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## Exploring the continuing effects of COVID-19 on tertiary screen production education in Australia

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### ABSTRACT

This article considers how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted tertiary-level screen production education in Australia. Six university educators across four Australian states present a series of critical thematic reflections, interrogating their lived experiences of teaching screen production courses during periods impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns and social distancing requirements. The analysis reveals the pandemic amplified areas like concept development and fundamental production skills using mobile devices, while more advanced technical skills and student collaboration suffered due to remote learning conditions. Managing health risks through COVID-safe protocols became a major priority. Student storytelling shifted towards shorter individual projects exploring themes of isolation, though some collectives producing anthology series also emerged. While some pandemic-driven changes like online meetings have persisted, the authors identify an ongoing need to foster students' interpersonal skills and technical proficiency developed through collaborative, hands-on learning experiences. The diverse reflections highlight common challenges but also differences across states based on varying COVID-19 conditions and restrictions. Overall, the authors argue for balanced, responsive approaches going forward to equip graduates with frameworks to navigate screen industry shifts alongside changing student expectations around delivery modes.

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Screen production; tertiary education; COVID-19; critical reflection; remote learning; student collaboration

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a major disruptor that challenged some first principles regarding what we, film academics based in Australia, teach screen production students, and why and how we teach specific material. This article reflects on ways that tertiary-level screen production education in Australia was impacted, and continues to

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be impacted, by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. We present a series of critical thematic reflections that interrogate our lived experience as tertiary educators working in screen production education across four Australian states. An analysis of our reflections reveals multiple points of view but also isolates common experiences and major themes. The pandemic affected urban and regional areas in Australia differently and there were clear differences between states and territories, reflecting Australia's vast geography and the behaviour of the COVID-19 virus.

The key research question framing this enquiry is: How did the conditions of COVID-19 change the nature of screen production education in Australia and what are its ongoing impacts? There were obvious changes that occurred in teaching during the pandemic, the most visible being a shift to online video conferencing platforms for hosting meetings and classes. However, in posing this question, we aim to uncover less apparent changes and specifically focus on those related to screen production education.

Our critical reflections are presented thematically aligned with a series of sub-questions:

- What areas of screen production education were amplified during COVID-19?
- What areas of craft, theory, and methods fell away?
- How were the health risks posed by COVID-19 managed in relation to industry working protocols?
- How did student storytelling change in both content and method?

In posing these questions we hoped to gain a better understanding of the changes that persist and how these changes have affected the nature of screen production education.

The resulting thematic reflections draw upon our experiences as six educators located across four Australian states including Victoria (2), Western Australia (1), New South Wales (2), and Queensland (1). We consider a combination of specific production activities, subjects (a course or unit of study within a degree program), and award-bearing programs that were delivered during periods of COVID-19 restrictions across several institutions. We focus on challenges, observations and modifications or outright rejection of previous learning and teaching practices. Our collective reflection spans both undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications. By grouping in themes in response to the six prompts, we have highlighted the *varied* impacts that COVID-19 has had on the teaching of screen production in Australia. This variation of experience results from differing state government responses to the pandemic, including policies and directives that mandated lockdowns, social distancing, and state and national border closures. We further interrogate and discuss our reflections in the thematic responses section aligned with the methodology that is expanded upon below. The next section of this paper describes the effects the pandemic and Australian lockdowns had more broadly, providing a contextual background for our critical reflections on screen production learning and teaching.

## Background

The onset of COVID-19 in the early months of 2020 had devastating effects for the global film industry, leading to widespread halting of production and the closure of cinemas. Writing in May 2020, Keast noted the way that the pandemic had impacted on almost every aspect of the Australian screen industry, leading to widespread job losses and

struggling businesses (2020). An April 2020 survey conducted by Screen Producers Australia (SPA) showed that more than 119 local productions were suspended or postponed due to COVID-19, with further cost implications, due to loss of export revenue, estimated to result in 'total damage [of] more than \$2 billion, affecting more than 30,000 employees, freelancers and contractors' (SPA quoted in Keast, 8). Moon reported similar problems for screen industries in Asia, Europe, and the US due to widespread halting of production combined with a loss of exhibition opportunities (2020).

The pandemic also created widespread disruption of education systems across the globe, impacting more than 94% of the world's student population (Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021). In response to lockdowns, universities around the world were forced to suspend face-to-face teaching and move to online learning, using video conferencing software and other digital tools. Emerging research suggests mixed responses to this change from both instructors and students (Lapitan et al. 2021; Moorhouse and Kohnke 2021; Mortazavi et al 2021). On a related note, Czerniewicz et al observe the way moves to online teaching have highlighted various forms of inequality in education (2020). On this front one might consider how the pandemic has been disruptive, but also transformational (Jandrić et al. 2021).

