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Insights from Three Online Art Educators: Strategies for Instruction, Interaction, and Assessment  
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**Abstract**

Currently, the entire world is experiencing an unprecedented threat due to the outbreak of COVID-19, which requires the majority of K-16 education to be temporarily taught online. The three authors have been teaching virtual courses with a studio art focus for a number of years. We share our collective insights for approaches to instruction, interaction, and assessment in virtual courses that might help other art educators to achieve successful learning outcomes for their students. We learned that building a learning community and peer connections is of the utmost importance; we propose mixing asynchronous and synchronous methods and providing prompt and comprehensive feedback on students' artwork. The authors encourage other art educators to stay open-minded to new and flexible teaching environments, transforming this crisis into an opportunity to incorporate innovations into their teaching that even more effectively meet every student's needs.

## **Insights from Three Online Art Educators: Strategies for Instruction, Interaction, and Assessment**

At the 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Distance Teaching and Learning Conference, a presenter of the “ABCs of DE: The Pitfalls of Online Teaching” session began her talk by asking this question to the audience: “Have you taken an online course?” (Zhadko, 2018) Why is this an important question to ask instructors who teach online? This question has tremendous value because those instructors who have taken online courses themselves more fully understand the “pitfalls and challenges” of this mode of education, and how it differs from traditional classroom instruction.

Currently, the entire world is experiencing an unprecedented and dangerous threat due to the outbreak of COVID-19, which requires the majority of K-16 education to be temporarily taught online. While unfamiliarity with digital technologies may make the transition to online teaching difficult, the world’s sudden dependence on distance learning has sparked the pressing need to implement virtual art education that is efficient and effective (Godvin, 2020). The three authors are all art educators who have been teaching virtual courses with a studio art focus in higher education for a number of years. Based on our experiences, in this article we share our collective insights for approaches to instruction, interaction, and assessment in virtual courses that might help other art educators to avoid some of the common pitfalls of online teaching and to achieve successful learning outcomes for their students. Each author describes the strategies she employed while teaching an online course and offers an analytical reflection. We end by offering the key learnings from our teaching experiences, examining how diverse students’ needs could be met.

### **Possibilities of Online Teaching and Learning**

Colleges and universities have developed a separate division under labels such as e-learning, distance learning, and online learning to administer online courses. Due to the growing availability of distance learning at these institutions, “enrollment in online courses achieved the largest growth at 7.3% from 2015 to 2016” (Friedman, 2018, para. 4). The field of art education has adapted accordingly, developing new instructional methods that utilize a virtual learning environment. Reflection on the pedagogical use of an online space has led some art educators to theoretically analyze the impact of virtual learning (Keifer-Boyd et al., 2018); implement digital technology to construct unit plans (Erickson, 2005), as well as create, discuss, and display art (Lu, 2013; Wilks et al., 2012); and teach studio art online (Manifold, 2019; May, 2011).

Educators have developed strategies for students to participate actively and to build their knowledge formally and informally in online environments (Fernando, 2018). In order to encourage students to enhance their learning experiences, online instructors need to help them create a learning community through the design of a course’s lectures, projects, assignments, and evaluation (Ouyang & Scharber, 2017). Martin et al. (2018) note that an instructor’s presence, connection, and engagement influence the quality of an online course. In addition, these researchers identify four aspects of facilitating distance education: technical, pedagogical, social, and managerial (Martin et al., 2018). Instructors can utilize a video-based instructor introduction and course orientation, visual syllabi, a variety of contact methods, weekly announcements, video-based short lectures, discussion forums, timely feedback, text/audio/video/visual-based feedback on assignments, personal responses, and synchronous sessions.

With the development of online education, researchers have explored ever-growing technologies and platforms. Distance learning has adopted specific platforms such as Zoom (Verma et al., 2020), Google Hangouts (Hashim et al., 2017), and VoiceThread (Delmas, 2017).

Online studio art has been found to provide flexible and effective learning that allows students to produce artwork at any time, overcoming the limitations of distance and time constraints (George, 2018). The following sections will examine instructional approaches utilized in three art education courses offered online. How to teach studio projects virtually will be a main focus.

