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A/Live: Synchronicity and Liveness in Art and Online Teaching

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It should go without saying that this paper is set against the backdrop of challenges brought about specifically by the Covid-19 pandemic and teaching higher education remotely over the last 18 months. However, as we emerge from the devastation Covid-19 has wrought upon the economy and higher education in particular, rather than relaxing, I believe it is more important than ever to keep our eye firmly trained on what best practice looks like with regards to face-to-face, synchronous classroom teaching in the creative arts. As universities scramble to consider new economic models, we are entering into a deeply unstable transition between 'what we did to survive during Covid', and the 'new normal'. During this period, changes that were rolled out during a global emergency, are becoming a fait accompli. Unfortunately, these decisions are occurring *before* we have had a chance to find out what post-Covid *recovery* looks like for our sector, with universities already rolling out sweeping reforms to the way higher education operates and is delivered.

Therefore, it is important to have thought carefully about what it is *specifically* that we value about concepts such as 'liveness' and 'synchronicity', concepts that we may have previously taken for granted with regards to teaching. These concepts are important to consider, not because these qualities should be *automatically* considered best practice in all educational contexts but because they link to very particular aspects of delivering creative arts education that I believe we need to safeguard.

During the pandemic, there was much talk of the 'flipped classroom'. This model refers to a shift in the way lecturers spend time with students both in the classroom and in the lecture theatre—away from delivering content or 'imparting knowledge' during synchronous class-time (face to face)—to a model whereby students are provided with this material asynchronously and use time in the classroom to discuss the material or any outcomes they have produced. This coincides with a move towards the content of lectures being delivered in 'bite-sized pieces.'

In an article published in the *Times Higher Education* on the 7th of January 2021, Trish McCluskey, Associate Provost of learning and teaching at Victoria University (VU), said, "…there is no place for lectures in VU's 'block teaching' model." While McCluskey noted that, "…some lecturers were strong storytellers", the format was too long. Presentations of 15 to 20 minutes, the typical duration of a TED Talk, were superior because "…that's the amount of time that students are known to be able to concentrate for" (Ross and Mckie 2021).

Of course, VU is not alone. In fact, many if not most institutions are considering permanent changes to the value they place on face to face 'lecture' time. As Ellie Bothwell wrote in February 2021,

> Perth's Curtin University proposes to scrap all lectures by the end of this year… They will be replaced by "CurtinTalks" – short videos of 10 to 15 minutes, each based on a single topic or concept, with students expected to watch two or three a week for each subject. …Murdoch University… are… giving teaching staff 18 months to "transition away" from lectures. …Instead, information previously delivered through lectures will be curated, squeezed into "mini lectures" and integrated with online activities.

Citing similar moves occurring at the University of California Berkley, Professor Lurillard from University College London's Institute of Education has warned, "As Berkeley is an admired institution, its decision will be ammunition for those people within any university discussion going on at the moment" about the future of teaching and learning. "They will say, 'Berkeley is doing it. It's time we rethought as well,'" she said." (Bothwell, 2021).

In other words, once this model is established, a new set of targets will emerge. These targets are motivated not only by education but also economic concerns. And herein lies the problem. If it is possible to deliver asynchronous bite-sized 'lectures' without need for physical lecture theatres, how long will we (the creative arts) be able to argue for the (economic) value of in-person studio time? Throwing away the large lecture theatre model, which research has shown may not be best practice either, will place even more emphasis on visual arts and studio-based curricula, which on paper, start to look *very* expensive to run. Further, shouldn't the fact that our students can't concentrate for long periods of time be part of what an education seeks to address?

I need to stop for a moment to clarify my position. I understand that more broadly, these changes to the method and mode of delivery are due to some very convincing trends and facts, regarding the way students 'consume' education. Even before the pandemic, students were not necessarily showing up to 'live' lectures. I recall, pre-pandemic, discussing this with a friend who teaches mathematics to enviably large cohorts. He regularly orated lectures and annotated the old-fashioned blackboard, to near empty lecture theatres. Changes to modes of delivery and student engagement were already well underway, actively facilitated by lecture-capture and online Learning Management Systems.

However, sweeping reforms to the lecture-theatre mode of delivery cited above, risk standardising the way we teach, and establishing an economic model that will not suit a) all subject areas, or b) all students. Further, it will set up an economic model that will increasingly draw attention to those who don't or can't deliver such lean packages, and, in so doing, we (in the creative arts) will inevitably be asked to rationalise our pedagogical approach.

In a world now filled with online content, recorded Zoom sessions and skill-sharing educational platforms with hours of content, it is important to revisit and consider the role 'liveness' and 'synchronicity' play— in our perception, our sense of connectedness to the world, and to what we value.