The move from face-to-face to online teaching was particularly challenging for creative arts subjects, seeing as these often foreground embodied and collaborative aspects of learning (see for example, Davis and Phillips (2020) on drama education). Moreover, creative arts subjects often have a number of learning outcomes related to 'soft skills' or non-academic outcomes. On music education, Joseph and Lennox note that 'learning is social and not isolated', taking place through teamwork and fostered by communities of practice (2021, 242). Thus, the move to online learning poses challenges for the development of students' resilience, the setting of goals and the development of social skills. For Davis and Phillips, these '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' (2020, 67).

## COVID-19 and screen education: existing research

Like other creative arts areas, the teaching of screen production focuses on the development of a range of hard and soft skills for students and is generally informed by industry practice. Just as COVID-19 put an end to considerable screen industry practice, so too were student screen production assignments cancelled, suspended, or reworked for an online learning environment in 2020. Reflecting on their curricula at Deakin University, Australian educators Duckett and Baulch posed several apt questions for the discipline:

What does distance mean for those of us who teach film? How do students learn camera functionality if they are in lockdown without the camera they learn to use in their first semester at University? Because our assessment tasks are built around shooting using a prosumer video camera, what can we ask students to do if they have no one at home to shoot and no camera to shoot with? Finally, and more critically, how do we justify and rationalize filmmaking when filmmaking as an industry is officially suspended? (2020, 104)

Educators across the globe rushed to answer questions such as these as government-imposed lockdowns set in. Emerging research captures the complexity of reworking curricula and assessment tasks, as well as some positive outcomes.

As several researchers have noted, a key challenge for instructors involved making screen production education meaningful in an online environment as this meant a move away from traditional industrial working conditions (Henry and Maric 2023; Rosas-Salazar and Horta 2021). Significant online resources already exist in relation to screen production methods and techniques, raising a question about the value of additional materials created or curated by universities. On this subject, Rosas-Salazar and Horta describe their desire to meet ‘a methodological demand to maintain modules (as far as possible) at a university teaching level, preventing them from becoming mere YouTube tutorials’ (2021). Meanwhile Asker deplores ‘the Zoom factor’ which he describes as ‘the constant migraine inducing teaching learning online from homes’, which was a problem for remote learning more broadly (2020, 3). On a more positive note, Duckett and Baulch note that their home institution already had several resources in place that were of benefit to remote working conditions, such as free student access to the Adobe Creative Cloud package of software applications, and infrastructure for cloud learning. In their case, the move to remote learning meant that they were ‘challenged but not overwhelmed’ (2020, 104). We would suggest that such resources are common for screen production students in Australia however, challenges such as reliable and stable internet access and the gatekeeping of downloads permissions in some international territories that largely impacted international cohorts, complicates this as a generalisable baseline.

In many cases, lockdowns resulted in students needing to complete individual film productions, rather than collaborative works. For example, Carson strove to find an alternative to the embodied practice of film directing and working with actors for students at the Toronto Film School in Canada (2021). Working remotely, his students created individual screen works using the Zoom platform, which were presented and discussed with peers. On a similar note, students at the University for the Creative Arts, Farnham, created solo short fiction films as ‘total filmmakers’, thus allowing them ‘to explore their inner filmmaker, the nexus of creativity and personal inspiration driving them to choose this career’ (Connolly 2022, 86). In an Australian context, Duckett and Baulch describe their students’ use of mobile phones to make films, these offering an ‘agile, cheap, and entirely valid cinematic camera’ (2020, 104). Henry & Maric similarly observe a productive pivot to mobile phone filmmaking in their interviews with New Zealand and Australian educators (2023). While Duckett and Baulch’s students worked individually, they were able to share screens over Zoom to compare their footage or obtain feedback on editing processes, which fostered a sense of ‘making and doing together’ (2020, 104) that typically underpins screen industry practices.

