

Arts Education Academics' Perceptions of eLearning & Teaching in Australian Early Childhood and Primary ITE Degrees

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Abstract. This article presents the findings of an investigation of eLearning & teaching in Arts education in Australian Initial Teacher Education (ITE) degrees. This project used survey and interviews to collect data from academics in 16 universities in 5 Australian states regarding their experiences of eLearning and Arts education. A rigorous and comprehensive thematic, inductive approach to the analysis of data revealed four main themes: congruence and incongruence of eLearning in Arts education with academic identity, dissonance between eLearning and the nature of Arts education, negatively perceived reasons for teaching Arts education in an eLearning mode, and some expressions of positive experiences in this space. These themes revealed a divided, unsettled and challenging space with pockets of acceptance, but characterised by epistemological and pedagogical questions, doubts and uneasiness.

Introduction

The genesis of this research was in our own experiences of designing, implementing and evaluating units in Arts education in primary and early childhood Initial Teacher Education (ITE) degrees over a period of eleven years, and in the questions these raise for our practice. Primary and early childhood degrees were selected for this research as these degrees occupied the bulk of our learning and teaching practices and because they involved very large student cohorts. Following on from a number of scholarship of teaching projects largely centred on ITE student perceptions of fully online eLearning in an Arts education unit (Baker, 2011a, 2011b, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2013; Baker & Pittaway, 2012), in this project we focused on academics working within the same environment.

Even within our small research team there were different experiences of the application of eLearning to Arts education, ranging from early if somewhat uneasy adoption to more troubled acceptance, and all members had, and still have, questions regarding the ontological and pedagogical implications of teaching Arts education in an online mode. We questioned the applicability of the mode to all five Arts domains, wondering if the differences in experience were due to the uniqueness of each domain and the associated teacher identities; we questioned if some Arts domains were inappropriate for this mode; what role does the unique nature of each domain and deeply held teacher beliefs about them have in the different degrees of acceptance of this mode of learning; and how did other academics experience this contested space?

To characterise the wider academic environment in which ITE Arts education is situated we present a robust examination of literature surrounding the forces that are significantly changing the nature of higher education, the adoption of eLearning, and the array of pressures on academic work and identity. Our qualitative research, using survey and individual interviews and analysed through a thematic, inductive process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) fills an important gap in the understanding of the academic discourse around eLearning in Arts education in ITE degrees. The Australian Curriculum includes five Arts areas under the umbrella of The Arts: Dance, Drama, Media Arts, Music and Visual Arts (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2016), and we investigated the perceptions of academics, from 16 Australian universities across 5 states, who teach in these curriculum areas in ITE degrees. Specifically, we sought to explore their experiences of, and beliefs about, teaching Arts education in an eLearning mode. Data collected through this project are considerable, and in this article we report the scope of the data and our associated findings seeking to map the terrain of this space.

Literature

Over recent decades academia has undergone significant shifts in response to the rapidly changing environments in which universities operate (By, Diefenbach & Klarner, 2008; Wells, 2005; Winter, 2009). Shifts from collegial, autonomous, and discipline based cultures to those characterised by corporatised priorities, competition and changing student demographics have challenged traditional notions of academia and academic identity (Nixon, 1996; Winter, 2009). Simultaneously eLearning has required shifts in the ways academics work, teach and communicate (Wells, 2005), again challenging traditional and historical notions of identity. We maintain that this multitude of pressures on higher education have impacted upon the nature of academic work in general, and we argue that the same is true of Arts education in early childhood and primary ITE degrees and eLearning and teaching.

The globalisation of the world economy, economic rationalist funding models, and the development of an international higher education 'market place' have resulted in an expansion of the higher education sector and in fundamental shifts in the work of universities and academics (Guri-Rosenblit, Sebkova, & Teichler, 2007; Hanson, 2009; Sadler, 2011; White 2007; Winter, 2009). In the UK, Harris (2005) writes "The massification and internationalization of higher education has transformed the university...to a consumer driven system...the student has come to be viewed as a consumer" (p. 424). As universities have responded to globalisation and mass markets, the language surrounding universities has changed from one of education and learners to products and customers (Harris, 2005; White, 2007; Winter, 2009). By, Diefenbach and Klarner (2008) present a particularly bleak picture of the negative impact of managerialism on universities in Europe stating that it has "created an environment that encourages opportunistic behaviour such as cronyism, rent-seeking and the rise of organizational psychopaths" (p. 21).