Within the visual and more broadly creative arts, provoking a sense that 'something is happening' is often accompanied by the term 'activation'. Performers are recruited to 'activate' and even 'oxygenate' galleries and museums. Installation artists and sculptors frequently speak of activation regarding what seems to be a pesky and pervasive state of stasis. However, these concepts, to activate, agitate and animate, simply reveal the all-too-common mental habit, a kind of ongoing slipstream that continues to divorce processes from end products. These mental habits apply to all spheres of human perception. Meat from the supermarket is as easily divorced from the slaughterhouse as clothes are from the factories they were made in and rubbish popped neatly into our curbside bins from the teeming piles of rubbish accumulating in landfill. These mental slipstreams or abstractions in our thinking impact not only on our perception of processes in the world, they also play out in audiences' experience of creative arts. It is difficult for audiences, with the self-same concentration spans, to see art as process-based or dynamic. Therefore, unpacking

this for our students to help them learn the active and time-consuming nature of research and the duration and endurance of *practicing*, is an essential part of what a creative arts education should impart.

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In the early 2000's I used to turn on public TV Channel 31 at random times. Every now and then I would encounter a strange livestream; a cropped image of someone's darkened studio desk and part of a tropical fish tank. The shot wasn't framed to catch any action. In fact, there was no visible change, other than a fish that would occasionally dart past. However, because I knew it was live, there was an energy, a presence. I was mesmerised and would keep it on for hours, even though 'nothing was happening'.

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I regularly turn on the radio, to listen live. I distinguish my desire for live radio from my desire to listen to podcasts. I don't always want to choose the 'delivery of information in bite-sized packets'. I want to open myself to chance, to listen to something I *don't* know I'm interested in.

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I have started using live-radio in my performances-installations, turning it on and off as I move sculptural elements around within the work. I use ABC News Radio, to shift my mind and attention outward and be reminded: of global weather, international politics, and the traffic building up on the West Gate Freeway. Other people. Other problems. Other lives. By switching it on and off at intervals, I remain mindful of the world outside the gallery, and offer this broader context to my work. I invite new relations between myself and others and allow myself to be influenced and affected. I am not a singular artist working in a hermetically sealed gallery. Outside the interiority of the gallery world, *other things* are happening.

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I once accidentally sat behind a row of parked cars, waiting impatiently to turn left into a busy intersection. Several cycles of the traffic lights passed before I realised, I wasn't 'waiting', I had STOPPED. The shift in sensation from one state of mind (waiting) to the other (stopped) was a fully embodied transition, a reorientation of my understanding of what was going on in the world. These sensations felt physically, palpably different, yet externally they were the same. In one I was *awaiting* change, chance, luck. In the other, I had stopped. Nothing would happen to me. I was stuck.

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It can be argued the perception that 'nothing is happening' is a particularly Western frame of mind. For example, Indigenous Australians understand reciprocity between

self and Country to be foundational, ongoing, pulsing and alive. Bundjalung-Murrawari-Kamilaroi artist Dr Brian Martin has written extensively about the problematic way that Western ontologies result in 'representationalist thinking', particularly the way that Western ontologies separate out *culture* from *everyday life*. If culture and everyday life are separated, then art can only hope to *represent* rather than present, or be in reciprocal and dynamic exchange with, life. Martin describes how this fundamental Western ontological position is antithetical to an Indigenous world view. Martin says,

> In Indigenous terms, one "belongs to country", not the reverse and there is a reciprocal relationship between people and "country". This also reveals a way of thinking in terms of a dynamic ontology that exists within Indigenous cultural ideology where this reciprocity is grounded in country (2017, 185).

Within an arts context, the concept of reciprocity, a/liveness and indigenous knowledge applies. As Martin states:

> The relatedness that we have to the world around us also can be seen as the inseparable relationality that we have to making cultural things. A pragmatic example we can use to demonstrate the separation is the use of the term 'art'. In the multiple Aboriginal languages in Australia, we do not find the word 'art'. Art is a Western term and could be argued as something stationary of static and has, at many times throughout history, separated itself from the social and real world. The use of the word 'Yuka' in Wergaia language means 'to paint' which is a demonstration of the action of doing. 'Yuka' has agency and has relationality to the maker, the viewer and to knowing (2017, 185).

With much talk circulating amongst universities about the importance of decolonising the curriculum, one must wonder at what point these new flipped methods of delivery will be evaluated for their various biases. Have we stopped to consider and evaluate the broader implications of separating out human interaction from the *delivery* of information? The flipped classroom model pre-supposes that students access the material *before* a live, synchronous class and arrive prepared for interactive, discursive learning experiences (Sosa 2021, 2). Research undertaken during the pandemic shows that this mode of delivery might indeed, be appropriate for certain kinds of knowledge acquisition – for example, so called 'hard-skills' linked to technical competence associated with working with equipment, data, software,

numbers, equations, graphs, etc. may benefit from these kinds of flipped classroom innovations (Joia 2021, 3). Yet the same body of research has found that learning 'soft skills' …those that "deal with intrapersonal skills, such as one's ability to manage oneself, as well as interpersonal skills such as how one handles one's interactions with others," (2021, 4) unsurprisingly, may not.