In their article about teaching screen production in Chile in 2020, Rosas-Salazar and Horta note that the pandemic ‘laid bare the inherent problems of a developing country’s society in crisis’ by exposing inequalities and access issues (2021). Here, both students and instructors experienced issues with internet speed in rural areas, and access to computers and other equipment that they required to create work. Furthermore, they observed a deterioration of many students’ mental health, which impacted their individual work (2021). Rosas-Salazar and Horta refer to a July 2020 survey of students of the Film and Television Department at the University of Chile that asked the question ‘how have you felt in recent months with the pandemic and the current semester?’ [and] found that the most popular terms used by audio-visual students were “unmotivated”, “overwhelmed”,

“anguished”, and “bad” (2021, n.p.). These survey results point to an additional challenge for the screen production educator – how to support students through a period of ongoing uncertainty regarding the future. Considering the above, Connolly’s assertion that ‘the 2020 COVID pandemic has arguably had the most substantial social and processual impacts on film production and its teaching in recent history’ rings true (2022, 85). Our reflection on teaching screen production focused courses in a range of Australian contexts seeks to add greater nuance and richness to these examinations of the tertiary education experience.

## Methodology

To productively add to the existing scholarship in this area, the authors of this article have adopted a methodology of critical reflection on lived experiences of screen production education. This approach, which is also adopted by Brammer and Clark (2020) and Powell and McGuigan (2021) in the contexts of management and accounting education respectively, allows us to compare our respective experiences and consider their future implications. Our specific methodology involved a three-stage process that involved (1) informal conversation between authors, (2) the writing of structured individual reflections, and then (3) thematic analysis of these individual reflections by the group. The first stage occurred organically. We were all members of the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA) research sub-committee and our methodology emerged from the conversations we were having with each other in regular meetings. In addition to sub-committee meetings, we would organise after work drinks on a regular basis hosted through Zoom as a way of remaining connected. Through these regular formal meetings and informal conversations, we found that there were significant differences as well as similarities between our individual lived experiences because there was no consistent national strategy regarding COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. We also found that all faced different challenges when adapting our respective curricula and learning outcomes to fit within new and emerging contexts. Nevertheless, we felt it would be a beneficial contribution to scholarship in screen production education if we drew on individual lived experiences, comparing in a systematic way to establish whether there were themes in common and as well as various insights and strategies that could be shared. We then set about crafting individual written reflections (recounts and reflections of our lived experience designing and teaching screen production) that responded to the questions outlined in the introduction. These short, written works were then circulated and further discussed. During the third stage (thematic analysis) we compared these documents, isolating commonly identified challenges and divergences of experience. Some of the individual written reflections are referenced in the analysis below.

As academics and creative practitioners, we were familiar with creative practice research and argue that creative practitioners have unique relationships with digital technologies, often leading to an ‘open-ended exploratory use of digital technology [that] can lead to major changes in the way practitioners reflect on making works’ (Candy 2019, 203). For creative practice researchers and academics, reflection is regarded as central to practice, reflecting creative practice research as a type of enquiry that centres the careful ‘gathering [of] reflections on the process of doing/making, in order to contribute

knowledge to the practice of doing/making creative work (screen work)' (Batty and Kerrigan 2018, 7). Like Powell and McGuigan, we sought to outline 'reflexive experiences' within the pivot from the traditional classroom teaching to the virtual learning environment (2021, 335) and take 'a critical stance in outlining our reflexive experiences of what is lost and insights gained' (336). Schön acknowledges that reflection in and on one's practice is 'central to the art through which practitioners sometimes cope with the troublesome "divergent" situations of practice' (1983, 62). The methodology used in this article is further framed by Schön's idea of a reflective practitioner.

### What areas of screen production education were amplified during COVID-19?

From the reflections we observed that concept and script development, and the fundamental principles of shooting and editing were amplified throughout the pandemic. Common themes related to the use of mobile phones instead of industry standard production equipment, the shift to Zoom, and the effect of both on the teaching of filmmaking craft. The following excerpt, from the reflection discussing how the rolling lockdowns in Melbourne affected a university capstone Masters course, illustrates the importance of smartphones as production tools:

We shifted to using mobile phones as production tools. Anxiety levels were high, and students were keen to make films documenting their experiences of life during the pandemic. Deserted Melbourne streets and the optics of a forlorn deserted CBD became a common visual trope. The international students braved isolation as many of our international students live and work in the CBD – however, during the pandemic lockdowns many could not work. (Melbourne based academic)

The shift to using mobile media as a tool for production manifested in Brisbane during the lockdowns as well, where as well as shooting material in their own homes, the students were able to licence archival material (up to 10% of their total screen time). Importantly, they could only use the production equipment the students had to hand, which was often just a smartphone and further, teaching staff-made *iso* (isolation) films to demonstrate the possibilities of filming alone with a smartphone. These teaching examples were embedded into learning materials (Brisbane based academic). Henry and Maric (2023) also noted that Australian and New Zealand educators observed a productive pivot towards mobile phone filmmaking.

