

Introduction

The class I observed was part of the undergraduate unit Engaging and Exploring Arts Education (ECA100) at Deakin University's Waurin Ponds campus. This unit introduces preservice teachers to three key arts disciplines - music, visual arts, and drama/dance - through a rotation of practical seminar workshops. My observation focused on the final music seminar in the series, which explored creative music approaches and soundscapes as a pedagogical strategy. The seminar combined performance, reflection, and collaborative composition, with students working in dual roles as both "artist" and "audience" while engaging in the complementary processes of "making" and "responding."

The educator, Dr. Fiona Phillips, is a lecturer in arts education (music) and an active researcher in innovative arts-based narrative inquiry methods. With a professional background spanning early childhood to higher education, she brings extensive expertise in music pedagogy, curriculum design, and creative practice. She also holds certifications in both the Kodály and Orff approaches, which were evident in her facilitation of the workshop and her commitment to experiential, arts-informed teacher education.

The learners were 28 undergraduate pre-service teachers preparing to become generalist primary educators. The cohort was diverse: approximately 30% male and 70% female, with five students from high socio-economic backgrounds, 13 from middle-SES, and 10 from lower-SES backgrounds. Eighteen students had regional home postcodes, with many residing in university accommodation or rental housing during term. The group also included five bilingual students, two English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, and three already employed as education support staff in schools. Two students had Learning Access Plans (LAPs) in place, underscoring the importance of inclusive and differentiated approaches in teacher education.

The purpose of this seminar was to equip students with practical, creative strategies for embedding music in primary classrooms, aligned with the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2024): The Arts - Music, Foundation to Level 6. This curriculum emphasises learning music through performing, composing, listening, and moving, while cultivating creativity and responsiveness. The observed seminar therefore supported preservice teachers in developing pedagogical skills that integrate experiential music-making with curriculum aims.

Preparation for the Case Study

In preparation for this case study, I got connected with Dr. Fiona Phillips, lecturer in Arts Education (music). Through email correspondence (Appendix 1), Dr. Phillips provided consent to observe her seminar and agreed to a follow-up interview. She also shared key unit resources, including the 2025 music assignment task and the 'Creative and Critical Processes of Composition' document. In addition, selected seminar slides and photographs of classroom materials and teaching resources I took during the seminar have been included (Appendix 2). These materials outlined the learning sequence, pedagogical framework, and assessment expectations for the music rotation of ECA100.

To build background knowledge, I reviewed all the documents with particular attention to Creative and Critical Processes of Composition. This framework outlines two interconnected cycles - the creative process and the critical process - which Dr. Phillips identified as central to her seminar design. I wanted to see how these dual frameworks would be embedded in practice, as they offered a way of balancing imaginative exploration with reflective evaluation in student learning. This also connected with models encountered in our EDU202 unit, such as Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 2014) and De Bono's Six Thinking Hats (De Bono, 1985), which similarly emphasise iterative thinking, multiple perspectives, and active engagement. Seeing how these cyclical approaches were integrated into classroom teaching made the observation especially meaningful, as it illuminated how theory and practice could combine to foster both creativity and criticality.

Together, these resources provided a strong grounding in the pedagogical orientation of the seminar and helped to situate the lesson within broader music education pedagogy.

Conducting the case study

I attended the final seminar of the music rotation in ECA100 at Deakin University's Wauryn Ponds campus. During the first half of the seminar, four student groups (six members each) presented soundscapes on the themes of seaside, classroom, desert, and city as part of their assessment (Appendix 2). Dr. Phillips provided handwritten, constructive, and encouraging feedback to each group.

The second half of the seminar transitioned into a recap of the first three weeks of content. Dr. Phillips revisited the props, teaching techniques, and activities students had explored earlier in the rotation. This was followed by two practical activities. The first was an Orff inspired ensemble using xylophones, glockenspiels, boom whackers and metallophones. Students engaged enthusiastically, beginning with imitation and improvisation before gradually layering rhythms and melodies into a full-group performance. The second activity was a rhythm-and-rhyme ball-passing game, designed to foster coordination, timing, and collaborative participation. I documented observations of student engagement and interactions throughout these activities in my field notes.

Following the seminar, I conducted a short interview with Dr. Phillips where we explored student demographics, inclusivity, curriculum alignment, and systemic challenges. To complement these insights, I collected photographs (taken with consent) of classroom

resources (Appendix 2) - including puppets, story quilts, and instruments—alongside teaching documents she had provided in advance.

