

## Don't Waste a Crisis!

*Summary of the 1st EDuIT webinar on the future of performing arts education*

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### Takeaways:

- Technology should be the handmaiden of learning, not its guide.
- For teachers not used to teaching online, a just-do-it-and-see approach has a number of surprising benefits.
- The pandemic provides an opportunity to co-create courses with students.
- Teachers should have the confidence that students will learn, even if lessons feel untidy.

EDuIT's monthly series exploring the future of performing arts education kicked off with its inaugural webinar in July 2020. Guests Mohit Kakkar, Professor Sharon Choa and Professor Michael Anderson shared their views on and their experience of making performing arts education work online.

The webinar series, led by Robert Wells and Louise Lee, provides a chance for us to take stock as practitioners compelled by a global coronavirus pandemic to teach away from studios, labs and classrooms and to keep classes running on desktops, laptops and phones instead. What have we managed to do better, equally well or not at all? When our sanitised studios, labs and classrooms reopen, what should we continue to do online? This series provides a forum for colleagues from a range of performing arts disciplines to share glimpses of the future of education caught in the black mirror of the present crisis.

The theme of the first webinar was how to make the performing arts work online. In answer, two broad approaches to online crisis teaching emerged. For Professor Michael Anderson, the pandemic has given a head of steam to what he terms technological determinism, in which the pressure to technologise drives learning. He urges teachers to think of learning first and the technology second. In his view, understanding how students are motivated to learn, applying tried and tested frameworks that structure creative and learning processes and employing the best variety of pedagogical practices should govern our approach to 'live' and online teaching equally. For Anderson, the disruption caused by Covid-19 is an opportunity for teachers to transform their practice in ways borne out by research, and for institutions to review their curricula in terms of what is taught, when, and through what medium – "doing the things online that make sense online".

A contrasting approach, unnamed and discussed implicitly, arises from the experience of individual teachers plunged into the daunting and destabilising drama of needing to deliver online courses traditionally conducted face-to-face. This approach puts technology first, and necessarily so. Learning must happen, and it can only happen online. Much of what and how students learn has to be abandoned. Some tools exist, others must be found, but learning is limited to one medium and we must make the best of it. In this approach, pedagogy is not planned, it is discovered. "Just do it and see" is its answer to the question of how to make performing arts work online.

In the webinar, Sharon Choa shares a discovery she made on her personal expedition into teaching conducting online. She describes how limitations in the quality of sound, as well as reduced recourse to instruments and musicians, necessitated the practice of silent conducting. She was surprised to find her students learning better this way. In order to successfully conduct music in silence, students need to mentally retain a detailed knowledge of the score. "It's a pity that we did not have the chance to put them in front of an orchestra and conduct what they learnt," she says, "because I felt that they learnt their scores far far better than last semester when we were interacting with each other face-to-face."

Being a nursery for surprises is one benefit of this just-do-it-and-see approach. Over the course of the webinar, participants brought several more pluses to light. Firstly, it is perhaps the only practical approach to teaching a course remotely without either the time to plan and pilot changes, or prior experience to draw on. In that sense, it is fit-for-purpose. Secondly, it forces teachers to experiment, to innovate and to reflect on what works and what does not, growing their practice as they go along<sup>1,2</sup>. By seeing creativity as the only response to managing a crisis<sup>3</sup>, and by viewing teaching as a creative act, delivering a course online may be as learning-rich for the teacher as it is for the students.<sup>2</sup> Thirdly, this approach can and should involve the students in co-creating the unfolding course especially since the online world is their natural habitat and they know what and where its resources are<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, the speakers agreed this approach *encourages* resourcefulness in students and provides an opportunity to "to step up and shine"<sup>3</sup>. This increased responsibility is a beneficial counterbalance to teachers' common inclination to underestimate their students.<sup>3</sup> Finally, by ceding ground to the students, the teacher steps off the stage and becomes a member, a guiding member, of the online learning community each course creates, facilitating learning not transmitting knowledge.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

For some, a just-do-it-and-see approach is a great leap backwards. Outcomes-based education has made it psychologically difficult for teachers to embark on a learning journey with a simple destination in mind and only a general direction for a route. Teachers have come to feel they need every step of the way mapped out in advance otherwise their practice is unprofessionally sloppy. However, naming and legitimising a just-do-it-and-see approach might give teachers the confidence boost they need to give online teaching their best shot. For Mohit Kakkar, the change in mindset required of a teacher to *just do it and see* includes flexibility, courage, and faith that learning will take place and the students will benefit from it, even if the learning and the benefits are not explicitly outcome-clear at the start.

These learning- and technology-centred approaches are not mutually exclusive. A teacher will not feel his or her way forward blindly. Nor does Michael Anderson's learning-first approach preclude discovery. What both of these approaches share in spirit, however, is a belief in the present as a silver-lined opportunity for teachers to experiment with their craft, not in order to teach more comfortably online when they are forced to, but to incorporate into their practice lessons learnt from putting technology first, learning first, or both first. Michael Anderson supplies the motto for the moment:

"Don't waste a crisis!"

- <sup>1</sup> View expressed by Mohit Kakkar
- <sup>2</sup> View expressed by Sharon Chao
- <sup>3</sup> View expressed by Michael Anderson