The amplification of readily accessible production tools such as smartphones resulted in a strong focus on craft and filmmaking basics as a response to COVID-19 restrictions. In a Sydney media production cohort, staff 'restricted students to recording media (sound, as well as still and moving image) within the boundaries of their homes for their assessment tasks' (Sydney based academic). The reflection further states that a return to first principles was one strategy adopted and manifested in content that emphasised foundational and general concepts that can be applied to screen production broadly and that hold true, regardless of the technologies being deployed – whether that be prosumer video camera, DSLR or mobile phone. This focus on the building blocks of screen media communication was a feasible and effective shift for first year students who needed to be introduced to, and become fluent in, concepts such as framing and composition,



image editing, sound mixing and final output (Sydney based academic). Furthermore, upon returning to face-to-face teaching there was an observable student preference to continue working with their mobile phones, where this was offered as an option (Sydney based academic).

The use of video conferencing tools such Zoom for both content production and production team coordination were also amplified during the pandemic. The reflection from the academic teaching an industry-informed capstone screen production subject in Perth describes how the use of online collaborative tools was amplified throughout the duration of the pandemic:

Despite a return to face-to-face learning, students continued to utilise remote communication technologies, such as Zoom, to conduct script development sessions, crew meetings and in some cases, auditions for actors. Considering these factors, I would suggest that, although the pandemic's disruption of tertiary screen production education lasted only a short time in Perth, it nonetheless changed student attitudes and behaviours in the year following. (Perth based academic)

The use of online and remote communication tools has continued post-COVID-19. For example, the use of video conferencing tools was also important in Brisbane where

during peak lockdown many first- and second-year production-based assessments were altered to become shorter projects made individually by students rather than as a group. Students were encouraged to use online tools to collaborate (e.g. Zoom to conduct production meetings or interviews for documentary production) and share data (online file sharing). (Brisbane based academic)

These areas that were amplified had clear implications for how we approached craft, theory, and production methods with our students.

### **What areas of craft, theory, and methods fell away and how did this impact student engagement?**

The most obvious area in which some aspect of teaching and learning fell away during the pandemic was face-to-face interaction between students, and between students and teachers. While this change was a common experience across discipline areas, it was felt acutely in the discipline of screen production due to its intrinsic collaborative, face-to-face nature. Academic and technical staff undertook substantial work to transform delivery modes and provide rich online materials for students. Activities in these programs were often a blend of synchronous and asynchronous activities and there was a strong focus on the first-year experience, peer support and connection alongside a defined push to ensure that final year capstone projects were underway and sustained momentum. Online tools additional to Zoom included instant messaging and VoIP social platform software such as Slack, Discord and Microsoft Teams, and tools such as Word Cloud, SurveyMonkey and Mentimeter assisted the brainstorming and scripting processes online, although Adams and Pente (2011) have warned that perhaps we as teachers ought to be more critical about the long-term significance of adopting these online methods of communication. However, online options tended to be more accommodating of neurodivergent students' preferred ways of working, or those living at a physical distance from university campuses (Natale and Libertella 2016).



Further to a shift to using mobile phones to record content, students pivoted away from industry-level lighting, grip-, and sound recording- equipment. Instead, students were obliged to work with their own devices and available lighting for production unit assessments and capstone research projects up until 2022. As a result, there was a teaching emphasis on foundational concepts that could be applied to screen production more broadly, regardless of the technologies being deployed. However, on some occasions this inability to access state-of-the-art technology and facilities was a showstopper. For example, a Melbourne-based university made the decision to cease final year stop-motion animation projects that had been slated for on campus studio production with specific technology infrastructure requirements. In other instances, zero access to on-campus facilities mattered little. For a Sydney-based institution represented in this paper, audio drama production remained unchanged from previous years. Students continued to produce 7 × 5-minute interlinked audio drama podcasts, but now using a mix of Zoom and studio production, and more widely, podcasts became a popular choice for final individual projects as students were also unable to access on-the-ground facilities at other institutions.

There was also a breakdown of traditional production roles and specialisation areas for students studying screen production degrees. As a result, some teaching staff commented that editing students were not able to proficiently use postproduction software, for example, or that first assistant directors were not familiar with the typical calls on set. However, it could be simultaneously argued the breakdown in traditional production roles and specialisations may in fact benefit students about to enter an ever-expanding entertainment industry driven by online video and mobile phone apps, which are often produced by individuals and small teams with transdisciplinary skill sets creating niche content (Maric, Pizzica, and Nalbandian 2024).