The Australian higher education sector has likewise undergone transformation in recent decades, and the language of the corporate university is true also for Australia (Churchman, 2006; White, 2007; Winter, 2009). Since the changes in capacity and funding quantum of the Dawkins white paper of 1988 (Australian Government, 2015), the higher education sector in Australia has expanded massively (Coates, Dobson, Edwards, Friedman, Goedegebuure, & Meek, 2009; White, 2007). The *Our Universities: Backing Australia's future* (Nelson, 2003) policy document was premised on the impacts of internationalisation, globalisation, and technological developments and states that universities "need to be run in a

business-like fashion” (p.15). Government reform not only increased access to universities but also changed the profile of students, altering the nature of learning and teaching in the academy (Wells, 2005). In an ethnographic study of the integration of corporate activities into academic work in one Australian University, Churchman (2006) refers to the extent to which corporate approaches and practices had been adopted as the “permeation of managerialism into the operation of universities” (p. 5). The number of students entering universities had increased whilst funding had reduced (Coates et al., 2007), and more recently the Bradley review (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) proposed to further expand access to tertiary education, particularly for those from low SES backgrounds.

Changes in higher education have had an inevitable impact on academic identity (Billot, 2010; Sutton, 2015; White, Roberts, Rees & Read, 2014) with Winter (2009) writing that “the perceived need to align all academics around corporate values and goals has given rise to academic identity schisms in higher education” (p. 121). Billot (2010) connects context and identity, stating that “It is axiomatic that as the sector and context alters, then so must the individual’s identity” (p. 712). In describing a schism caused by managerialism Winter (2009) refers to it as resulting from the congruence or incongruence of personal and corporate values or the extent to which the values of the personal and the organisational align. For Winter (2009) the values of the ‘managerial’ and of the ‘academic’ place conflicting and competing demands on the work and identity of the academic, identifying two different sub groups of the academy “academic managers” and “managed academics” (p. 121), one with organisationally congruent values and the other essentially disengaged from that dominant narrative. Reflecting the values congruence/incongruence stance of Winter (2009), McNaughton and Billot (2016) refer to changes in context impacting on academic “identity, role, and affiliation ambiguity” (p. 2). Tang is more emotive (2011), maintaining that the shift to neo-liberal models of education has changed the heart of what it means to be a teacher, describing this as a “struggle over the teacher’s soul” (p. 365). Academic identity then, is clearly and powerfully impacted by global changes.

Contemporaneous with the corporatisation and expansion of the sector has been the development of advanced communications technologies enabling quality asynchronous and timely synchronous communications within ubiquitous learning management systems (Bigum & Rowan, 2004; Wells, 2005; White, 2007). These technologies have forced a shift from the limitations of the traditional model of distance education framed by teacher-student communications and the universal postal system, towards both synchronous and asynchronous teacher-student and student-student communications made possible by modern information and communication technologies (Baker, 2013).

White (2007) maintains that there is a ‘confluence’ of pressures on universities that aligns with the evolution of eLearning providing the opportunity to “give it a meaning different from those it may have had previously” (p. 598). This resonates with other authors who intentionally or otherwise note that some universities conflate eLearning with increasing market share (Blake, 2009; Blin & Munro, 2008; Wells, 2005). In the UK, Hanson (2009) argues that “academic identity, with its long association with the concepts of collegiality and autonomy, is in crisis” (p. 554). Hanson (2009) investigated the implementation of eLearning in a UK university using focus groups with a small sample of nine academics in one location, and found that there was potential for eLearning to “prompt loss of teacher presence and displacement as knowledge expert...to undermine the ontological security of their academic identity” (p. 553). Not only did Hanson identify ontological impacts but also found that subjects expressed the belief that eLearning was designed to supplement and not replace face to face learning (p. 558).