Curriculum details

The ECA100 unit situates its teaching within the framework of the Victorian Curriculum: The Arts – Music, as the pre-service teachers (students) are required to both understand and apply this curriculum in their future classrooms. By grounding activities such as soundscape composition in key curriculum strands - Exploring, Developing Practices, Creating, and Presenting (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2024) - the unit ensures that students are not only introduced to musical elements but also equipped with practical strategies for classroom implementation. In practice, the first two seminars built foundational knowledge by introducing musical elements, graphic notation, and digital tools, while the final seminar shifted toward application, focusing on the ‘Creative Music Approach and Soundscape Pedagogy’. Here, students collaboratively composed, rehearsed, and performed short soundscapes explicitly linked to curriculum strands, effectively combining theory with practice and embodying the processes of “making and responding.”

During the interview, Dr. Phillips identified key challenges in this curriculum context. With only nine contact hours across three weeks, she stressed the need to rationalise content and focus on pedagogies that would have the most impact for students with little prior musical knowledge. She also highlighted that the curriculum strands are “vague” and depend heavily on teacher interpretation. These concerns echo broader issues in Australian curriculum design, where generalist teachers - often with as little as 23 hours of music training - are expected to teach music alongside other demanding areas such as English, Mathematics, and Science (Lorenza, Baguley, & Kerby, 2021). Many remain reluctant to engage deeply with music due to these pressures. Dr. Phillips further expressed concern that the arts are undervalued compared to STEM, a trend reinforced by performative measures such as PISA and NAPLAN (Lorenza et al., 2021).

Yet, despite these constraints, ECA100 demonstrates how purposeful curriculum design can bridge such gaps. By embedding the creative and critical processes into practical tasks, the unit equips pre-service teachers to see music not as a marginal “extra,” but as a rigorous and vital means of fostering imagination, collaboration, and reflective practice. In this way, the unit highlights both the challenges and the possibilities of embedding arts education meaningfully within the wider curriculum.

Learning and Teaching

I think overall the teaching and learning experience was well grounded in creative and critical pedagogy. Core values of critical pedagogy were evident throughout: decolonising music education, fostering lateral and interdisciplinary thinking, and enhancing curriculum delivery through teacher agency.

During the group presentations, I observed both the creative outputs and the dynamics of student interaction. Confidence, collaboration, and depth of explanation varied across the four groups. Some presented with clarity and assurance, while others were hesitant or brief. At these moments, Dr. Phillips stepped in as a facilitator, posing reflective questions that prompted students to think more deeply about their creative choices. She also drew on interdisciplinary links to counter what Bernstein (2003) describes as the “collection code” of the Australian Curriculum, where subjects are kept in rigid boundaries. Her teaching instead modelled the possibilities of connection.

For example, when one group used a bell to frame their classroom-themed soundscape, she highlighted the mathematical symmetry in its design. In another case, she affirmed the use of a First Nations instrument in a desert soundscape, situating it within Indigenous literacy. These responses validated students’ outputs while also demonstrating how the arts connect with broader curriculum contexts. In doing so, Phillips gently challenged the privileging of STEM by showing how the arts contribute to holistic learning. As Zhao, Narikbayeva, and Wu (2021) observe, music education provides multisensory experiences that engage both educational and aesthetic dimensions, while fostering creativity through the interplay of cognitive and affective processes.

Her commitment to inclusivity was equally evident. By incorporating First Nations instruments and multilingual welcome songs, she resisted Western dominance, stating, “I do not have a dominant song list.” This approach reflects Brookfield’s (2005) view that critical theory exposes inequities hidden in dominant ideologies and that educators must help learners perceive and challenge them. Phillips modelled this by affirming cross-cultural knowledge and Indigenous practices, showing how pedagogy can contest hegemony and support democratic learning.

Her sensitivity to students’ needs was clear in how she accommodated performance anxiety through digital alternatives. Even the posters with musical terminology placed on tables acted as scaffolding. Though not explicitly taught, repeated exposure allowed students to internalise new vocabulary. This resonates with behaviourist principles of operant conditioning (Ewing, Le, & Groundwater-Smith, 2014), where external forces shape learning in a supportive and non-intrusive way. Students were also encouraged to freely explore Orff instruments before transitioning into structured ensemble performance. The physical environment itself acted as a learning stimulus with instruments, storybooks, and maps (Appendix 2) arranged to spark curiosity and invite participation.