The final factor to fall away during the pandemic was a related aspect of student identity arising from being part of a campus culture. There were a number of anecdotal reports from students in creative screen production degrees struggling at times to successfully negotiate collaborations with peers after being isolated for such extensive periods of time and taking a more transactional approach to their studies. This appears to be reflected in other programs across the disciplinary gamut but is particularly felt in the highly vocational and collaborative programs of film and television, screen production, games production and animation. Many students additionally reported to their teachers they missed the enjoyment of working with their peers, face-to-face in the university setting, and traditions of campus life. Powell and McGuigan claimed the pivot to online learning means some things are 'lost, including human connection and interactions, messiness and spontaneity of classrooms and authenticity as an educator' (2021, 337). Certainly, many high school students of the graduating class of 2020/21 expressed a sense of sadness when graduation ceremonies were cancelled, delayed, or moved online (Hunt 2021). The annual end-of-year showcases of graduate works were cancelled, delayed, or presented online in 2020 for the tertiary film courses around the country discussed in this paper, despite some relaxation in regulations in some states in the later part of 2020. Many institutions did not resume physical face-to-face showcase events until 2022.

## How were the health risks posed by COVID-19 managed in relation to industry working protocols?

There were significant concerns from screen production academics around managing the health risks associated with COVID-19, particularly at the start of the pandemic when the situation was heightened and unfamiliar. A roundtable meeting of Australian tertiary institutions involved in screen production education was organised by ASPERA and AFTRS in late May 2020 to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on teaching practices. The roundtable included a presentation by then Head of Producing and Production, AFTRS, Lyn Norfor, who was 'closely involved in the COVIDSafe Industry Taskforce responsible for developing the COVIDSafe Production Protocols for the screen industry at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020' (AFTRS 2020). The roundtable discussion was an opportunity for academics teaching practical screen production subjects to 'explore the flow-on effects of new industry protocols in Australia as we consider[ed] the implications of both COVID-19 and the protocols for student-led projects, screen production teaching, learning and research' (personal communication, 26 May 2020).

As screen production academics closely observed the practices being put in place by local productions to restart work, they also accessed online COVID safety training resources to equip themselves and their students with a range of procedures and practices to minimise the spread of the virus. One Sydney based academic reported the requirement for student COVID officers to complete a brief online COVID officer certification. In large part, the Australian Screen Production Industry COVID-Safe Guidelines (Screen Australia 2020a) formed the basis for protocols that were developed by members of the ASPERA community. State-based variations on the guidelines emerged in both industrial and educational settings, with higher population states that were experiencing greater rates of COVID infection being more likely to impose stricter requirements.

Protocols developed by Australian universities generally outlined procedures for handling equipment, props and costumes, in an effort to eliminate or minimise transfer of the virus through bodily contact, short-range airborne transmission or droplet transmission. For location sound recordists, 'lapel mics were outlawed in favour of increased boom microphone use, so as to eliminate the need for human contact' (Perth based academic). When classroom teaching resumed, the wearing of face masks became commonplace in the classroom and where social distancing was not possible during film production for academics in Sydney and Melbourne.

The seriousness of the public health measures in place in Australia meant that high expectations for professionalism and proper observance of COVID-19 safety measures were levelled upon these inexperienced student crews. This extended to stipulations at universities in Brisbane and Sydney that student project proposals be revised so they could be shot outdoors or within students' own homes with minimal physical interaction and good ventilation. One Sydney university established 'COVID isolation bubbles for capstone crews and equipment'. Universities in Melbourne and Sydney also had requirements for COVID-19 safety officers on set. All institutions required that student project teams devise COVID risk mitigation strategies and gain approval for these plans in advance of production approval. These protocols were all in addition to mandatory

COVID-19 safe practices applied more broadly to staff, students and the wider community. As reported by a Perth based academic, 'generally speaking, students rose to the challenge of managing these new production concerns, displaying thoughtfulness and gratitude to be able to resume their work'.

It is important to note that the risk management strategies developed by Melbourne universities occurred within the context of the longest lockdowns experienced anywhere in the world. As one Melbourne based academic reported:

Eventually we were able to deliver production subjects on campus in intensive mode (12 weeks delivery in six weeks) over two summers and a winter term to try and catch students up and not delay their overall degree durations while also ensuring that we were prioritising time we had with students on campus and for their shoots, usually conducted in off campus locations.