### **Author A at University A**

I have taught an undergraduate online course titled *Art in the Elementary School* for the past twelve years at a southeastern university. The school's Art Education program currently offers four undergraduate courses and most of its Master of Arts in Education courses online. This art education method course for non-art majors explores both art education theory and studio practice. The course includes on-campus and online sections, both of which have been taught by the author. Art demonstration videos for the online section were recorded during my on-campus class sessions. It appears that about half of the students enrolled live in a nearby town and choose the online classes to use their time more flexibly.

### **Instruction**

This course uses Blackboard as a platform for class activities. To complete studio projects, students are guided through the following steps. First, students read detailed instructions. Based on the written text, students identify the project goal, objective, needed art supplies, and each step of art making. Second, students watch my demonstration videos. Third, students start working on an art project and record their art making process using VoiceThread, a type of video-recording software. Figure 1 shows students using this software to document their creative process.

Figure 1

*Still Images from Students' Art Making Videos and Completed Self-Portraits*



## Interaction

While creating art pieces, students email me when they have project-related problems. When students have technical problems, they contact the Instructional Technology and

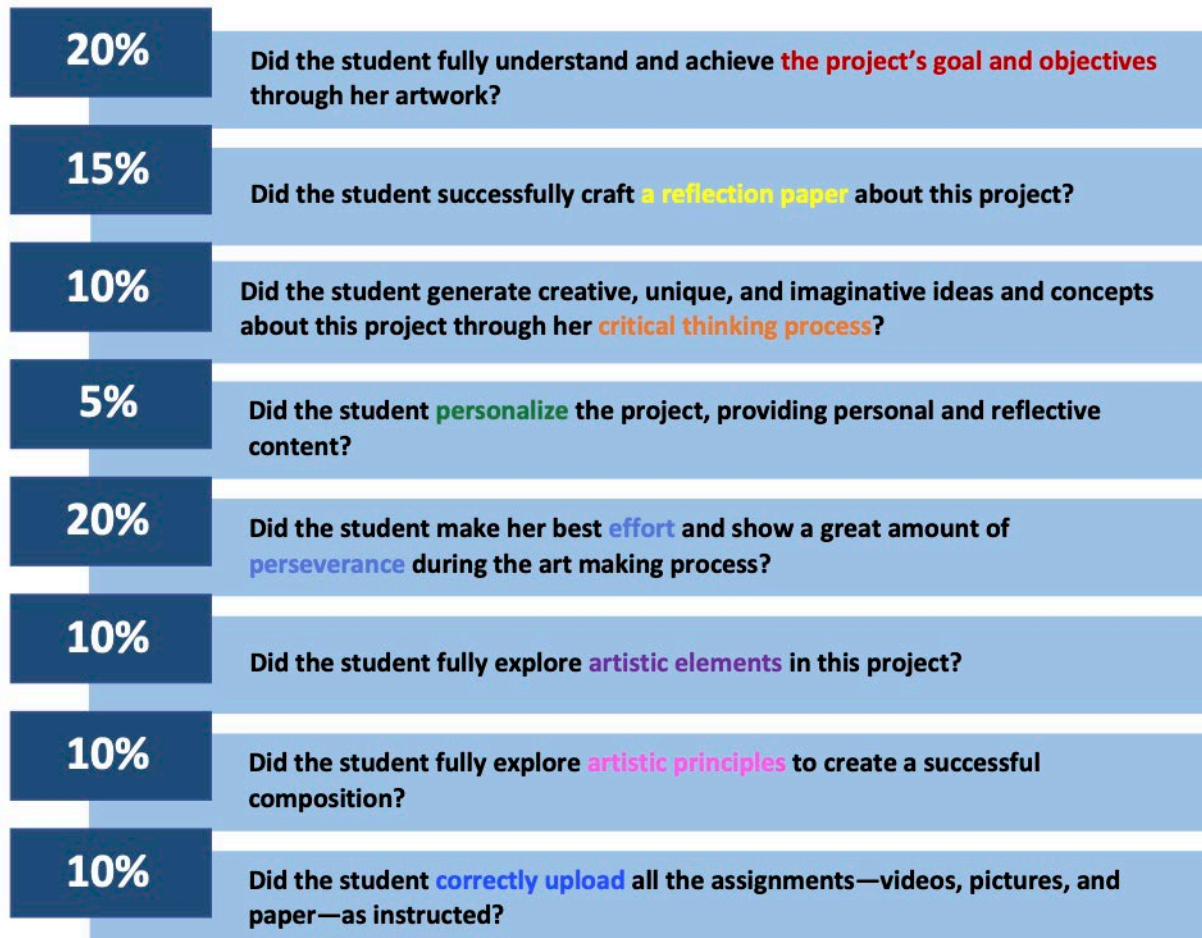
Computing Services staff. Both I and technicians try to reply within 24 hours, as their prompt assistance is crucial for students' successful performance. Once a student submits video recordings of art production and two artwork photos along with a 150-word reflection, I review the work and email each student her feedback. Students then improve their artworks based on the instructor's suggestions and submit their final versions. For four of the six art projects assigned, students additionally participate in art conversation forums on a discussion board. Along with artwork images, they post reflections regarding: 1) what was successful, and 2) what was challenging while creating the art piece. Students also need to reply to at least two classmates' postings. In this course, most activities are conducted in an asynchronous manner.