In an article entitled 'E-learning: You don't always get what you hope for', Kirkwood (2009) reviews a number of UK studies highlighting the importance of the relationship between institutional priorities, decisions around the adoption of eLearning, and the impact of academic agency on success. Kirkwood (2009) argues that in the university of today academics rarely have autonomy, and that their teaching and learning practices tend to reflect the objectives and priorities of the institution in which they occur. He also argues that the process of adoption is often undertaken hierarchically in a "top down" manner, and that this results in a reduction of academic agency that has the potential to create "dissonance between teachers' beliefs and practices" (p. 114). Similarly, Harris (2005) argues that in higher education now academic identity is actually being formed through reference to corporate and economic imperatives; rather than to individual academic beliefs. Thus we question if this has been the case in Arts education in early childhood and primary ITE degrees in Australian universities, and what the evidence is regarding belief congruence and incongruence with non-pedagogic imperatives in this sample.

For Arts education in early childhood and primary ITE degrees a potentially emancipating approach to the incongruences between neoliberalism and academic identities, drawn more from the notions of academic freedom, collegiality and social justice, is that proposed by Sutton (2015). Sutton (2015) traces a schizophrenic duality of identity born of competing and conflicting demands, and conjures a "pedagogy of critical hope" (p. 43) which counters this dominant narrative. Sutton writes that "It is then in face-to-face encounters with students that a pedagogy of critical hope is enacted" (p. 44). However, our question must be *What if the face-to-face encounter does not exist, what then?* Furthermore, what is the 'what then?' for arts education teachers – in a field that has long been characterised by a centrality of experiential and face-to-face encounter?

Methodology

We approached participants in August 2014 following ethical clearances, developing a list of all Australian universities and from that a contact list of potential schools. Some universities were excluded at this stage because they did not have Schools of Education or because they did not offer primary or early childhood ITE programs. Via email, Heads of 35 Schools of Education were asked to pass the survey information on to the most appropriate person to complete. The email contained study information and a link to SurveyMonkey where informed consent was obtained and the survey located. Seventeen survey responses were received. The survey remained open for six weeks, and included a screen asking respondents to participate in the (later) interview stage. The survey was trialled with the researchers' colleagues prior to being opened. The survey collected demographic data pertaining to age, years teaching, location, and program data relating to the number of Arts education units offered in respondent institutions. Data were collected about the modes of delivery of Arts education programs, fully face to face, blended or fully online. Participants were then asked to respond to a number of teacher belief statements via a five point Likert scale. These statements related to their beliefs about Arts education and how students learn in Arts education, and finally respondents were asked if they thought that eLearning was a suitable mode of delivery for Arts education. Fourteen questions were asked in all, with five of these also including opportunities for respondents to provide additional written data.

Eight positive responses for interview were received, resulting in seven completed interviews. Interviews with participants in four states were conducted by telephone between December 2014 and March 2015. One interview subject spoke specifically about the secondary ITE degree context and thus her data has not been included in this project,

resulting in a total of six interviews that were included. Both survey and interview data were transcribed and then analysed using inductive, thematic techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this presentation of findings we refer to interviewees by pseudonym and survey respondents by numeral.

Braun and Clarke (2006) write that “thematic analysis involves the searching across a data set - be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts - to find repeated patterns of meaning” (p. 86). Thematic analysis differs from other forms of content analysis such as grounded theory in that the analysis does not seek to conflate meaning to broader theory; rather, the analysis of data is driven by those data. As Braun and Clarke (2006) write “Analysis involves a constant moving back and forward between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data that you are analysing, and the analysis of the data that you are producing” (p. 86).