In addition, a Melbourne academic reported that difficulties securing external locations for student shoots have increased in Melbourne, particularly in contexts where a location is a workplace. The same academic noted that, '[a]mbiguities regarding the application of workplace health and safety rules to student productions is giving rise to concerns around increased COVID-19 risk and associated legal implications'.

In each of the universities discussed in this article, it became clear that the pandemic necessitated flexibility in assessment requirements. Extensions of time and scheduling out of session course delivery were intrinsic accommodations in managing the burden of compliance. For example, one Sydney institution permitted students to 'complete all assessments with a 2–3-month delay across the 2-year degree program' (Sydney based academic).

In an informal follow-up with screen production colleagues at the beginning of 2023, it was found that out of 6 institutions contacted, only one still had significant COVID measures in place outside of high-risk settings. For the rest it is 'pretty much business as usual with common sense measures in place for those who test positive' (personal communication 2023). However, what constitutes common sense measures is still open for debate. This relaxation of protocols reflects a broader approach within Australia (and perhaps the world) that we must now find ways to live with the virus.

### **How did student storytelling change in both content and methods?**

While universities' media production processes were quickly adapting to more flexible systems after the first lockdowns in 2020, above-the-line activities such as screen development (from brainstorming, conceptualisation to final draft scripts) were afforded more focus than ever before. Screen Australia significantly increased its expenditure to promote the development sector and mitigate risks associated with production during the COVID restrictions. It launched the Premium Plus fund by reallocating Production Investment funding to the Story Development fund to ensure that when production was viable again, projects could get back up and running as quickly as possible. More than \$AU2 million in funding across Premium Plus and the Premium Story Development fund was pushed out to the sector between April and June 2020. Industry responded with production companies diverting their activities to research and development (Screen Australia 2020b).

Tertiary institutions rose to the challenge of an increased demand for screen development. The sector was optimistic about the shift: 'I believe we'll have a golden era of storytelling, because you always do after a crisis; you always have remarkable stories that come out' (Buster in Sanwari 2020). Indeed, film schools were managing despite difficulties (Duckett and Baulch 2020). In Sydney and Melbourne, universities pivoted towards a curriculum that could run remotely by developing more subjects on concept development, short documents, storyboarding and scriptwriting, as they awaited with uncertainty for the start of production. Even before COVID-19, many of the film schools reported the benefits of the restrictions on creativity (John and Joyce 2020; Taylor 2019). At two Melbourne institutions, intensive screen development and production management courses replaced activities that required face-to-face contact. In Sydney two institutions reported the advantages of limiting the number of actors and locations that can be used. There was a trend towards short anthology and series production, where individuals in isolation could contribute towards a common artefact as part of a greater collection. An anthology web series produced at a Brisbane based institution gained critical recognition, including screenings at festivals and award nominations.

In Hollywood, Netflix streamed Bo Burnham's *Inside* (2021) and in the UK, actors David Tennant and Michael Sheen produced *Staged* (BBC 2020-2022) – in both shows the actors play fictionalised versions of themselves, recorded from their own homes. TikTok also revelled in the use of consumer video technology to produce one-minute versions of longer narratives (Feldkamp 2021). At university level, there was a swing towards shorter, individualised content that was performed and filmed on consumer technology, with students at Perth and Brisbane based institutions reporting a greater number of student-led collectives and clubs taking similar initiatives.

Duckett and Baulch (2020) highlight an individualistic rather than collaborative process within the context of their institution. Our individual, multi-sited reflections evidenced varying levels of collaboration, invention, and diversity in content, as students navigated the limitations of creating within the confines of their homes and local areas. We also noticed that longer phases of screen development and post-production resulted in engaging and polished artefacts. Universities in Melbourne and Perth reported student work exploring the emotional impact of the pandemic. In reflections from Sydney and Brisbane, strict lockdowns saw student productions sourcing crew and actors amongst *bubbles*<sup>1</sup> of shared households or family members. A collective of Sydney based students applied and successfully received production funding for a 15-part TikTok series under the Screen Australia Every Voice competition.

Unsurprisingly, student work produced in the first months and year of the pandemic explored stories about home and family and dystopian themes of isolation, as reflections from Melbourne and Perth attest. There was a trend towards diversity, especially in Melbourne, where international student cohorts produced projects illustrating similar and diverse experiences of the lockdown internationally. All tertiary film schools reported content that showed unique insights into other cultural experiences of the pandemic with Zoom technologies enabling classes that brought together students located across Australia, China, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, and India. The style and tone of these narratives sometimes evoked the new technological habits of the period, such as the multi-framed Zoom gallery. Institutions in Perth, Melbourne and both institutions in Sydney and Brisbane reported an increase in internet and podcasting anthologies.

