Art Access and Equity in Teacher Education During a Pandemic

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Abstract

I teach in a multiple subject credential program that requires all preservice teachers to complete a course specifically focused on arts curriculum and instruction. Based on my experiences in other credential programs throughout California, arts curriculum and instruction is often combined with another content area like social studies. My arts course critically examines pedagogy in dance, media arts, music, theater, and visual arts within a 10-week time period. My narrative explores how abruptly moving to remote arts instruction stressed access and equity as essential elements for content coverage. Future practical implications for remote arts instruction include, but are not limited to, classroom management, access to arts supplies, hands-on learning, and sustaining authentic assessment.

Keywords: arts education, access, equity, content coverage

Introduction

As an artist, educator, and researcher, I immerse myself in exploring curriculum and instruction in the arts while being cognizant of the

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privileges I bring to my work as a teacher educator. But a lack of preparedness for the pandemic exposed deeper access and equity issues in my teaching. Although the effects of the pandemic have been extremely challenging, I am grateful for the shift to online instruction which provided space to stretch and explore ways for all teacher credential candidates ("candidates") to be engaged with curriculum and instruction in the arts.

I teach in a rural, public university in California. More specifically, I teach a required curriculum and instruction arts course in a multiple subject (K-8) credential program. In the arts course, candidates critically examine pedagogy in dance, media arts, music, theater, and visual arts. In other teacher credential programs throughout California, a similar course may share curricular space with another content area, like social sciences. I am mindful, therefore, that compared to other teacher credentialing programs, the teacher credentialing program in which I teach is unique. But I remain hopeful, nevertheless, that the stories shared here will help inform other educators navigating the possibilities and promises of teacher education, and particularly as it involves the arts.

Disquisition

One aspect that motivates candidates to create meaningful arts education experiences for their students is the growing evidence that the arts increase student engagement (Bowen & Kisida, 2019; Catterall et al., 2012). Whether the candidate leads an arts-integrated (two or more content areas taught at the same time), arts-enhanced (arts assist in teaching a separate content area), or arts-for-arts'-sake lesson (learn specifically about a concept in the arts), research indicates that arts engage students (Bowen & Kisida, 2019; Catterall et al., 2012). I lean on the idea that the arts increase student engagement across the curriculum quite heavily in my arts course. I recognize, additionally, that candidates come to the classroom with a variety of comfort and experience levels in the arts and are expected to know how to design and implement arts instruction in their future classrooms, I pack each class session with hands-on lesson exemplars and discussion.

Prior to the pandemic, the arts course was generally taught in a face-to-face, physical classroom space. Each class session was intentionally focused on specific domains of the arts to ensure as much content as possible was covered before turning the page to the next domain. Given in-class time constraints, candidates generally yearned for additional opportunities to learn in each domain. The use of online discussion boards supported further conversation and reflection about content covered in

the face-to-face class sessions. Curricular space dictated face-to-face and online content coverage, until the pandemic required a reimaging of the course into a fully remote learning environment.

When Covid-19 unexpectedly stormed into the semester during the last week of the first section and right before the six-session section of my course was scheduled to start, the university provided only two preparatory days to move all face-to-face courses (which included the arts course) to remote/online teaching and learning. After acknowledging my own anxieties and those of my candidates, I began the process of thinking about how I would end my first section of the arts course and teach the second section of the arts course remotely. Prior to this abrupt shift I had taught one course completely online. This made my shift to remote instruction somewhat less jarring than for my colleagues who had no experience teaching online, but with less than a week to prepare, Covid-19 challenged me to figure out how to teach dance, media arts, music, theater, and visual arts remotely. I took the opportunity as a learning experience to move beyond merely a form of *show* and *tell* about curriculum and instruction in the arts, to involve candidates in the arts.