It is important to state that the researchers came to the data with mixed experiences of eLearning and with some biases. One member of the team played an academic developer role, being engaged in the design and evaluation of Arts education units, and with a focus on the scholarship of teaching and learning. Another member of the team, a Music and Visual Arts educator and an early adopter, had initially been resistant to teaching the Arts in a fully online mode but had become more at ease with it over time although still having reservations, particularly surrounding the experiential nature of Arts learning. The third member of the research team, a Drama educator, although working in the space, still had significant reservations about this mode of learning and in particular its applicability to Drama education. All members of the team are qualitative researchers with different areas of methodological expertise. To address the potential of these biases to precipitate early generation of themes arising from data we engaged in a rigorous and inductive process of analysis.

Phase one consisted of first readings of the data corpus (both data sets: survey and interview) and initial reflection on potential codes. During this phase the survey data set was downloaded and placed into an Excel spreadsheet, resulting in seven sheets with varied qualitative and quantitative data from across the data corpus. The transcribed interview data set was placed into a single Word document and a separate Word document was used to note potential codes with around 140 notations made about potential codes in this document. Colour coding of data extracts was also a feature of this stage wherein extracts in transcripts and Excel cells were coloured to note potential interest for phase two. Phase two consisted of re-reading the data corpus to search for meanings, patterns and areas of interest, focussing on the smallest, meaningful extracts and collating these extracts according to the initial codes produced from these data. To complete this phase it was necessary to allocate each participant a pseudonym or code, and to co-locate the data corpus in one Word document. This resulted in 88 broadly coded data extracts. Phase three consisted of surveying these codes and all of the coded data extracts, seeking to isolate connections and relationships that suggested potential themes.

Phase four included the evolution of “candidate themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91) in which the 88 codes were re-examined with respect of potential thematic alignments. This phase of the reading and analysis tended to focus equally on the semantic and the latent meanings of data extracts and the candidate themes that emerged from this stage numbered 25. Phase five took place using the ‘search’ feature of Word in a multiple columned matrix consisting of the 88 data extracts in rows. These extracts were re-coded, often against multiple codes (up to four), and were aligned against six developing themes and multiple sub themes (up to 11). This process was repeated and the final analysis resulted in four themes and 16 sub themes. This is what Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to as “identifying the ‘essence’ of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall), and determining what aspect of the data

each theme captures” (p. 92). This stage moved well beyond the semantic to the latent and implied meanings, seeking relationships between themes and sub themes and between themes.

Analysis and Discussion

In this section we scope the landscape of teacher perceptions of eLearning in Arts education in Australian ITE degrees by describing these resultant data themes, highlighting extracts that best represent the data corpus, and preliminarily exploring the complexities of the relationships between themes and subthemes. The themes, sub themes and the number of references coded in analysis are presented in Table 1. The four themes and 16 sub themes represent highly complex interactions between views that are affirming of the eLearning space for Arts education or resistant or damning of it, sometimes simultaneously evident in contradictory data from the same interview or survey response.

	<u>Themes</u>	<u>Sub Themes</u>	<u>Number of coded extracts</u>
1	Congruence and incongruence with identity	7	64
2	Dissonance between the nature of the Arts and eLearning	2	25
3	eLearning can be a positive experience	4	25
4	eLearning & teaching expressed as a negative imperative	3	11
Total	4	16	125

Table 1: Data Corpus: Themes, sub themes and number of coded references

As is evident in Table 1 the most numerous coded theme related to congruence and incongruence with academic identity (n=64), and the next two next most numerous coded themes were ‘dissonance between the nature of the Arts and eLearning’ (25), and ‘eLearning can be a positive experience’ (25). The least numerous coded theme was that of ‘eLearning & teaching being expressed as a negative imperative’ (11). Throughout this section all interview participants are referred to using a pseudonym such as Genevieve, and all survey respondents are referred to by a number such as Respondent 6.

Congruence and Incongruence with Identity

The theme ‘Congruence and incongruence with academic identity’ is significantly more numerous coded than any of the other themes, and its sub theme ‘eLearning is a negative compromise’ (22) accounts for more than a third of its 64 coded extracts. This single theme has more coded extracts than all of the other three themes combined, and this suggests that identity is a critical component of academic practice. Final coding within this theme was

as congruence (as in agreement with) or incongruence (as in dissonance with) identity, with 'eLearning as a negative compromise' being prominent within the 'incongruence' subtheme.