As noted by Italian researchers in a qualitative study on watching tragedies to mitigate the fear of COVID-19, screen production was a powerful tool to help people face the intense uncertainty of the epidemic, allowing ‘spectators to both obtain more insight into the current situation, and to project their fears and uncertainties into film and television drama, offering a cathartic liberation that offers them hope toward the future’ (Testoni et al. 2021). The increased demand for content on public streaming platforms was favourable for Australian film schools. Student projects were critically recognised at film festivals and awards. Students also took advantage of open access offered by film, music and audio libraries and the relaxation on the percentage of sourced material allowed for assessments. In summary, the constraints of localised protocols for screen production were readily accepted and adapted by students in the academy. As Powell and McGuigan urge, in our post-COVID worlds, educators are empowered to ‘embrace this opportunity as a force for educational transformation’ (2021, 242).

### **Discussion: what changes introduced in response to COVID-19 have persisted?**

The thematic analysis of our critical reflections reveals several ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on screen education. Before discussing these effects, we firstly note that they run parallel to broader screen industry change and remind ourselves of the dynamic nature of screen production and distribution, both historically and in the current era. As Hennig-Thurau et al. observe, the film industry has undergone considerable technological development since its inception (moving, for example, from silent films to talkies, and from black and white to colour images); however, the move to digitisation has perhaps had the most profound effect, as it has enabled a move to the distribution of screen products via the internet (2021). Notably, the pandemic has hastened the repositioning of major industry players within the online streaming space, with companies such as Disney and Amazon establishing services that deliver their content directly to the viewer at home (ibid.). This industry battle for a share of the online space is paralleled by increased student engagement with prosumer platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, as venues for self-expression and entertainment.

One thread that recurs in our analysis is a desire to not simply return to production and related methods, processes and practices that were common before the pandemic, but to embrace change. This educator desire reflects Henry and Maric’s assertion that ‘the experience of teaching screen production in the COVID environment brought broader shifts and pedagogical questions for our field into sharper focus, not only online and blended delivery options, but how to teach core skills effectively, how to engage students, and how to prepare them for the evolving screen industries’ (2023, 13). In this sense, pandemic experiences can be harnessed as a means towards innovation that is realised by introducing new ways of working and thinking.

The changes we have explored above had various unexpected outcomes resulting from the interaction of different educator adaptations, which highlight that broader and intersectional consequences need to be considered. For example, we found that the fundamentals of screen production could be effectively taught to first year students using mobile phones as key production tools. However, in some cases, this strategy as an early framework for learning screen production led to an ongoing preference for working

with mobile phones over industry standard equipment for later year students. It is notable, however, that a preference for industry standard production approaches is implied through the choice by some institutions and their student cohorts to defer final capstone production until lockdown restrictions were lifted.

Students demonstrate a clear desire to continue using online communication tools for reasons of flexibility and time management. We would argue that this student demand, as well as industry adoption of online tools, challenges traditional face-to-face workshop models of screen production education and at the very least, calls for some hybrid delivery of content. Hetherington and FitzSimons observe that prior to the onset of COVID-19, screen production education had largely avoided trends towards teaching online, 'due to its dependence on group-based teaching, realisation of assessment items and use of complex technology' (2015, 11). Moreover, Henry and Maric observe a 'scepticism and resistance' toward the online delivery screen production education by colleagues in the field (2023, 3). Our analysis suggests that such positions are not sustainable, and rather, that in the face of advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) and new filmmaking technologies such as virtual production, new pedagogical paradigms are emerging. These pivots to teaching screen production in online spaces and using remote technologies offer new possibilities for engagement with a diverse student body but require innovative approaches to reflect shifting work practices and enable peer learning.

A considerable challenge going forward concerns how to address students' acquisition of soft skills such as collaboration and adaptability, as well as high level technical skills and the understanding of filmmaking logistics that comes from filming in public settings. Several of our individual reflections point out that periods of exclusively online learning that occurred in 2020, and in some cases continued into 2021 and 2022, have created a gap in student skills in these areas.

