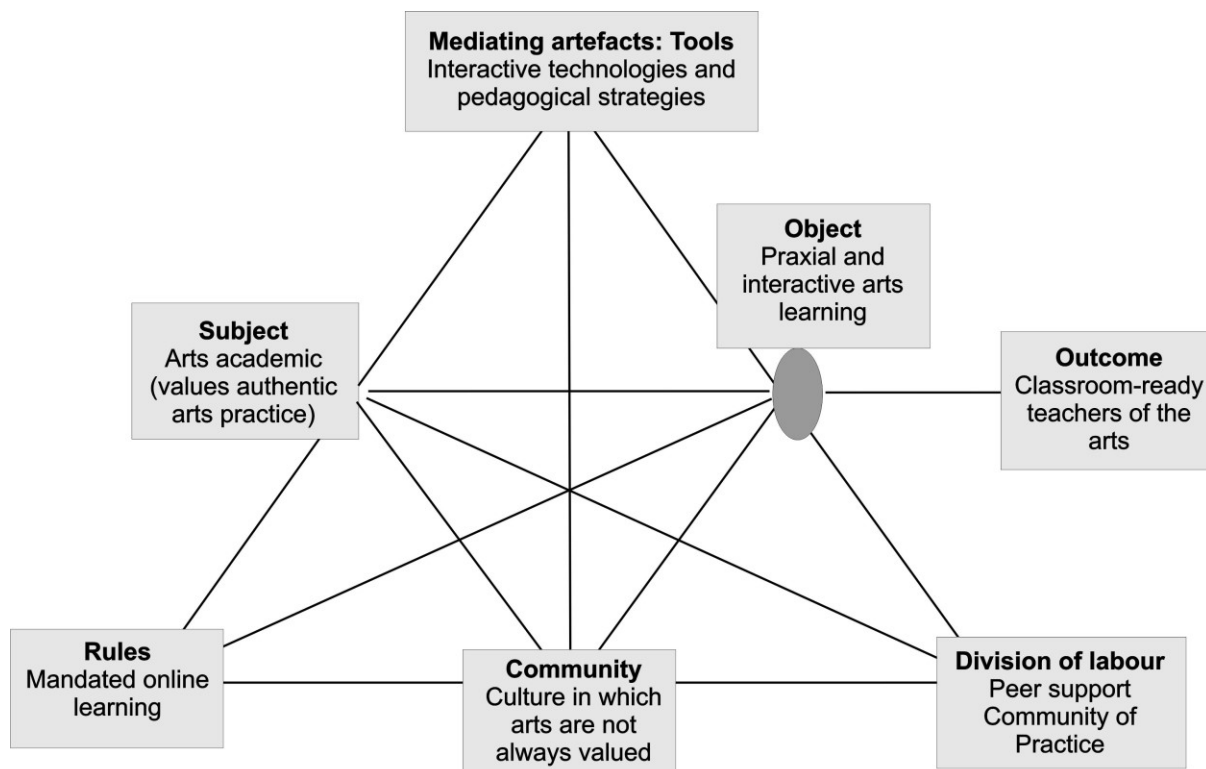
Fig. 2. The activity system of online arts academics.

The activity of facilitating rigorous arts training for pre-service educators was grounded in the *subjects'* core values regarding the transformative power of the arts in education, which then translated into teaching goals that privileged authentic arts praxis and student engagement as a learning *object.* Participants believed that pre-service teachers must *experience* authentic arts practice in order to enact it in their future classrooms. However, opportunities for paraxial learning traditionally facilitated on-campus were significantly limited online. Such findings align with previous research that highlights problems around the integration of theory and practice and workplace readiness in online arts courses (Allen et al., 2014; Baker et al., 2016; King, 2018; Lierse, 2015), indicating that the perceptions and attitudes toward praxis held by participants are experienced more widely than the participant group in this study. In addition to praxis-focused learning, connecting personally and cognitively with students was a valued dimension of participants' teaching activity to attain their object

goal. The possibility for genuine connections to be forged was evident, confirming a body of research that online learning has the potential for genuine student interactivity and interpersonal connection (Kahu & Nelson, 2017; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Nonetheless, engaging students interactively was noted as challenging by participants in this study, particularly for students who chose not to interact. As such, collectively, the goals of authentic praxis and student interactivity necessitated a re-imagination of online pedagogy and innovative mediation via a range of *tools*.

Exploration of the mediating *tools*, which included the use of technologies and pedagogical strategies, highlighted that participants were approaching the "problem of praxis" creatively. Learning tools such as online tutorials, forums, and multi-modal learning content were universally adopted, and these were enacted with a strong focus on engaging students in communities of learning, and embedding opportunities for praxis. The creative use of ubiquitous technologies (e.g. mobile phones) for sharing arts experiences—while not used by all—was an accessible means to engage learners as active participants in a larger, interactive online community of learners. Research shows that online students are often time poor (Stone, Freeman, Dyment, Muir & Milthorpe, 2019), and few choose to engage with content and application activities unless it directly relates to assessment (Harris, Brown, & Dargursh, 2018). In line with this, this study found that assessing arts learning experiences was notably successful in achieving both paraxial learning and student engagement. Additionally, those who embedded experiences in authentic community contexts reported positive outcomes that students enjoyed and from which they benefited. However again, these were considered productive only when mandated as assessment. The utility of formal assessment online as a learning tool to stimulate meaningful integration of theory and practice has been previously affirmed (Allen et al., 2014; Davis, 2018; King, 2018;

Lierse, 2015), and while these studies all highlight there are attendant challenges, the value for assessment in engaging students in praxis highlights these may be challenges worth experiencing and "working through". Further study into the nature and constraints of such praxis-focused assessment tasks is therefore recommended, including student perspectives and longitudinal evaluation regarding how effectively these are preparing them for classroom practice.