### **Assessment**

Students mail or drop off their completed, original artwork twice, once around the midterm and the other near the final. This course aims to incorporate both formative and summative assessment methods. As part of formative assessment, I review students' videos to include the art making process in their evaluation. I provide a summative grading rubric that is used for art projects, so students can review the assessment criteria before creating art pieces. Figure 2 presents the grading rubric for art projects.

Figure 2

*The Grading Rubric for Art Projects*



## Analysis

The participating students were non-art majors, so many of them lacked confidence in their art skills. They responded positively to the instructor's step-by-step instructions and detailed feedback on art projects. They valued the clarity of the instruction and the opportunity to improve their artwork. I learned that providing a comprehensive grading rubric is critical for online courses. In addition, the use of diversified methods such as text-based guidelines, video-based demonstrations, and a discussion board was effective, as these resources encouraged a multi-layered learning process and increased self-efficacy on the part of students. Participating in a peer-review activity, they formed a learning community by supporting each other's art making journey.

Some students attempted to copy project examples and classmates' art reflection writings. In response, I ceased uploading examples for most art projects; the project samples could have discouraged imaginative and original ideas on the part of the students. Also, the discussion board settings were changed so that students could only view classmates' writings after posting their own reflections. Reflecting on these outcomes, I recommend that online art educators revisit their curricular structure and strategies regularly. For example, I joined the Universal Design Learning (UDL) faculty interest group and redesigned the course based on this curriculum theory (Knochel, Hsiao, & Pittenger, 2018).

### **Author B at University B**

As an associate instructor, I taught an introductory art education course at a midwestern state university for six semesters. The featured course was designed for general education students. Over 100 students took the course each semester. Initially, the course was only taught in a traditional setting. In 2012, the course was offered in a hybrid format, including both online and in-class components. The following year, the course was conducted entirely in an online environment.

### **Instruction**

The professor who has taught this course for many years developed a textbook, on the basis of choice-based art education (Douglas & Jaquith, 2009). This course included 14 strands, 80 art lessons. Students could choose one to three strands, depending on their course credits. Students followed the sequence of lessons within each strand. The series of lessons was sequential based on the difficulty of various skills and the types of artistic understanding. The textbook provides detailed directions for each activity. If students could not understand the directions, they emailed me or met me in person.



## **Interaction**

Students and I met in the Adobe Cyber-classroom at an assigned time once in a week. Between 30 and 40 students enrolled in the class, so I divided them into four small groups. Approximately ten students were logged into the Cyber-classroom through the university's website. At the first meeting, I asked the students to state their preference for mode of communication among video, voice, and chat. To receive credit, students needed to take pictures of their artworks, both in progress and after completion. Then, they uploaded the photo images, and, in a synchronous class session, explained their works to classmates. Other students and I made comments accordingly. During the following session, students shared thoughts about their artistic process and improvements they had made to their work.