In her interview Genevieve's response when asked to report any negative experiences she had observed in the eLearning space illustrates this:

the sense that student [sic] are missing out because they're not having that face-to-face studio experience. We try our best, we offer them an external Saturday workshop if they're able to come...but they can't all do that. I wish they could come on campus and engage with the arts, it would be so much better. Really it's their choice to be external; they know that that's how it is going to be (Interview).

Elsewhere in the interview Genevieve states that she would 'prefer that they could all do it internally'. Genevieve states here that the face-to-face experience is better for students and that when students enrol externally they 'miss out', and she also suggests that students are aware of their disadvantage.

In his interview Martin spoke about his philosophy of Arts education early, stating that *I come from a place of strong interest in social justice, of participation and engagement for all people and that comes from my early training as a teacher in the 1970's*. He goes on to indicate that he feels that eLearning is incongruent with his philosophy and why, stating that *Looking at the congruence with my philosophy, I feel there is a depersonalization, almost a dehumanising effect of being online. I don't feel I know students as well*. Martin explains this incongruence further, focussing on the importance of the embodied nature of Arts making:

What I love about the arts is the way it engages students in a physical embodied way. That affects the mind as well and that whole affected domain. I think you can see very clearly if you're teaching a dance class who is engaged and who is not and I can work then with those that are not. To do that online is almost impossible...It is about having an embodied experience; your body is present in that place and it has all kinds of effect upon you (Interview).

Respondent 4 refers to the importance of 'experience' in Arts making, and the disconnect between this and the online environment, stating that *I believe ITE students need to experience doing the arts in order to value what the arts have to offer. This is not possible just by tapping a keyboard. ITE students often do not appreciate this however*. Of particular interest here is also the reference to the perception that ITE students do not have the necessary experience from which to judge the suitability of eLearning to the Arts. A 'catch 22' indeed. Respondent 11, in responding to the statement that 'E-learning is a suitable mode for the delivery of Arts education to ITE students' stated that *the Art[s] by their virtue are performative and rely on socially constructed learnings. I'm at a loss as to how this can be satisfactorily achieved in a fully online platform*. In these written responses both of these participants express a disconnect between what they see as important in learning in the Arts and the capacity of eLearning to deliver this for early childhood and primary ITE students.

There were 9 coded extracts from five participants that referred in some way to a perception of a lack of agency or consultation, important aspects of academic identity, in the shift to eLearning in their teaching contexts. Respondent 17 referred to a *Head of School directive to... "recapture market share" in competition with other universities...[and] under pressure from our Pro-Vice Chancellor and Head of School two years ago to design and implement a new completely online offering for all ITE courses*

These data reflect literature about the relationship between agency and academic identity, wherein top-down decision-making processes can result in lack of academic agency (Kirkwood, 2009) wherein corporate identity has permeated university decision making (Churchman, 2006), and corporate values and individual academic identities are at odds (Winter, 2009). The power differential between managers and managed academics (Winter,

2009) which reflected the sub themes of cynicism and a lack of agency, is most succinctly expressed by Mary who said that *'if we wanted to have a creative arts subject, it had to be online'* (Interview).

In her interview Genevieve reflected on the importance for ITE students of encountering dynamic educators, stating that *I feel sorry for them that they haven't had the opportunity to be blown away by a really fantastic teacher...It's a worry, it would be great if they were all internally enrolled but they're not*. For Genevieve this encounter is an important component of preparing ITE students and it cannot be replicated in an eLearning mode. For Martin there was a distinct incongruence with the ways in which he was used to teaching and this was having a negative impact for him, he stated that:

I'm not enjoying sitting in front of a screen so much, to go online and respond to students who are in the totally online environment. I find that very debilitating and demoralising, the amount of time I have to spend in front of a screen. In terms of my health, it's affected my back and my eyes (Interview).

