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To cite this article: Susan Davis & Louise Gwenneth Phillips (2020) Teaching during COVID 19 times – The experiences of drama and performing arts teachers and the human dimensions of learning, NJ, 44:2, 66-87, DOI: [10.1080/14452294.2021.1943838](https://doi.org/10.1080/14452294.2021.1943838)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14452294.2021.1943838>



Published online: 27 Jun 2021.



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Teaching during COVID 19 times – The experiences of drama and performing arts teachers and the human dimensions of learning

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ABSTRACT

As countries moved to halt the spread of the COVID 19 pandemic in 2020 access to physical sites of learning was restricted, so teachers across diverse educational contexts were required to rapidly embrace different modes and combinations of delivery. With a desire to profile the voices of teacher experience, a number of educational researchers initiated a research project to examine the experiences of teachers during COVID-19 times. The stories of performing arts teachers revealed some shared areas of similar concern with other teachers namely a rapid increase in using different technologies and online tools and an extensive increase in workload. Teachers expressed concern for those students who became ‘invisible’, and for the ‘invisible’ aspects of the classroom and learning that were difficult to replicate online. The research highlighted the importance of the ‘human dimensions’ of learning in these art forms and the important role played by professional networks.

KEYWORDS

Drama education; Covid-19; online learning; perezhivanie; teacher networks

Introduction

In March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the COVID-19 virus spread as a pandemic (Ghebreyesus, 2020). To reduce the spread of the virus many universities, schools and education centres closed or restricted their learning programs on site, or restricted groupings and regulated social distancing practices when they remained open. Teachers across all sectors had to significantly reconfigure their teaching practices at very short notice, conducting what has been termed ‘emergency remote teaching’ (Hodges et al., 2020). The pandemic changed how millions of students across the world were being educated (Tam and El-Azar, 2020), with teachers moving swiftly to facilitate teaching and learning through remote, distance and online modes, most through using a range of digital technologies, learning tools and platforms (Rapanta et al. 2020). Motivated by the relatively low-profile given to teacher voices about how they were experiencing these extraordinary changes, Author 2 (Louise Phillips) put out a call on Facebook and emailed potential international researchers who might be interested in a collaborative research project. The intention was to capture and analyse the perspectives and experiences of

teachers during COVID-19 times. Eight academics responded to the call to create a team of nine educational researchers (all previously teachers) located in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and the U.S.A. We were all part of different teacher communities and professional associations that we were keen to work with, as well as sharing common concerns as educational researchers about the impacts of this time of rapid pedagogical change, innovation and hardship.

Key features of COVID-19 related changes to teaching and learning have been echoed in surveys of teachers in Austria, Germany and Switzerland (Huber and Helm, 2020), China (Zhang, 2020), Australia, Ireland and Mexico (Jacobs et al., 2020), South Africa (Czierniewicz, 2020), as well as another small survey of fifteen drama educators in Australia (Abela et al., 2020). These all point to shared challenges that relate to teachers having to quickly shift the ways they teach and where they teach to digital spaces using a suite of technology-based tools. The changes demanded an extensive increase in workload, and teachers expressed concerns for students for whom the digital divide was an unavoidable reality.

Drama and Performing Arts teachers particularly missed embodied, social and relational aspects of learning when it moved online. These dimensions of learning, which are sometimes called non-academic outcomes (Martin et al., 2013) or social and psychological outcomes (Lee et al., 2015) are ones that research has demonstrated are developed and promoted through drama pedagogy (Lambert et al., 2016). These aspects of the learning experience – the ‘invisibles’ of education – increasingly came to the fore during COVID-19 times and were qualities that drama teachers missed, worked to maintain and were concerned about for their students.

Theoretical framing

The intention of the research was to ascertain how teachers were making sense of the COVID-19 restrictions, the impact upon teaching and learning, and how their understandings influenced their practices. For this article a cultural-historical framework referencing Vygotsky, Engeström, and others has been used to inform the research analysis and discussion (Engeström, 1987; Engeström and Sannino, 2010; Vygotsky, 1986). This work recognises the important role that mediational tools, artefacts and signs play for humans (subjects) acting within and upon the world (Vygotsky, 1978). This framing provides a means for analysing how human activity directed towards achieving motives or what are called *objects* may be mediated and achieved through tools that range from pencils and paper to embodied conventions of drama, to online technologies. Significantly when the tools change, the activity changes and it may be more or less possible to achieve the object of the activity.

Significantly to this study is that this framing has been useful for examining changes to learning-based activity, such as when technology is introduced or changed. A body of work in the sociocultural sphere has for some decades focussed on the concept of Human Computer Interaction (Nardi, 1995; Kaptelinin and Nardi, 2018) and that term is useful to revisit as it helps to identify that such activity is about the human aspects and not only the technology. This is of particular importance to the current COVID 19 education contexts whereby rapid, disruptive changes were made to teaching activity, much of which involved change to tool use and increased use of technologies. Dilemmas and

contradictions are instrumental to change, as through identifying them, there is potential to examine possibilities for shifts, some of which may be expansive and transformative.

An important concept used as a focus for this research – *perezhivanie* – is drawn from the field of cultural historical theory research and is concerned with change and transformation. *Perezhivanie* is a Russian term and a concept that has generated considerable interest and investigation over the past decade. The theoretical work was prompted in particular through analysis of Vygotsky's (1934/1994) use of the term, other Russian scholars, and a growing body of work conducted in the past five years (Davis, 2015; Davis and Dolan, 2016; Ferholt, 2015; Kozulin, 2016; Mok, 2017; Fleer et al., 2017; Smirnova, 2020).