A professional trait that was an advantage in the abrupt shift to remote instruction is that I am a self-described planner. Before the semester even begins, I have a roadmap to help ensure curricular alignment to program and accreditation goals and objectives. This roadmap also permits me to prepare lesson plans and lecture material well in advance of the class session date and allows for flexibility in my teaching. If meaningful class discussions require additional curricular space, then I can adjust my plan to ensure content coverage. My planning, however, only took me so far when the impact of Covid-19 was fully realized. Immediately, I thought: How will I *involve* candidates in dance and theater remotely? How will I *involve* candidates in small group discussions and presentations? How will I *involve* candidates in the arts? I returned regularly to my favorite quote: "Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I will understand." I could not only tell and show arts instruction. I needed candidates to be *involved* so they would understand.

Up until Covid-19, the arts course succeeded on content coverage (Barr, 1987; Zhang, 2020). My planned roadmap assured curricular alignment with program and accreditation goals and objectives in ways that established opportunities to learn. What happens then, when candidates are suddenly required to complete a course remotely and they need specific technology and skills to access the content? How can candidates be *involved* in the arts course remotely? Remote arts instruction may seem like a reasonable instructional opportunity for a public

university located in a rural community, as it allows the university to cast a wider net in reaching candidates further from the campus. But when the pandemic entered our rural communities, I was concerned about candidates having access to a reliable Internet connection. Some rural communities may have only one option, if that, for an Internet provider. Yet, even with this awareness, I did not consider access and equity related to web camera use. Indeed, I was focused on the opposite issu—seeing everyone. Teaching dance depended upon my seeing candidates perform certain moves. For visual arts instruction, I needed to view candidates' work to involve them in collaborative conversations. Indeed, my understanding of art was about seeing the involvement.

Yet, within a few days of the shift to remote instruction, I found myself—for the first time in my life—teaching arts remotely. Before the course started, I received notice that a candidate had children at home and felt the need to apologize for distractions at home. Another candidate notified me that they were uncertain about the required technology access for the course. I rapidly discovered that some candidates struggled with unreliable Internet connections for audio and image and, therefore, attempted to join class through multiple devices, with their video feed often wobbly or failing. Other candidates said they needed to have their web camera off to attend to other family responsibilities while taking the course. For example, one candidate's child frequently wanted attention once the candidate was in class. I realized candidates might be balancing the needs to complete student teaching hours, attend credential courses, and, in some instances, homeschool children in the middle of a pandemic. The issues and questions facing all of us multiplied. Could the course be completed from a smartphone or would it require a desktop or laptop? Was it necessary for candidates to be seen via a web camera? What if candidates cannot find a quiet place to attend class remotely? Most importantly, what did this all mean and how would I involve my candidates in arts teaching and learning? These concerns and the many others led me to reconsider an important question: To what extent does access and equity drive content coverage, particularly in arts education?

Dispatch

As I sit with the possibility and promise for what I can do in teacher education and how I might do it, I realize my thoughts are entry points that welcome further elaboration. In the change from face-to-face to remote arts instruction, I maintained my goals and objectives, but how the goals and objectives might be achieved differed. For example, the

final project of the face-to-face course requires candidates to teach an arts lesson of their creation while practicing classroom management and student engagement techniques. Without the physical classroom space or access to school art supplies, student engagement, discussions, and art supply management and distribution were not implemented the same way they would be in a face-to-face learning environment.

Moreover, classroom management and student engagement do not necessarily present themselves in the same way in remote arts instruction. In face-to-face learning environments, mute buttons, waiting rooms, and breakout rooms are not options. The rules and procedures, therefore, of the remote learning environment are actualized differently than in a face-to-face learning environment. Carter et al. (2020), for example, described how self-regulation in remote learning environments requires students to organize their physical learning environment and to monitor feedback from a remote teacher. In contrast, in face-to-face learning environments, the teacher serves more as a co-regulator to reinforce organization and provide real-time feedback. The sudden change to remote arts instruction meant learning new strategies for managing and facilitating opportunities to learn. It also emphasized previous research concerning the impact of students' socioeconomic status (SES) on opportunities to learn (Schmidt et al., 2011) and particularly in the arts (Neddeau, 2013).