There were also a number (n=8) of extracts related to congruence with personal identity wherein participants referred to the positive outcomes of eLearning and their role in this. Typical of such comments was:

E-learning in the Arts provides preservice teachers with resources that they can access to enhance their Arts learning. While actual engagement with the artistic process is critically important, resources to support this engagement can be provided in online environments, as can opportunities for students to engage with each other when they are externally enrolled (Respondent 14).

Interestingly as with other data about positive outcomes from eLearning in Arts education, this comment remains qualified by the participant, suggesting a residual uneasiness with the online mode.

Dissonance between the Nature of the Arts and eLearning

This was an area we were particularly interested in exploring and we note that this theme was the second most numerous coded, although numerically far less than the main theme of identity. This theme included coded extracts indicating that participants were in some way uncomfortable with the application of the eLearning mode to their Art form because of the 'nature' of that Art form. Participants (n=12) referred variously to the experiential, embodied or performative nature of the Arts as being in some way at odds with eLearning, with 19 such coded extracts recorded. Participants (n=6) also referred to the importance of some form of practical engagement with the Arts to enable students to value the Arts with seven such coded extracts recorded. *'My belief is that student teachers have to engage with the Arts personally themselves, before they can even begin to be passionate about their role as teachers of the Arts in schools'* (Interview, Genevieve) indicates both of these aspects were a priority suggesting that Arts engagement precedes passion, a theme that is reflected elsewhere in her interview data and in the body corpus.

The survey responses delivered a powerful challenge to the notion that eLearning could effectively engage learners in the sensual, connective nature of the arts. The comment, *'The totally online offering continues to give us many challenges, particularly with regard to addressing the essentially physical and social components of participation in each of the arts, especially dance, drama and music, but also media arts and visual arts'* (Respondent 17), highlights the challenges presented in an eLearning environment. The essentially personal and communicative nature of Arts learning was likewise emphasised by Robert who stated that:

The students can collaborate with ideas and concepts online but the actual practice of that skill, to practice how you use your body, again coming back to that practice of how we actually do that, you have to actually be face-to-face with people. There's still a personal engagement that needs to happen (Interview).

The lived nature of Arts making is highlighted in Respondent 17's statement that *'It cannot replace the vital visceral and embodied experience necessary in each of the five arts as identified in the Australian curriculum'*, again suggesting that eLearning cannot provide this experience. Paul reflects on the importance of embodied learning stating that *For me, arts education is embodied learning, it's embodied learning that's practical, hands-on experience of making and responding in the five art forms in the Australian curriculum.* (Interview). These data suggest that for these participants the embodied nature of the Arts, then, is incongruent with eLearning.

eLearning can be a Positive Experience

This theme related to data that was somewhat at odds with the vast majority of the body corpus, indicating that some participants believed that eLearning can be a positive experience. Six participants made a total of nine references to their perception that eLearning solves problems such as access to university education for geographically distant students and to improved levels of equity for students. Paul stated this comprehensively:

last year we had just under 30% of our students in the bachelor of education part of the course who were external students so it's a significant number and when we say external they're not necessarily you know far flung in Karratha or the sticks, they can actually just because of circumstances be people from a metropolitan area who have chosen to study externally. (Interview).

Participants (n=5) made references (n=9) to the positive outcomes of eLearning in Arts education but likewise qualified these perceptions by indicating that this was only possible in a blended rather than a fully online mode. Respondent 17 was one such participant, stating that *'E-learning is useful for supplementing face-to-face experience in some kind of blended mode of delivery'*. Martin focuses on the advantages of eLearning, although not stipulating if he is referring to a blended or fully online mode, stating that *'Students are uploading video materials; sound recording, avatars, apps and we have had some very good responses, demonstrating a level of engagement and understand beyond what we had in essays previously'* (Interview). Thus, while limited in our data corpus, there are clearly Arts educators who are embracing the potential of eLearning.