The Russian word *perezhivanie* can be approximately translated to mean the 'lived emotional experience'. Kozulin (1991) notes that *perezhivanie* has a 'spectrum' of meanings, from experience to suffering. It recognises the emotional as well as cognitive dimensions of experience, the interactions between individual and the social. According to Vygotsky, *perezhivanie* involves the 'indivisible unity of personality and situation'. This is the unity of a 'personality making sense of a situation', (Zavershneva, 2014, p. 91). Examination of *perezhivanie* can help understand how people come to process experience and restructure their motives and volition (or human will) (Vygotsky, 1986) and how that this experience and reflection impacts upon a person's development.

Vasilyuk (1991) points out that *perezhivanie* can also refer to undergoing some trial and surviving it. He was therefore interested in *perezhivanie* as a means for examining how human beings cope with critical situations in life:

... how he or she will succeed in overcoming the suffering, in standing the test, in emerging from the crisis and regaining mental equilibrium — in short, in coping with the situation psychologically. We are speaking of an active, result-producing internal process which actually transforms the psychological situation, of experiencing [*perezhivanie*] as an activity. (Vasilyuk, 1991, p. 20)

Working with '*perezhivanie*' for research purposes then may involve identifying critical incidents, and acknowledging the affective and emotional dimensions as well as the cognitive in possible learning and meaning making.

Methodology

Drawing from a tradition of narrative based methods employed to understand teachers' lived experience, the research team sought to create a platform to hear teacher voices and stories about their work and their lives (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007). We designed a 'qualitative' survey with questions written like those for an interview. The content was therefore analysed thematically across each question and participant, rather than via any statistical means. The survey included six demographic questions (about location, teaching context, qualifications, years of teaching experience and age) and 16 open-ended questions about how COVID-19 impacted teaching and learning, teacher perceptions about student learning, and what helped teachers get through this time. Ethical clearance was obtained through James Cook University's Human Research Ethics Committee and subsequently through other university ethics committees. Survey responses were stored in a secure account on an Australian server following Australian Government requirements.

The survey was created on Qualtrics, and an invitation to participate was distributed through education networks. The networks used were those with which research team members had a connection. For the drama and education field, this included distribution through the national professional association 'Drama Australia', using social media accounts and direct email, with invitations to participate also emailed to related state and territory associations. This distribution became a form of purposive sampling, targeting a diverse array of teaching experiences in varying contexts. Participating teachers were invited to pass the survey onto other teachers they knew who may be interested, to increase responses through snowball sampling (Goodman, 2011). The survey opened early May 2020 and remained open throughout 2020 to capture the different waves of school closures and lockdowns across the key participating nations.

We note the limitations to the study, and while the survey was distributed beyond the countries the research teams were based in the responses were largely restricted to these predominantly western countries.

Data and responses

In total 624 educators from across the world completed the survey, with the majority from Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and the U.S.A (countries in which the researchers were based). For the purposes of this component of the research, the data was extracted for those teachers who identified as Drama or Performing Arts teachers. Even though over 160 responses included one or other of these as disciplines, many respondents did not progress beyond the initial demographic questions to answer the content questions. For the purposes of this article only those respondents who actually answered questions were included for analysis and that reduced the number to 61.

Of the 61 responses examined, most of these were from Australia (56), with two responses from New Zealand, one each from Mexico, Singapore and the U.S.A. The Australian responses were from Queensland (21), New South Wales (15) and Victoria (16), with two each from Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory.

Most of the respondents were secondary drama teachers (43), while 10 were tertiary educators, 5 were primary educators and 2 worked in the early childhood sector. As this data set included anyone who identified as a Performing Arts teacher as well as teaching Drama, some taught Dance as well as Drama (24), some were Dance specific and several were Music teachers. A number of educators identified other areas they taught including English (7), Special Needs (4) and ESL (2).

The majority of respondents had more than 11 years of experience (40), with 25 having 21 or more years of experience teaching. This is significant in that the response came from teachers with extensive experience.

Data analysis – key themes and organisers

A number of approaches were used for analysing the data. The responses were compiled via question as well as via respondent. Initial data coding identified 'perezhivanie' elements of:

- Changes experienced, what teachers 'struggled with' and found difficult, where there were indicators of emotive language what teachers found helpful, what sustained them, what they had worked through, achieved.
- Data from survey questions 7–22 were colour coded and lists of keywords identified regarding change, difficulty and struggle were compiled. The number of times these were discussed is presented in [Table 1](#).

Next the data was entered into an online qualitative analysis system known as Voyant (<https://voyant-tools.org>). Voyant (Sinclair and Rockwell, 2021) is an open-source web-based environment for data visualisation analysis and includes a number of data visualisation tools such as cirrus (word clouds), streamgraphs, scatterplots, termsberry, and wordtress of the most frequent words used in responses. TermsBerry presents high frequency terms and their collocates as cluster of berries'. The most frequent terms are presented in the centre of the berry cluster and are larger circles (berries). When a term is hovered over, the other terms that it is collocated with are highlighted along with the number of times it is collocated with that key term hovered on. [Figure 1](#) below presents a termberry for all the qualitative text from the Performing Arts responses. The words included are those mentioned 25 times or more.