We have discerned a need to improve the collaboration skills of some students who missed out on valuable experiences of working in teams with peers while in lockdowns. This is in line with a short fall in interpersonal skills that was noted by educators interviewed by Henry and Maric, with one educator (Terry) suggesting that 'professionalism and interpersonal skills suffered the most when students did not have the face-to-face opportunity to work in groups, displaying less teamwork and accountability for 'showing up' when in the online context' (2023, 7). Post pandemic, the task of fostering collaborative skills in students who principally engage with their peers via online platforms is a considerable challenge and one that requires a reframing of the notion of 'team'. Writing on collaboration in the post-COVID era, Hardwig and Boos note the prevalence of fluid, temporary and dynamic team situations and suggest that 'we can no longer conceptualise a team as a bounded social unit and must focus on the process of collaboration in which team members are actively involved' (2023, 260). Such a task calls for a reconceptualisation of filmmaking as a potentially decentralised activity that requires a flexible collaborative approach. We would suggest that methods for fostering students' development of these skills in hybrid learning environments is an area that requires further research.

## Conclusion

Making meaning through critical reflection on what was discovered, what was possible, and what resulted from an adaptation approach during the pandemic can be a rewarding

exercise. The national picture that emerges from our critical reflections reveals a 'scholarly journey' (Lucas 2011, 169) in screen production education. For subjects that had previously relied on the physical presence of teachers and students in the same space to model ways of working, the move online challenged the fundamental pedagogical approaches that many screen production courses were built around. The challenge was not only how to engage students with content but also to find effective ways to promote the connection between students in the larger cohort that is so essential to the collaborative activities involved in screen production. Online screenings, digital collaboration tools and building time into classes to share experiences went some way to address this sense of cohort and building of networks. However, while some of these strategies have been integrated as components of post-COVID-19 teaching of screen production, at the time, the feeling that these were only interim measures and not sufficient in the longer term existed. In some respects, it was the understanding that these were not 'forever' strategies that enabled students and lecturers to persist. This was particularly the case where teaching staff took on additional workload to ensure the effectiveness of online learning. Further research is needed to ascertain the effectiveness of differing strategies adopted by screen production educators. This will become clearer with the passing of time, given that the ripples of the pandemic experience have not yet given rise to a period of stability.

In the process of posing research questions and pulling together our individual critical reflections on screen production education during COVID-19 we became attuned to the enormous benefits of creating 'a time to look inward, to look more deeply into how we can foster within ourselves greater empathy, authenticity and humility to acknowledge, as educators, our own vulnerability for we are on this journey together with our students' (Powell and McGuigan 2021, 342). This is a reframing of pandemic adversity that at times presents screen production education during COVID-19 as diminished and the pandemic as a force that solely constrained production. Looking forward, Henry and Maric (2023) rightly caution that 'while the period functioned as a sandbox for new teaching strategies and delivery modes ... application in the post-pandemic context will need further consideration' (13). In this new frame, the pandemic becomes a set of circumstances that creates potential for the critical examination of new opportunities and new foci for student learning, particularly about understanding what matters within creative practice and to whom.

We would argue for a measured approach to these reassessments that takes account of the impacts for both teaching staff and students. Increasing student demand for flexibility in their education in the face of greater mixing of paid work and education, as well as growing external stresses upon them, need to be moderated by educator observations. These are focussed on deficits in student acquisition of the soft, interpersonal skills as well as technical and production management skills that rely on situational learning. At the same time, our students are entering an industry that is exposed to ongoing disruption from social, technological, and economic shifts in broader society. The adaptability and perseverance they were required to exercise during the pandemic will also equip them well as they respond to an increasingly changeable industry.

Our reflections on the challenges we faced, what we observed occurring and the modifications we applied to our teaching practice highlight both the commonalities and differences that we experienced within our context of Australian tertiary screen



production education. The diversity of accounts, from states where a lighter touch to pandemic restrictions occurred through to the institutions impacted by the longest lockdowns recorded over the pandemic period, articulates the particularities of Australian educator experiences and the specific ways in which screen education adapted to continue teaching and learning activities during the pandemic and beyond.

Despite moving into a time of post-COVID normal, we find ourselves facing cohorts of students with changed expectations around the form of their education, expectations which have developed in response to their experiences during the pandemic. This is compounded by the significant, ongoing shifts occurring in the screen production industry because of emerging technologies and societal change. Key to the insights emerging from the pandemic is an understanding that we have entered an era where greater responsiveness to the impacts of external factors on student learning is expected. As educators our most important contributions will be in determining how to balance these expectations regarding the form of delivery with ensuring that graduates are equipped with effective frameworks so that they too can be responsive to industry demands and build sustainable and satisfying careers.

## Note

1. A COVID-19 'bubble' refers to a grouping of close contacts who interact without mask usage or physical distancing. This usually means only those in one's own household during strict lockdowns.

## Disclosure statement

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

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