eLearning & Teaching Expressed as a Negative Imperative

When discussing the motivations for their courses to be taught in an eLearning mode eight participants responded that they did so for reasons other than pedagogy referring to: market share (6), cost (3) and broader Faculty/University policy to do so (1). This theme also links strongly with the theme of 'congruence and incongruence with identity' in which data regarding sub themes of cynicism and a lack of personal agency were very clearly evident. . Respondent 4 highlights cost as an issue and refers to aspects of the 'nature' of the Arts (Theme 2), whose comments seem tinged with cynicism (Theme 1), and as such provides data that crosses 3 of the themes. Respondent 4 states:

It may involve more cost but the only way to prepare generalist teachers is for them to understand what the arts involve in terms of personal satisfaction, self-understanding, possibilities for learning skills and knowledge, and the concept of audience and artist interaction.

Marketing or market share also features strongly in these data, wherein five participants relate the perception that market share was one motivation for the shift to eLearning in their teaching contexts. This aligns with comments made in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2007) noted earlier regarding the two problems that eLearning does solve – time and place. Genevieve focuses on the potential of eLearning to attract learners who are geographically non-co-located, stating that ‘*it’s a marketing tool for us. We would attract a lot more students from around the country*’. Respondent 17 highlights the top down nature of the decision, in relation to market share, stating that the decision to enter the eLearning mode occurred as a result of a ‘*Head of School directive to...recapture market share in competition with other universities*’. Likewise, Martin’s data reflect the notion of a need to ensure market share, stating that ‘*It came at a time three years ago when it was made clear to us that there was concern that we were losing our market share of students*’ (Interview). Robert also referred to the need to respond to competition from other universities, stating that ‘*We’ve watched universities compete with other universities. Some universities are delivering all their courses online*’ (Interview). Thus the sub themes of market share and cost are strongly reflected across interview and survey data sets, and suggest congruence with literature in this area (Billot, 2010; Blackmore, 2001; Henkel, 2005; Houghton, Ruutz, Green, and Hibbinsa, 2015; Sutton, 2015; Wells, 2005). These data seem to strongly suggest that academic agency appears to have been increasingly eroded as financial imperatives take precedence over Learning and Teaching decision-making.

Conclusion

This article has sought to profile Australian academics’ perceptions of eLearning in Arts education in early childhood and primary ITE degrees in Australian universities and has presented a number of significant findings worthy of further exploration. The perceptions of some participants regarding the motivations for their courses being offered in an eLearning context are of some significance. These perceptions, ranging from cost benefits to market share, highlight top down management approaches consistent with the literature. These perceptions of process are strongly linked to matters of academic identity, wherein participants maintained that eLearning was a negative compromise and that their participation in the decision to go online was minimal, and lacked consultation and personal agency, again consistent with the literature. These data relate to major changes in the academy and are worthy of significant further exploration, particularly in respect of their impact on academic identity.

A surprisingly few data extracts were coded with incongruence between eLearning and the nature of the Arts, although these data were powerful in themselves. Such data highlighted singularly difficult challenges to do with the essentially embodied and visceral nature of making in the Arts and often expressed this perception in a very pointed way. This theme, despite being relatively less frequent, is certainly worthy of further examination. Likewise, those data that highlighted the positive nature of eLearning in Arts education are worthy of further examination, particularly in respect of blended contexts. However, the implication of these data is that some universities offer Arts education units in ITE degrees in fully online modes, and this seems to present singular challenges, as highlighted by some participants and thus should be explored in further detail.

The research team sought to clarify practices in eLearning in Arts education in Australian universities and the perceptions of Australian academics about the applicability of this mode of learning to the Arts domain. What we have revealed is a divided, unsettled and challenging space with pockets of acceptance, but largely characterised by epistemological and pedagogical questions, doubts and uneasiness. These findings raise important questions for the sector and require further exploration. Why do some feel more comfortable with eLearning in the Arts than others? Why do so many questions about its applicability persist, and what are the implications of the shift into this space, in spite of these questions, for academics and the academy?

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