Voyant identified the most frequent words in the corpus as being:

students (353); online (188); work (172); learning (157); school (97); teaching (96); zoom (95); drama (77); face (77); time (73); teachers (58); classroom (50); group (50); google (48); need (46).

When the performing arts teacher responses from survey question 12 that asked specifically what areas teachers struggled with (and hence where perezhivanie might be experienced) was entered into Voyant the top terms were:

Students (24), Time (19), Teaching (14), Online (13) and Learning (9). Another Voyant tool, the collocates graph was used to further analyse words specifically linked to teacher use of the word 'difficult'. This also confirmed a similar cluster of words that reflected concerns and issues around students and learning, working online and how this work was difficult. Additional words in this cluster included need, remote and tasks (See [Figure 2](#)).

Furthermore, the Performing Arts data corpus was compared to the full data set for all survey participants, to ascertain if there were any terms/concerns specific to Performing Arts teachers. Perhaps not surprisingly the terms that were present in the performing arts data more than in the full data set were drama (77), face (as in face-to-face) (77) and group (59). The importance of these words and related issues emerges as the data is analysed.

Table 1. Key changes, difficulties and struggle for Performing Arts teachers during COVID-19.

Key change and difficulties	Number of times mentioned in the data
Move teaching online, off campus	21
More instruction/theory/more structured/written resources	18
Less face-to-face, physical work	9
Rewriting assessment and programs	7
Less interaction with students	5
Performances and events cancelled	5
Increased cleaning of classroom	3
More feedback, responses to emails	3
Loss of income	2
Hybrid teaching	2
Less time invested on disruptive students	1

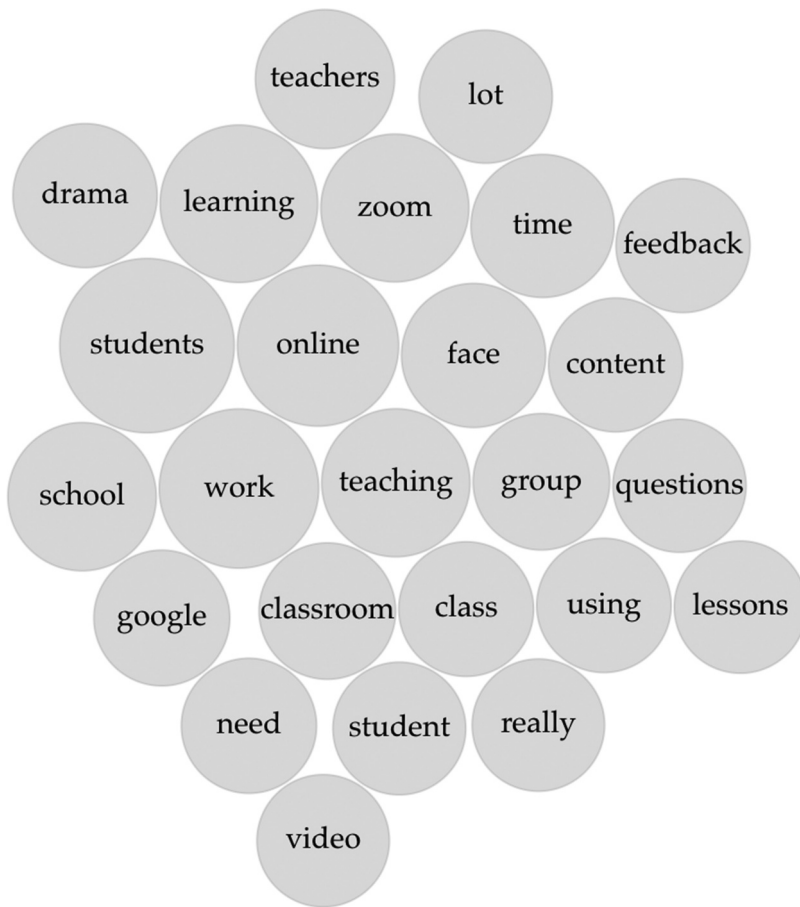


Figure 1. Voyant termberry for most prevalent terms within Performing Arts teacher COVID-19 response data.

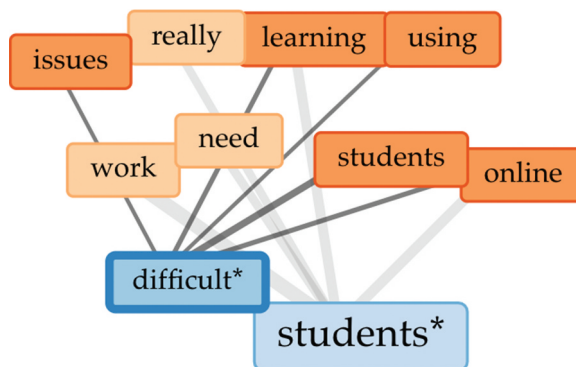


Figure 2. Voyant Collocates Graph identifying words linked to the concept of 'difficult' and 'difficulty'.

This identification and alignment of key terms provided direction for further deep dives into the data, which was also conducted through coding the data in NVIVO. This analysis focussed on students, change/difficulty/struggle, online tools and technologies, extra work, face-to-face learning, what helped, who helped, as well as achievements/innovation. The main organisers used for the presentation of data in the next section of the article focus upon the key terms of:

students,
online,
workload and time; and
face-to face.