Challenges remained, particularly around peer questioning and time constraints. During presentations, students rarely asked each other questions, which may have stemmed from limited background knowledge in music as well as the social discomfort of speaking in front

of peers. This lack of dialogue meant that learning was shaped largely by teacher prompts rather than peer exchange, limiting opportunities for collaborative knowledge-building. More structured scaffolds, such as question stems or anonymous written feedback, could have supported students to engage more critically with each other's work and reduced performance pressure.

By contrast, the ensemble activity at the end generated the highest levels of energy, happiness, and participation. Students appeared noticeably more confident and enthusiastic, freely experimenting with sounds and rhythms in a way that revealed genuine enjoyment. This hands-on, embodied approach seemed especially effective for learners without a strong musical background, as it removed barriers of technical knowledge and instead invited playful exploration. In this sense, the activity highlighted the potential of experiential learning to foster inclusion, joy, and collective engagement, suggesting that practical, collaborative tasks may play a crucial role in supporting confidence and deepening understanding when theoretical knowledge is uneven.

Overall, Dr. Phillips modelled how interdisciplinary, inclusive, and critical pedagogy can resist systemic constraints while preparing future generalist teachers in meaningful ways. For my own practice, this observation underscored the importance of balancing freedom with structure, embedding cultural diversity authentically, and designing environments that teach alongside the teacher. It reinforced my belief that pedagogy is never neutral. It can either reproduce inequities or actively cultivate creative, critical, and inclusive spaces.

References

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Appendix 1: Email confirmation

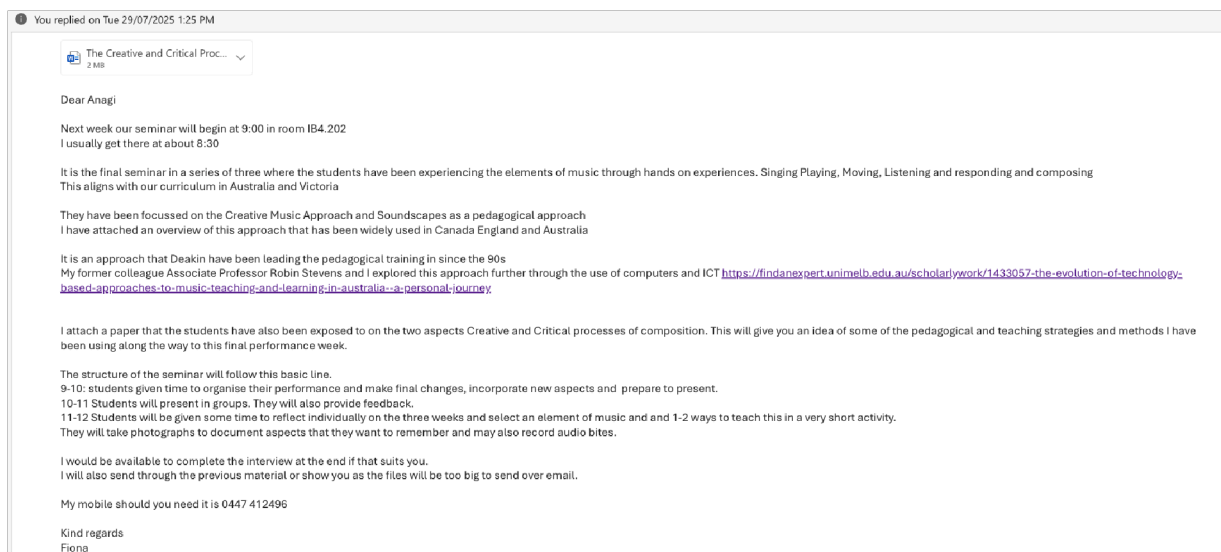


Figure 1: Confirmation email of case study observation

Appendix 2: Seminar slides and photographs of classroom materials and teaching resources