The data reveals that participants were operating within a set of *rules*, or university directives that left them in the position of necessarily innovating to ensure authentic arts engagement for their students. Higher Education was noted as a market-driven system, and arts courses were mandatorily offered online, without consultation and little consideration of their suitability for online. The *community* in which academics operated also often reflected a culture where the arts were not always perceived as valuable, which extended into schools, and equally, some students. For some, the move to online learning was indicative of a lack of valuing the arts by Higher Education decision-makers, and a poor understanding of the unique requirements of the arts; a problem that is widely recognized in the literature (e.g., Baker et al., 2016; Dinham, 2020). These complexities were made all the more challenging by time limitations, with participants asserting that the time required to produce quality resources and pedagogy was not acknowledged or provided. Stone (2016) affirms this, noting that "the time-consuming nature of developing and maintaining a strong sense of 'teacher-presence' is not always recognized in existing workload models" (p.5). In light of the challenges, the participants found a forward direction by returning to their *activity object*: maintaining a dedicated focus on engaging their learners interactively in authentic arts learning through innovative use of tools. However, they often invested above their allocated time to achieve this.

Finally, supporting elements of the academics' activity, or *division of labor,* were identified. Supportive partnerships such as peer-mentoring and seeking advice from other academics with more extensive experience were useful strategies to guide practice, initiative innovation, and critically reflect on courses. A number also raised the value of an online Community of Practice (CoP) with other online arts academics as a means to generate opportunities for targeted support and innovation. Previous research has conclusively identified that both formal and informal online communities are a useful means to sustain quality professional practice and develop a culture of support (Lantz-Andersson, Lundin, & Selwyn, 2018), and as such, the formation of an online CoP is a key recommendation arising from this project for the ongoing development and enhancement to online learning. Given that the arts educators in this study identified that they typically operated within an institutional culture that did not always value the arts, such a support community is considered of great importance. Importantly, seven participants (including myself) in this project have already commenced an online CoP, which is serving as a space for mutual encouragement and skill sharing.

Conclusion

Given the significant growth of online teacher education degrees (Knowles, 2015), this project's findings into the activity of teaching the arts online present insights into how arts educators are navigating the complexities, challenges and opportunities of this task. Activity Theory has provided a means to map the activity of online arts educators to better understand how they are navigating their role and its attendant challenges, and how context impacts upon this.

Previous research has emphasized that arts praxis is vital for the thorough preparation of pre-service teachers (Dinham, 2020; Kenny et al., 2015) and that this is significantly more challenging when teaching online cohorts (Baker et al., 2016; Davis, 2018; King, 2018; Lierse, 2015). This study demonstrates that the participating Australian online arts educators are vastly aware of the challenges, and intent upon finding ways to innovate upon their practice to develop opportunities for meaningful praxis. This study highlights that one significant strategy used by some participants led to a more authentic paraxial engagement for their students: mandating practical arts learning experiences in assessment. Not only has this finding led to a re-evaluation and adjustment of assessment tasks within my own courses, but is recommended more broadly as a means to ensure all online students can experience arts praxis as a foundation for the classroom. Additionally, this study notes that such innovations often require innovative use of ubiquitous technologies. Viewing the arts teaching practices of online educators through the lens of Activity Theory helps to identify that the success of such innovative strategies is not automatically guaranteed, and requires support, particularly at the institutional level, such as recognition for the time required in developing quality resources and student support, the provision and technical support of course-specific technologies, and access to targeted professional development.

In response to these findings, a number of recommendations arise from this study. First, it is advised that further exploration be conducted into the impact and effectiveness of assessment tasks that engage pre-service teachers in practical arts learning, focused on developing classroom-specific arts skills, processes and concepts. Second, institutional support that recognizes more realistic time allocations and technical support for online educators is required if the quality of learning is to attain congruence with expectations for face-to-face learning. Additionally, this study

represents an Australian context, and investigations into the activity of international online arts educators will contribute to a more comprehensive picture regarding how online arts learning is facilitated internationally.

Some limitations in this research must also be noted. First, the data arises from a small sample size and therefore cannot be taken as a generalization of all online arts educators. Further, the findings present a snapshot of how the participating academics were approaching their online arts coursework, but do not indicate the effectiveness of their approach. Nor do they provide the student perspective on online arts learning. Further research into the student perspective and how effectively they perceive their online coursework prepares them for the classroom is advised; in addition to studies that evaluate the effectiveness of online instruction compared to on-campus instruction.

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