This is one way of presenting the data as when discussing the teachers' experiences these themes are not presented separately. The voices of the teachers are included, using quotes from the data to exemplify issues and experiences.

Students, motivations and concern for the 'invisibles'

The number one term appearing in the data is 'students' and in analysing what teachers had to say regarding students, what dominates are their *concerns* for students, and their drive to keep going because of their students.

Number 1 priority was always to get the students HAPPILY online in the first instance - which took some doing. (NSW Primary teacher)

Teachers wrote about their concern for students who didn't engage with remote learning, for students with disabilities or learning needs, for equity and inclusion for disadvantaged communities, along with overall expressions of missing their students.

Concern for students not engaging

Teachers acknowledged that some students worked well in the off campus and online environments, but they were most concerned about those students who were not engaging, not present for synchronous or live sessions, not responding to emails or phone calls and not completing or returning work.

It was a long process. Some still haven't been in touch at all and don't respond to emails or phone calls. Parents don't get back to us either. (Queensland secondary teacher)

Some students were really responsive to working online. They attended all classroom sessions, and were able to email me/message me if they had any questions. But too many students simply failed to engage with the online work; these were the students who did not attend class meetings. (NZ Secondary teacher)

Some students have totally disengaged from learning. They have not returned to regular classroom or have returned but are not engaging with the work. (Victorian secondary teacher)

Concern for students with disabilities or learning needs

Teacher concern was heightened for those students with disabilities or learning needs. Teachers in some cases were creating multiple versions of resources and modifying them where they could. Several mentioned phone-calls and communications with parents and care-givers, who were attempting to support the student in the home learning:

Much greater check in directly with parents to support students with learning needs. (Queensland secondary teacher)

Some students have needed me to send them individual lesson plans to help with their ability to adapt to the changes. (NSW Secondary teacher)

Concern for equity and inclusion for disadvantaged groups

Concerns for equity and inclusion also extended to those from low SES backgrounds or from diverse communities who did not have access to the technology and tools:

A lack of equity around digital connection resulted in some students not being able to access their learning. Other environmental factors in the home prevented some students from engaging with their work in a meaningful way. (NSW Secondary teacher)

My EALD kids really want to be back in the room as they need a lot more help. The ones not engaging online were already the kids having issues with learning so they'll be very very behind. (Queensland secondary teacher)

During the school holidays a survey came out checking on technology in homes. I took my role as Indigenous Connections person to a level where I contacted all 60 students to ensure they had the technology that was required. This was exhausting and frustrating as many families could not access the survey on our school communication platform indicating they rarely accessed communication from the school. (Victorian primary teacher, Performing Arts specialist)

Teachers missed their students

In terms of emotional responses by teachers identified in the data it was significant to read how many teachers 'missed' their students, missed having them together in the classroom. Teachers reported how they not only missed their students, but the energy coming from their students, and the interplay of energy given and reciprocated in the live presence of each other. It is this dynamic and human response that is often what sustains them:

I really missed seeing the students each day. I worried about the ones who were not engaging with the work online (NZ Secondary teacher)

I get energy from my students - much more than I realised. It's been very flat and sluggish feeling at school without them around. (Queensland Secondary teacher)

I have learnt that I get energised in the classroom, from the students simply reacting to my instructions. In remote learning ... I was struggling. I just wanted to die, everyday. (NSW Secondary teacher)

I really like being around kids. I missed them when we were locked down. (NSW Secondary teacher)

This concept of energy is a significant aspect of teaching practice to reflect upon, as the idea of energy flow and reciprocity was also related to motivation. It was difficult for teachers to keep working so hard and keep churning out the content and materials, if they didn't have the energy and feedback from their students – as that helped make it all worthwhile. Some teachers mentioned how their motivation was suffering:

Not being face to face with my students has had a clear impact upon motivation for both them and myself. ... I have struggled with the lack of interaction with my students and providing ongoing support to other teachers. (Queensland Secondary teacher)

We see that teachers experience *perezhivanie* in performing arts teaching in that there is an emotional affect of joy, delight, and adrenalin in the reciprocity of embodied teaching and learning/meaning making. In the absence of reciprocal embodied teaching and learning, teachers also experienced *perezhivanie* as a deep-seated sense of loss and sorrow.

As Gallagher et al. (2020) too describe that 'traditional understandings of "embodiment", "participation" and "ensemble" no longer apply' in the virtual only drama classroom during COVID-19 pandemic requiring 'drama educators to think of drama practices that could enable young people to find one another again' (p. 641).

Shifts to 'online' learning and changes to tool use

The major area of change identified in the data is the shift to online, remote and home-based teaching. However for some it was further complicated by hybrid models and multiple modes of delivery, with some students in the classroom, some online and some they could only send materials to. For all respondents the COVID-19 teaching response had involved using a range of technologies, some that they had to learn to use very quickly. While in recent years many educators have increasingly used online platforms and communications tools within their learning programs, the advent of COVID-19 meant that teachers were suddenly expected to be digital learning designers, multi-media content creators and facilitators regardless of their expertise or experience.

It is important to note that when terms such as 'online' and 'technologies' are used that they cover a broad range of tools, spaces and platforms, many of which have become 'naturalised' in educational contexts. These include learning management systems, digital repositories, email communication, computers and devices such as phones and tablets.