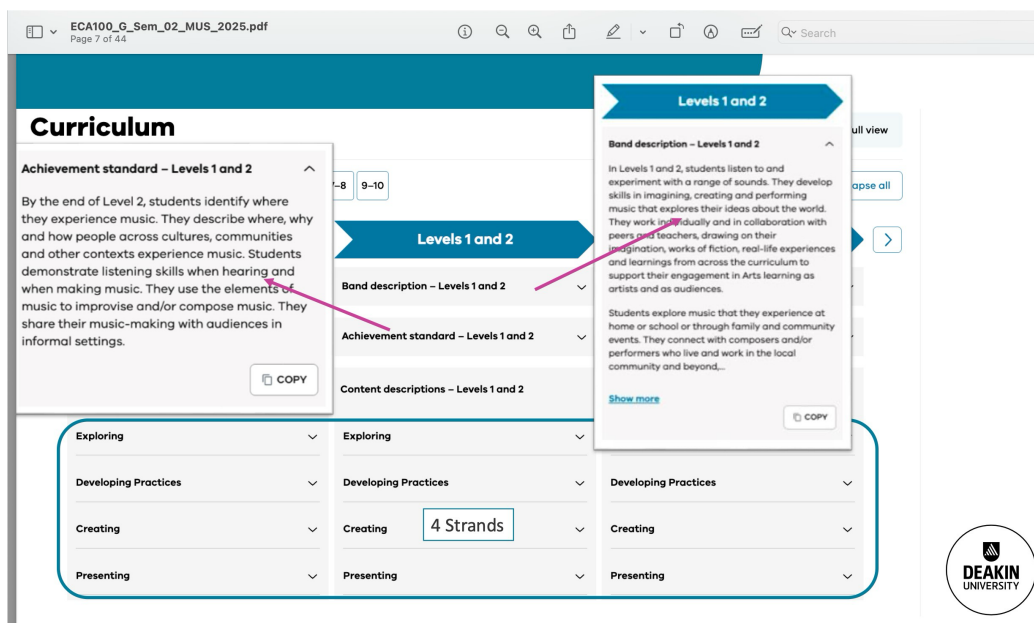
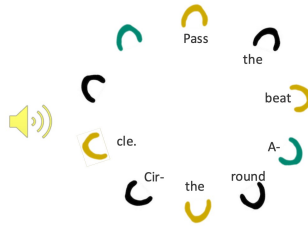


Figure 2: Seminar 2 slide on VCAA curriculum strands. The students had to refer to this when making their group presentations.

Pass the Beat Around The Circle



Students sit or stand and pass the steady beat around the circle to the phrase "Pass The Beat A-Round The Circle". The phrase is 8 beats long. A word or syllable is on each beat. Therefore the sound of the rhythm made by the words and syllables aligns with the beat exactly.



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Figure 3: Seminar 2 slide on an activity using indigenous art inspired story quilts/mats.



Figure 4: Photo of props



Figure 5: Posters and visual aids

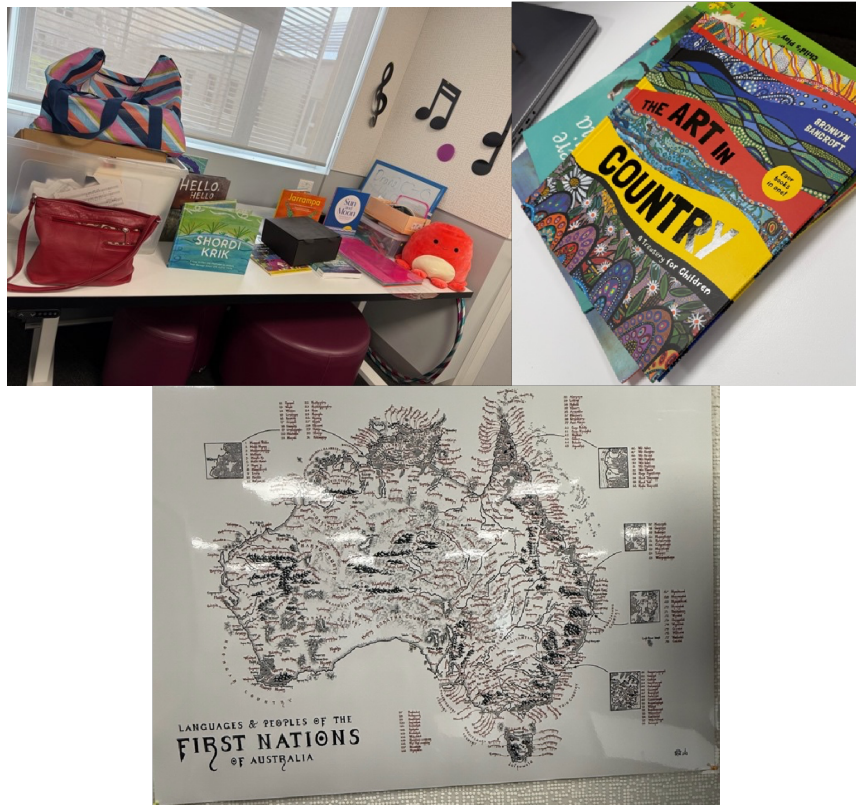


Figure 6: Indigenous books and resources on display in the classroom



Figure 7: Variety of instruments from different countries and cultures on display around the classroom