Furthermore, "these active pedagogies are not always welcomed by students, who point out their lack of inclination for active learning and performing tasks outside of the classroom, admitting that they are not used to taking control of their own learning" (Sosa 2021). To 'flip the model', it seems to me, asks our students to arrive at a lecture or class fully equipped to be model university citizens with more discipline than held by many professionals. In fact, at the same time universities were proposing students practiced or studied alone throughout the pandemic, I was gratefully attending 'shut up and write' sessions with academics from across the university, coming together on Zoom to sit together in silence as we got on with our work. The shut up and write model was in fact initiated in order to create accountability and habit formation along with social motivation and support that one would assume you could get at university. In these sessions, we do not know each other, nor do we discuss our work or engage in lively active discussions. We just sit, together, practicing in silence.

Over the last 18 months of flipped classrooms and studying online, students have reported "negative emotions, as they felt confused, insecure or disoriented acquiring self-regulation skills" (Sosa 2021, 2). And to be honest, I can understand this. It *is* terrifying, to turn up not knowing what anyone else has been up to, to show work created alone at home. It is in the classroom, looking over the shoulders of others, being inspired and practicing together, that we develop the discipline, and the courage to hang in there. By taking away the **time** spent together learning and sharing knowledge, there are assumptions being made about the students' capacity to conduct this kind of self-directed learning. Furthermore, these decisions may have serious cultural implications – I have already witnessed a myriad of social and emotional impacts experienced by creative arts students undertaking online learning, with no shared studio practice or human contact provided by a face-to-face learning environment.

I tried many different methods of teaching online over the last 18 months, including giving students the option to 'flip'. However, as excruciating as 3-hour synchronous

Zoom sessions could be – screens full of blank Zoom-tiles indicating switched off cameras, along with the stilted conversations and prolonged silence – synchronous live sessions proved incredibly important to students. Many reported back to me that these sessions, practicing together, live and imperfect, were nevertheless the highlight of their week. These classes represented a period of time, a duration, put aside for practicing, together. Like any habit or discipline, setting time aside, tuning in and being in an environment with others doing the same, is what facilitates learning. In the creative arts, we need to model duration. We need to model not-knowing.

These concepts are not new, and it has long been noted that the process of learning and risk taking required for genuine growth in creative practices can be at odds with traditional teaching and assessment processes. As Dina Belluigi from Rhodes University South Africa noted,

> It is questionable whether play and risk can be supported in fine art studio practice curricula where the artwork rather than the learning process remains the primary criterion of success (Davies, 1997). A number of studies have revealed what many have long suspected: students often experience the summative assessment as traumatic and in some cases detrimental to their learning… Assessment can decrease creativity if it creates experiences of alienation, such as if the timing is insensitive (Dineen et al., 2005), the primary goal is an externally-imposed grade or mark (Amabile, 1996), feedback is perceived as irrelevant (Blair, 2007) or assessment too harsh (Mann, 2001), promoting surface or strategic approaches, compliance or reproduction rather than questioning or production (Belluigi, 2013, 19).

It doesn't matter that our government wants job-ready graduates. Our students want to genuinely learn the creative processes that take real time to acquire. They want to get better at being creative artists, and there is no short-cut to this process. Duration, duration, duration!

What is interesting about the value of being together online, is that it can be in silence with our cameras off. While teaching drawing online in 2020 and 2021, I had students look at footage from a series of live webcams. We sat in silence, all looking through the same portal, sharing a moment, separate yet together. Importantly, we also shared risk. Inevitably, the webcams I curated for students to work from in the drawing class would have missing animals, empty nests and internet streaming

issues. However, it was exactly this unpredictability, and the way we recovered together (drawing empty nests, and aquariums with no fish, along with various other creative solutions), that the practice and learning occurred.

Figure 1: The Otter Den at the Melbourne Zoo: Webcam screenshot.

Figure 2: Zebra Cam, Melbourne Zoo, Webcam Screenshot.

We live in an era in which humans love to frame, silo, section, and divide. This is both deeply entrenched, culturally loaded, and even physiologically programmed

(Whitehead, Gallagher, Ingold). This phenomenon plays out most critically in educational institutions, where we separate, specialise and stream disciplines, isolating one from the other, and then begin to expect that they are all delivered in the same way. By asking students to come to class ready to present *finished* work, we once again prioritise final products over active, relational processes, and lose our hard fought emphasis in creative arts research on the importance and benefit of remaining in more liminal states – learning and finding new ways of being and knowing through embodied practice. These concepts are not new in the delivery of creative arts pedagogies. It has been a long time since we have emphasised the product over the process in the delivery of curricula (Belluigi 2013) and summative methods of assessment where students are assessed either "…solely or mostly on the artefact displayed" have shown to be "counter-productive in terms of creativity" (Belluigi 2013, 27). Yet once again, if we are not careful in the slippery days of economic reform post Covid, we may find ourselves needing to fight for what is actually the core business of creative practice.

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