In analysing the data the range of technological tools and platforms that teachers identified using were identified. These were then clustered into the types of tools people used drawing upon previous work by one of the authors that identified that the different kinds of technologies used in the drama classroom and associated 'toolkits' (Davis, 2011). These digital tools are clustered in Table 2 as:

- Video conferencing and synchronous communication tools

- Learning Management systems, repositories

- Communications, collaboration and asynchronous communication tools

- Content creation tools.

Table 2. Performing arts teachers use of digital and online technology tools during COVID-19.

Video conferencing & synchronous communication tools	
Zoom	24
Microsoft teams	16
Google meet hangouts	7
Google classrooms	7
Blackboard collaborate	3
Skype	2
Webex	2
Learning Management systems/repositories	
Canvas	10
One Note	8
Google drive/suite	7
Learning Place/school intranet	6
Stile	4
Moodle	2
Communications/collaboration (& asynchronous communication tools)	
Email (note that email use is often taken for granted and so may not have been specifically listed for many respondents)	6
One Note	8
Messenger/What's App/Viber	1 each
Padlet	1
Seesaw	1
Content creation	
Screencastify/Screenomastic	3

The key shift for many teachers was to the use of video conferencing and live collaborative technologies to enable synchronous communications typical of face-to-face lessons in physical classrooms. This was combined with significant work required to design content for 'transmission', to generate and share learning materials, and support students in their very different 'home' learning contexts. Some of the ways performing arts teachers reported how they worked with digital technologies to attend embodied performance:

We have done on-line readings of plays. Students have chosen household props and particular rooms in their house as inspiration to use in their improvisation work. (Western Australian Tertiary Educator)

Yr 11 collaborative google slides to do elements of production. Zoom classes impro games and script readings.Shared screen for student work. (NSW Secondary Teacher)

Online learning, presence and presentation of self

There is a distinction between using technologies in the classroom and to support every day teaching and learning process and what may be called 'online learning'. Online learning includes pedagogical and learning design knowledge and consideration of things like how interactions between teacher and students and between students are managed, and the projection of presence, in this case 'teacher presence' which needs to be social, cognitive and facilitatory (Rapanta et al., 2020). Considerable effort is required by the teacher to create and maintain a sense of 'teacher presence' within and across online

spaces, and to generate feelings of warmth and a sense of community. Teacher presence extends to providing support and maintaining positive relationships for the students in the group/class. Once again the notion of 'energy' emerged as an aspect of presence and the teaching/learning process that was difficult to maintain when teaching online:

I am a practical teacher and I enjoy being in the classroom, it is hard to shift energy online, it is hard to build meaningful relationships. I care about the environment my students are in when they enter my classroom. (Queensland secondary teacher)

We sense from the performing arts teachers' accounts of teaching online that, as argued earlier, the *perezhivanie* affect was that of loss. While the synchronous online classroom experience or encounter largely replaced the typical classroom experience for a majority of teachers, teachers noted that as well as them having to learn how best to utilise the platform for creative learning, that students were not always keen to participate in ways they would in the face-to-face classroom. Some students couldn't or wouldn't use cameras or speak, as for some (as noted in other studies) it seems there is a higher risk involved in the presentation of self online:

I think students find it harder to ask questions on Zoom. I often use the "thumbs up" reaction to gauge understanding and get them to add questions using the chat function. (Queensland secondary teacher)

A lot of students had issues with being on camera therefore disengaged. (Victorian secondary teacher)

Drama classes are known for their capacity to build relationality and safe spaces, for example, through drama teachers starting classes with warm up activities to invite the class into a playful relational space.

Content creation – multiple modes and forms

Many educational institutions already use learning management systems, but the main difference during remote teaching was the huge increase in the range of technological tools used and content-based resources teachers created and uploaded. This including creating recordings of explanations and instructions as a type of 'lecture' or podcast, and a huge increase in email communications, especially explaining and clarifying assessment. The type of technology use and communications vastly increased across multiple platforms, sites and spaces. An example of the range of tools and interactions involved is summarised by one teacher as follows:

Firstly, I started all lessons checking in with my students via teams. Then I would follow up students I was concerned about with emails. There was also a class page on the school intranet where all lessons, resources, support materials, videos etc were posted and this was updated numerous times each week in order to have a hub that allowed students to have the tools they needed at their fingertips. I also sent out a weekly newsletter with information about streamed performances, opportunities and updates from the drama community which helped students feel more connected to others. (NSW Secondary teacher)

Many performing arts teachers reported creating instructional videos. One dance teacher shared a video collated with 35 dance teachers around the world (see The Viral Boogie Project <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-H0siTmrK8&t=7s>).

Workload and 'time'

Discussion has already highlighted the major shifts to online and hybrid forms of teaching and learning and how this generated a huge workload increase. Teachers noted an increase in their working hours, some working extremely long hours. Teachers also found it hard to turn off and escape the constancy of online communication:

I started work at 8.30 each morning and worked until 11.30 at night. (NZ Secondary teacher)

Cutting down the amount of work I am putting in. Logging off! How to present theory in a more engaging way without having to reinvent the wheel and spend hours doing it. (Victorian Secondary teacher)

Workload - it is much more time consuming to deliver content in an engaging way, to be thinking about how to draw students in without being able to connect in person. (Queensland secondary teacher)

The shift to online delivery was a significant shift for all teachers, but for teachers of learning areas such as the performing arts where more typically they would be physically on their feet and working with their bodies for a majority of their teaching time, the shift to online delivery changed the ways they worked to a more 'sedentary', screen-based experience. This dramatic shift was one that teachers struggled with:

I am finding I am working almost non-stop through the day into the evening without feeling I have 'done everything'. I make myself take breaks because the time in front of a laptop screen stretches so quickly into long hours which feel as though I haven't achieved anything but I know I must have! (NSW Secondary teacher)

Just have a very sore bottom and am sick of looking at a computer screen. I thrive on interaction with humans and so I feel like my teaching gets a bit dull at times ... especially when I have end on end tutorials! (Queensland tertiary educator)

Much of the initial workload increase related to re-designing work programs and assessment tasks:

Content and delivery have been quite different. I switched around some units and assessment tasks to suit learning from home. (Queensland secondary teacher)

In many cases assessment tasks most often changed were those that were originally planned as group presentation or performances to individual assessment tasks. For some contexts these decisions were made by the education and curriculum authorities, not the schools, teachers or learning sites:

In the junior years 7-10 we rewrote assessment take to individual performance, when usually we would be working in group performances. While this works out alright for a teaching perspective, students are less enthusiastic when not able to work in groups or produce junior productions. (SA Secondary teacher)

Drama teaching has become a lot more theory orientated, limited physical activities ... Due to school restrictions we have not been able to use Zoom or team meetings to have face to face meetings with the students online. ... Would really love for State schools to be able to use video conferencing with students like private schools are able to, that way we could possible try and do more practical activities. (Queensland secondary teacher)

Some teachers found the off campus and online teaching was a novelty, and they quite enjoyed it. For those for whom the time became more extended, or have now had multiple 'lock-downs' and remote teaching experiences, enthusiasm waned. Working from home and constant screen time was exhausting:

Initially we were all very engaged and busy discovering new technologies to use and adapt to in creating Zoom lessons online and the students were very positive and so happy, in isolation, to see each other on screen in gallery view. After weeks of many hours a day using screens it is clear that the teachers and students, working from home, are feeling each day is confined and repetitive- like "Groundhog Days"! (NSW Secondary teacher)

Considering these experiences raises issues surrounding workplace health and safety, as well as the importance of maintaining teachers' physical and mental health wellbeing. The workload and intensity of such was gruelling and teachers struggled as did many students:

One class recently I started crying and apologised to the group stating that I'm not coping very well. Subsequently we went 2 hours over time just chatting about how hard it is to get out of bed sometimes and how long it takes to do things etc etc. I think they appreciated the chance to talk. (Victorian tertiary educator)

The unsustainable increased workload was reported by teachers from all sectors and disciplines, as featured in The Conversation article 'Exhausted beyond measure' (Phillips & Cain, 2020).

Changes to modalities – the importance of 'face-to-face', embodied practice and the 'group'

A key data highlighted one of the major dilemmas and struggles for most performing arts teachers because of COVID related remote teaching – the shift from the face-to-face, embodied learning encounter and the ecology of the performing arts classroom, to the disparate, disembodied fragments of content distribution, and varied online exchanges.

More content driven, 'theory', written and individual work

A key shift was from the co-present, face-to-face lesson and learning experience to situations where teachers had to prepare a lot more written materials and resources. Not all teacher or students could access video-based software such as zoom. Some education authorities, schools and sites were very prescriptive about what platforms teachers could and couldn't use, and what they expected in terms of how material would be 'delivered' each week. In some cases, if students could not access learning online, this also might include print materials that could be emailed or printed out and collected by students. For many performing arts teachers this meant translating their classroom-based encounters to more text-based resources and 'theory-based work', more writing for teachers and much more reading for students:

It has transformed a course that is largely physical and dependent on group, project-based approaches into a more teacher centric model with far more written components so that student work could be monitored while in the virtual space. It has also made team teaching and collaboration more difficult. (NSW Secondary teacher)

Very hard to continue with practical work, so have focused on theory. Following up work consistently. (Victorian secondary teacher)

The primacy of the embodied 'face-to-face' experience

Drama is a subject and learning area whereby teaching and learning approaches are characterised by 'embodied' pedagogies (Bird and Sinclair, 2019; Forgasz, 2015), working collaboratively as a form of ensemble (Franks et al., 2014) and as a community (Munday and Fleming, 2016). Drama educator concerns for presence, embodiment and collective action are fundamental to their practice and the shift to online delivery meant embracing ways of working that challenged key foundations of their work and process.

An assertion made by a number of teachers was that working online reduced their ability to 'read the room' – the spontaneous and instant response and ability to seize a teachable moment, have a quiet word with a student while other keep working together.

Eye to eye teaching where body language communicates in a way that online teaching can't do. Relationships are developed and it is easy to see who is struggling and who is not at a glance. (NZ Tertiary performing arts educator)

It has made me realise that all my teaching in Drama and Dance has been dependent on making meaning with in groups in close proximity. The Drama games I play are often dependent on touch, such as tag games. It is much more difficult for students to learn about how to teach drama and the learn about the art form without constructing the meaning by working in a group in person. (Victorian tertiary teacher)

Furthermore, while some teachers found the use of 'break out' rooms in platforms such as zoom enabled some student collaboration and peer to peer learning, for the main, students were not able to interact and learn from each other so much as they normally would:

During the remote learning period the students weren't able to collaborate with their peers, because they were in their own individual homes. This affected the collaborative nature of the learning in my subjects. Furthermore I was not able to keep them on task as easily, as I couldn't see what they were doing most of time. They could've been doing the activity, OR they could've been eating toast in the kitchen and playing with their dog. (NSW Secondary teacher)