## **Assessment**

Each lesson included a 200-word reflection paper. Students described the personal meaning they derived from the lesson, their new and/or improved skills, the difficulties they encountered and how they overcame those challenges, and how they planned to utilize the lesson in a future classroom. They created a folder to hold files of all their images of in-progress and finished artworks, reflection papers, and a portfolio in PowerPoint. They then submitted this folder to the University Online Learning Website. The grading rubric included five areas: art production, perception, reflection, approach to work, and participation and improvement.

## **Analysis**

Students in my classes easily adapted to the communication format of a synchronous virtual classroom. I selected the option of a synchronous session in response to obstacles encountered in communicating online with students (Cole, 2016). For example, due to limitations on image size, exchanging emails was not suitable for providing feedback regarding

students' artworks. On the contrary, synchronous meetings allowed students to ask questions about their works and to receive prompt answers from me. Students who did not major in art appreciated receiving immediate feedback on their art creations from multiple perspectives. In addition, students told me that through these opportunities to share artworks and discuss the difficulties of art creation with other students, they felt that they belonged to a learning community. I recognized that establishing a learning community could be a critical factor in facilitating students' learning effectiveness and engagement in online education.

Despite the fact that students actively participated in the synchronous classroom setting online, I noted that students tended to hesitate providing critical and negative real-time feedback to peers. The use of asynchronous discussion boards, however, provided enough time for students to refine their language and give valuable feedback to others. Therefore, I recommend that online courses utilize a hybrid of synchronous and asynchronous formats, such as synchronous classes, synchronous one-on-one meetings, and asynchronous discussion boards, to improve students' learning and effective communication.

#### **Author C at University C**

As a graduate assistant, I graded an introductory art course for six semesters at a Northeastern state university in the mid-2010s. Since the early 2000s, this course has been offered to around 150 students per semester. One instructor and three graduate assistants were in charge of the grading, feedback, and communication with students. The student body was diverse, including on-campus undergraduate students, out-of-state residents with full-time jobs, and non-US citizens living abroad. Due to its massive size and roster of students in different time zones, the course was asynchronous. To improve the learning experience for students of diverse backgrounds, student writing and reflection was a major component (Andrews, 2005).

## **Instruction**

This course was delivered through its own website (for course content), an educational platform, Angel (for quizzes and communications), and a Google Grading Rubric (for assessment). The platform was recently changed to Canvas. With art history, art making, and reflexive writing serving as the foundation, the course website provided detailed instructions for exploring seven themes through completing art projects and reading accompanying art history texts. Also, the website provided tutorial videos and previous students' exemplary artwork. Without using any synchronous methods, the website guided students through a self-directed learning process.

## **Interaction**

This class did not have a venue to share students' artwork and receive feedback from each other. As a compromise, synchronous virtual office hours were offered, although almost all students preferred email communication. Students could receive feedback from the instructor and graduate assistants regarding their work-in-progress; however, very few students took advantage of this option. Since the instructor's grades and responses to students' inquiries prepared students for subsequent assignments, prompt communication and grading were important.

## **Assessment**

Each project was graded based on artwork (50%) and a 650-800-word research-based artist statement (50%). Students submitted digital images of their final artwork (one image of the entire artwork that includes its four edges, as well as 2-3 close-ups) and an artist statement. Almost identical grading rubrics were used for all of the projects. Each work of art was assessed based on its theme, adherence to assignment requirements, formal elements, composition, craftsmanship, and image quality; whereas the artist statement was graded based on its theme,

adherence to writing requirements, content, inclusion of research, art vocabulary, personal impact, clarity, organization, citations, and grammar. When using the rubric, graders provided both feedback for each section and overall comments for each project.

### **Analysis**

This course was of immense size while also being asynchronous. However, the course filled up rather quickly during the registration periods due to its support for self-directed learning. Whether students were on-campus or in different time zones, detailed guidance and prompt communication supported students' self-discipline in managing their learning.

Although plagiarism rarely occurred, the absence of a requirement to document the artmaking process raised the possibility for plagiarism. When an uploaded image did not include the four edges of the artwork and a student's skillset differed significantly from other projects, I used the Google Search by Image tool to see if submitted images were found online. Since this was only a reactive measure, I later developed the course at a different institution and added further requirements: an image of the artwork-in-progress for formative assessment, a handwritten signature and student's selfie with the artwork to attest to its originality, and feedback sessions among students for peer connections.