One scenario that poses future practical implications for remote visual arts instruction was highlighted in my arts lesson on sculpting. In my face-to-face courses, I have candidates use their bodies to "sculpt" images (akin to tableau). I generally demonstrate sculpting in an arts integrated history lesson focused on the Terracotta Warriors, built by Qin Shihuang (c. 221-206 B.C.E.) to protect his tomb. The story and details of the warriors serve as excellent examples of sculpting, the history of what became known as the Qin Dynasty, and potential cultural funerary beliefs. One way I planned to manage the shift to teach sculpting remotely was to have candidates sculpt using aluminum foil, assuming aluminum foil was an item generally available in households. As I started my remote sculpting lesson, a candidate asked me what they were supposed to do if they did not have access to aluminum foil. Requesting that the candidate just observe the lesson was not only a lackluster response, but the antithesis of my firm belief that involvement leads to understanding concepts. Disheartened from my inattention to potential access issues, I asked colleagues to share what they would recommend for the future. They suggested creating a supply list to share with the candidates prior to the course, shipping any necessary supplies to each candidate in advance, and considering other items that might

be used for sculpting (e.g., a wet paper towel, wax). Building in options for sculpting supplies seems like a reasonable and equitable approach that could increase access and involvement.

Dance instruction, in general, provides other scenarios that pose future practical implications for remote arts instruction. In the face-to-face course, candidates physically engage in dance lessons with their peers and co-construct dance routines. Shape, space, and time are rehearsed and dissected through hands-on dance lessons that intentionally foster exploring these concepts in dance. In remote dance instruction, however, shape, space, and time are realized differently. A candidate, for instance, could create a solo dance routine that explores shape, space, and time remotely, but this does not address the collaborative skills underscored in the face-to-face course, where negative and positive space look and feel differently with peers than they do in a solo piece. To capture these important aspects of the face-to-face course in remote instruction, therefore, I provided candidates with two separate tasks. First, candidates reviewed a list of dance activities in small virtual groups and were asked to think of ways to create a measurable learning objective from these ideas. This served as an entry point for discussions about dance, but it did not require candidates to dance. Next, I used Humboldt County Office of Education and North Coast Dance's (2020) handout on movement problems to engage candidates in think-pair-shares to create a movement problem and solution. For example, a movement problem might ask: How might we move from one location to a new one? The solution might be to hop from location to location, or to glide, or slither. Using their web cameras, the two-part lesson design fostered candidates' engagement in remote dance instruction in which options for task completion invited creativity and emphasized shape, space, and time in a remote learning environment. Providing choice within a framework of digital support materials further involved candidates in the application of pedagogical approaches to dance instruction.

Moving forward, I think candidate work can be captured in recorded video blogs (vlogs) asynchronously and shared in synchronous course meetings. Creating asynchronous vlogs with some scaffolded instruction would allow candidates to create and share their artistic works in synchronous spaces and increase the amount of time available for processing and completing tasks—whether in the visual or performing arts. Including vlogs would also decrease the amount of bandwidth candidates would need for discussion in the synchronous class sessions. Such assignment design would align with media arts course objectives because candidates apply technology skills to enhance their learning through an authentic assessment. Furthermore, vlogs would give candidates an

outlet to share and reflect on the artistic process without focusing solely on the results.

In the past few months, I have learned the importance of providing my candidates and myself some measure of grace. Teaching during a pandemic revealed how access and equity concerns affected candidates' level of involvement during remote arts instruction. I continue to put my best foot forward when planning remote instruction by engaging in virtual professional development and building on research that I find. As I move forward with remote arts instruction, I now know that ensuring candidates have access and that my course is taught with equity in mind is what drives content coverage—not relying on face-to-face pedagogical approaches in the arts. Instead of over planning, I can draw inspiration from artists like Andy Goldsworthy (The Crichton Foundation, n.d.) who uses natural materials to create works of art. Incorporating natural materials into lessons that are designed with candidates' access to resources in mind creates a more equitable remote arts learning experience, one in which opportunities to learn can be more fully realized.

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