Impact on sense of community

Not only was the loss of the drama classroom community something teachers struggled with, but they also noted that drama and performance work often plays an important feature in school life and experience. Classroom presentations, school assemblies and co-curricular performances are important events in school and education calendars and opportunities for communities to share and come together. These were significantly impacted during COVID times:

It meant family and friends could not come to see performances ... Things like performances and assemblies were radically different. (NT Primary teacher)

Disabled large group special events like school productions and assembly performances which were exciting for the community. (Victorian Primary teacher)

‘Working through’ – Support through professional associations and networks

When examining where teachers found support, knowledge and the means to get through these times, the Voyant tools were used to help analyse questions that specifically asked teachers who and what helped (see [Figure 3](#)). While some of the same key terms identified are similar to those from the whole data set e.g., work, it was important to read the phrases around to ascertain what helped teachers through ([Figure 4](#)).

For the knowledge sources and groups who helped, the most common terms were drama – as in Drama Associations and social media groups, followed by other colleagues, teachers and assistance at the learning site, with mention of IT support. Teacher groups such as Drama Australia, Drama NSW and so forth were often mentioned, and it is to be noted that a number of these associations created online lists of resources, hosted podcasts and professional development sessions and not only maintained but in many cases increased the usual scope of their activities:

Drama Victoria network, ATOM network, various other social media groups on Facebook, Instagram teacher accounts. (Victorian secondary teacher)

I have relied more on my online community of drama teachers and arts practitioners than ever. The generosity of others in sharing resources during this time is astounding! (NSW Secondary teacher)

Accessing the wealth of online content that became available extended beyond the professional teaching networks, with many teachers accessing online content and resources including from theatre companies in Australia and around the world:



Figure 3. Cirrus data presentation for questions about key knowledge sources.



Figure 4. What helps you get through.

Various resources from Theatres in Sydney especially and the UK, and a few in USA. There are many free screenings of plays available for a short time at the moment e.g., NT in London, Carriageworks and ATYP in Sydney. (NSW Secondary teacher)

In terms of 'what' else helped them get through (Figure 4), it is significant to note the presence of 'students' strongly in the data. In particular this relates to positive responses from students, gratitude and energy returned:

Alcohol!!! Oh and the students are all really lovely when they leave the online space . . . all say thanks, that was great etc. I think they are surprised that they are learning!!! (Queensland tertiary educator)

Other examples flag the importance of disengaging from work, going for a walk, heading outdoors, interacting with nature, alcohol and doing something a bit crazy:

Occasionally wearing a dragon onesie. (Victorian secondary teacher)

Transformation/innovation

As discussed earlier in this article dilemmas and contradictions can be the sites for transformation and innovation. In analysing the examples of where teachers identified they had been creative or innovative, there were a number of areas that were most often discussed. These included creating their own video and creative content, and working out ways to conduct practical, collaborative work online, often using organisational software they were generally 'required' to use.

Seeking ways to maintain ways of working 'dramatically', other drama educators have also identified the importance of that when shifting to working in digital spaces, exploring how to use process drama and interactive drama (Cziboly and Bethlenfalvy, 2020;

Gallagher et al., 2020; Tam, 2020), working within dramatic and fictional frames and working imaginatively.

In the data, drama teachers identified that they found ways to improvise, collaborate, create drama and move beyond using the technologies for 'instruction' and delivery. A number mentioned successes with rehearsing and performing in role via zoom or video conferencing, and students creating their own dramatic performances:

My Yr 9s made awesome home videos of monologues. Then they made little videos with puppets. Those that couldn't video made scripts. (NSW secondary teacher)

Teaching drama curriculum online is interesting ... We have tried to do some drama work together and the students have also done a small group improvisation that lasted about ten minutes. We were working in collaborate but they were pretending to be other people interacting on zoom. They did a great job. We recorded it and then assessed them against the criteria they had created!!! (Queensland tertiary educator)

Filming/video drama/group productions edited for film etc. Some very strong performances have come out of sessions on Acting for the Camera. (NSW Secondary teacher)

Particular mention was made about the effective use of breakout rooms for small group activities, these included students rehearsing, and devising work for assessment:

Breakout rooms on Teams for rehearsing. (Victorian secondary teacher)

Breakout rooms work really well. Students created an assessment where they worked creatively to make an app relating to dance that would a different group in the community to come together. (NZ Tertiary educator)

Some teachers identified their work creating screencasts and videos as creative and innovative, with them learning new skills they may continue to use in the future. Others enjoyed working out ways to use the institutional online tools in creative ways to help create dramatic worlds:

I found some new uses for 'Whiteboard', such as creating a visual representation of a village and it became the imaginative space to imagine the setting for a story. I discovered how powerful was a group creation of village by drawing and writing on the 'Whiteboard' on Zoom. (Victorian tertiary educator)

Creativity was also to be found in the overarching design of learning experiences with teachers realising that not all teaching and learning could/should be done online together and working out the worthwhile, creative activities students could complete at home and offline. This work could then be shared later or brought back to the face-to-face classroom:

Creating creative tasks that kids can do at home (Victorian secondary teacher)

Essentially for Drama and Theatre Studies we develop & rehearsed remotely and performed when back at school using live streaming. Year 10 Drama the students used a script that was adapted to be filmed and submitted their performances for editing. The work was edited into a class performance. (Victorian secondary teacher)

The shift in delivery mode and context catalysed novel approaches in performing arts education that drew from digital technologies, largely film, virtual room encounters, differing groupings and home contexts (for props and settings).