As a whole, the asynchronicity of this course presented both benefits and challenges. Students may have simultaneously enjoyed increased self-directed learning and flexibility, while at the same time struggled with the lack of opportunities to connect with peers. Therefore, I propose that the combination of asynchronous discussions with peer feedback sessions about artwork can encourage both self-discipline in learning and a sense of community for students in an asynchronous learning environment.

### **Conclusion**

Within this paper, we reviewed the online instructional strategies we utilized to foster students' engagement with art. Figure 3 provides a comparison of the three courses with regard to synchronous versus asynchronous instruction, format of artwork feedback, and method of artwork submission. Each course pulled from a different set of student populations: students on campus for University B, students on campus and in-state adult learners for University A, and on-campus students and adult learners in- and out-of-state and abroad for University C. To meet their different needs, the use of synchronicity was high in University B, decreased in University A, and absent in University C.

Regarding the question, "Have you taken an online course?" shared in the Introduction, we feel fortunate to have experienced taking online courses themselves. The biggest pitfall we found was the sense of isolation. The flexibility and independent learning that virtual courses offer may lead students to feel isolated and left behind. This negative aspect of online instruction is particularly pronounced when students try to strike a balance among school coursework, a part-time job, and family responsibilities. We learned that two instructional approaches are effective in preventing student isolation. First, adding opportunities for face-to-face communication between student and teacher via Zoom or office visits is helpful. Second, building a learning community and peer connections is of the utmost importance; students can support each other's learning process, offering encouragement and constructive criticism. We propose mixing asynchronous and synchronous methods and providing prompt and comprehensive feedback on students' artwork. In particular, non-art majors seem to appreciate such feedback to a greater degree.


Students with limited experience in art demonstrated positive learning outcomes in the online courses presented in this article, including a greater understanding of various art forms,

improvement in technical ability, comfort and confidence in art making, and readiness to appreciate their own and others' artwork (Manifold, 2019). We learned that it is important to re-examine classroom activities and learning outcomes regularly based on emerging curriculum theories and modify course structure and contents accordingly. Implementation of new curriculum theory and practice should be based on various student needs. Monitoring students' feedback, responses, and concerns is critical for identifying their ever-changing needs.


In his article published right after the COVID-19 pandemic started, Gannon (2020) suggests that educators build up "collective wisdom" (para. 7) and maintain a "teaching community" (para. 8) to successfully "pivot" to online instruction. In agreement with his suggestions, we encourage other art educators to stay open-minded to new and flexible teaching environments, transforming this crisis into an opportunity to incorporate innovations into their teaching that even more effectively meet every student's needs.

Figure 3


*The Comparison of the Three Courses*



**Synchronous  
vs.  
Asynchronous**



**Artwork Feedback:  
From an Instructor**



**Artwork Feedback:  
Among Students**



**The Methods of  
Artwork Submission**

**University A**

The course was offered mainly asynchronously. In the first three years of teaching this course, the instructor offered the chat-based virtual office hours, which was discontinued as students preferred email communication.

The instructor reviewed images of completed art projects and art process videos and emailed students her feedback. This way, students improved their artworks based on her suggestions before submitting their final versions.

The students shared feedback with one another through discussion board forum postings.

The instructor required students to submit original artworks through mailing or an office visit.

**University B**

The instructor utilized both synchronous and asynchronous methods of instruction. During the synchronous portion, students attended classes at an assigned time in the Adobe Cyber-classroom.

Students uploaded and shared the in-progress and final versions of their artworks on the screen board in the Cyber-classroom. After the student explained the work, the instructor verbally gave feedback.

Students shared feedback with classmates in synchronous discussion sessions.

Students submitted original artworks when the course combined both traditional and online learning. After the course was changed to an online-only format, students submitted digital images only.

**University C**

Due to its massive size and roster of students in different time zones, the course was asynchronous.

Although the instructor offered synchronous virtual office hours and students could receive feedback from the instructor regarding their work-in-progress, very few students took advantage of this.

This class did not have a venue for peer feedback.

Students submitted digital images of final artwork: one image of the entire artwork that includes its four edges, as well as 2-3 close-ups.

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