Discussion

The changes brought about to teaching during COVID-19 highlighted foundational concerns for drama educators – that their core motive for their teaching is to support their students in drama practice and this remained true. Teachers worked long and hard to adapt their practice and programs, using a suite of different tools, many that were new to them. This shifted the dynamic of mediation tools used in drama teaching to a much greater focus on technology-based tools and content 'delivery'. It also split and diffracted the more typical lesson or learning encounter, increasing the requirement for teachers to use multiple tools, modes, products and exchanges outside the synchronous learning zone.

The shift to using more online tools required enormous energy be devoted to learning how to use the tools, but also teach and coach their students and parents how to use them, creating new content and resources (some in multiple forms), juggling programs and assessment. This shift challenged some of the foundational tenets of drama teaching, people in a room working together physically, featuring extensive peer to peer collaboration, learning and co-creation. Teachers found ways to develop some alternative methods online and through combinations of online and offline activity. Though authors on the intersections of drama, performance, education and technology have long argued that technology should add to the drama classroom, not substitute it entirely (e.g., see Anderson, 2005).

Most positive comments and experiences from teachers about their teaching during COVID-19 pandemic often related to replicating aspects of live classroom through video platforms such as Zoom, Teams and use of break out rooms and designing learning experiences where students could collaborate and create their own work. However, the desire to replicate the human and creative dimensions of the performing arts classroom, as well as meet requirements of schools and systems meant taking on extended roles as resource and content developer, publisher, IT problem solver and more.

For some teachers working through these experiences was a time of great challenge but they felt able to adapt and succeed. However, the *perezhivanie* for others revealed that this was *not* a way they felt they could continue to work or teach. The community of the classroom, the energy, interchange and dynamics is part of what makes drama and performing arts teaching worthwhile, the human dimensions are fundamental.

The human aspect helped many get through this time, and as well as the feedback and energy from their students, for drama educators many found support and assistance from the professional associations and networks – the sharing of resources, podcasts and so forth helped teachers negotiate their way through this time.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted rapid, widescale responses in the education sector with drastic changes to teaching and learning instigated at very short notice. For learning areas such as Drama, where the primary tools of teaching are often the teacher and students as living, breathing presences in the same physical location working together, this presented particular challenges and huge workload increases.

The technological tools became less of a peripheral or complementary set of tools to being primary mediation tools and this presented different layers of complexity and

challenge. Not all teachers could use the tools that might best serve their purposes, and not all students had the devices, the bandwidth, the home environment, the motivation or the capacity to be able to work online or independently. Some teachers found ways to innovate and be creative in their teaching and use of technologies, in particular through using video conferencing tools to facilitate embodied learning, working in role, or through setting creative challenges that students could complete in their own spaces, then record and share.

In considering how teachers processed and ‘came through’ these experiences and their *perezhivanie*, teachers remained committed to their motive of achieving the best possible outcomes for their students. This commitment drove them to work above and beyond contracted hours, working long hours, long days and at night. Many teachers admitted they were struggling, tired and fatigued. It is important to acknowledge that and not suggest that these things just happen and everyone now needs to accept and move on. With such disruptive events continuing to occur, systems do need to learn from these experiences, prepare for contingencies and provide more support for teachers.

What was significant to find in the data was the important roles of collaboration and what support that drama educators were sustained by. In particular the data highlighted the role of peers, colleagues and the drama professional associations – teachers advising and helping each other, generating new solutions and alternatives within their learning communities.

As to possible futures and how best to support teachers and students as such events may continue or recur, the data highlights the importance of listening to teachers and supporting them. Teachers were committed to supporting their students and their learning but that doesn’t mean that should be taken advantage of. While schools and education systems wanted consistency in delivery and tool use, some ‘rules’ that teachers must use certain tools, and generate certain types of content meant huge workload increases for many teachers that were unsustainable. Systems could provide more resourcing and support to professional associations, to shared content creation and professional development. Furthermore, the human aspects of learning, working and creating – the ‘invisible’ dimensions of learning – are to be recognised and valued. The role of educators such as performing arts teachers in creating engaged social learning encounters is important work that is crucial to remote, online and hybrid forms of learning. Importantly, teachers were still able to use drama to investigate what Gallagher et al. (2020) refer to as a pedagogy of personal geographies through the ‘geographical imaginary’ (p. 640) they were able to support transitioning personal intersections of place, time and identity affected by the contemporary chaos of ambiguities and contradictions and provide connectedness for students during uncertain times.

Acknowledgments

The ‘Teaching and Learning during COVID-19 Times’ study team included Louise Phillips (James Cook University, now of Southern Cross University, Australia), Chris Campbell (Griffith University, Australia), Jenny Ritchie (Te Herenga Waka Victoria University, New Zealand), Susan Davis (CQUniversity, Australia), Geraldine Burke (Monash University, Australia), Kate Coleman, (University of Melbourne, Australia), Melissa Cain (Australian Catholic University, Australia), Cynthia Brock (University of Wyoming, USA) and Esther Joosa (Singapore) See <https://omeka.cloud.unimelb.edu.au/teaching-and-learning-in-a-pandemic/>.

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Conflicts of interest

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

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