

EXPLORING STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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Isolation, Connection, and Embrace: Exploring Students' Perspectives on Virtual Art Education During the Pandemic

Name: Borim Song, Ed.D.

Affiliation: Associate Professor of Art Education, School of Art and Design, College of Fine Arts and Communication, East Carolina University

Address: 2000 Leo W. Jenkins Fine Arts Center, Mail Stop 502, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858-4353

Email: songb@ecu.edu / Website: www.borimsong.com

Tel: 252-328-1319 (office) / 410-440-1359 (cell)

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-0674-9752

Kyungeun Lim, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Art Education

School of Art, College of Arts and Letters, Northern Arizona University

Room 211 Building 37A, Fine Arts, 1115 S Knoles Dr, Flagstaff, AZ 86011-6031

Email: Kyungeun.lim@nau.edu / Website: www.kyungeunlim.com

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6920-4293

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Abstract

Utilizing storytelling, two art educators explore how their undergraduate students experienced the transition to online education after the outbreak of COVID-19. Three themes are examined based on the students' reflections: 1) new characteristics of and experiences within virtual learning, 2) isolation and connection, and 3) embracement and adjustment. The participating students shared their course experiences, with regard to the changes in course design and structure made due to the abrupt transition to online instruction. The participating students felt some loneliness due to isolation and social distancing. They experienced multilayered connections purposefully made through learning communities, small groups, student pairs, and student-instructor communication using discussion boards, emails, group chat, personal webpages, and Canvas messages and feedback. We suggest that exchanging narratives about students' learning and art making experiences helps educators build their own teaching communities and serves as a strategy to overcome challenges and develop resilience in uncertain times full of changes and transitions.

Key words: isolation; connection, virtual art education; higher education; student experience; COVID-19

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Authors' Bio

Borim Song is an Associate Professor at the School of Art and Design of East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina, USA. She holds her Ed.D. and Ed.M. from Teachers College, Columbia University in New York City. Her scholarly interests include digital art instruction, online education practice, contemporary art in K-12 curriculum, cross-cultural and intercultural movements, and community-based art education for underserved population. Song's writings on art, art education, and cultural studies appear in publications in both the U.S. and Korea.

Kyungeun Lim obtained her Ph.D. from Indiana University Bloomington, double majoring in 1) Art Education in Curriculum & Instruction, and 2) Comparative Education in Education Policy Studies. She holds an M.A in Art Education and a B.F.A in Fine Art, focusing on painting and minor in Art Education from Seoul National University. She has been teaching arts and education from elementary school students to adults at schools, museums, and higher education institutions in traditional classroom settings and online classrooms-both synchronous and asynchronous.

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Isolation, Connection, and Embrace: Exploring Students' Perspectives on Virtual Art Education During the Pandemic

This photo was taken at a playground I used to go to a lot when I was younger, and it was very sad to see the pandemic had caused it to shut down and how everything was changing. When the pandemic first started, I had hope that it would end soon, but little did I know it would last this long. It was and is so hard to believe. As of now, I'm beginning to believe that this will be the new 'normal.' (personal communication, February 15, 2021)

Figure 1

Caution, Photograph by Sandy,¹ 2021.



¹ All student names included in this article are pseudonyms.

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The COVID-19 global pandemic has brought numerous changes to college students' lives (Hash, 2021; Lee et al., 2021). The epigraph above presents an undergraduate art student's honest response to the pandemic, also illustrated in her photograph (Figure 1), which shows these changes with a visually striking 'caution' sign. As art educators, we collected our undergraduate students' stories and artworks that exemplify the transitions, challenges, and concerns they experienced during the pandemic. Inspired by art educators' suggestion of the importance of sharing stories and narratives through writing in an educational context (Jung, 2011; Lawton et al., 2019; Zander, 2007), this paper provides readers with examples of the student's written reflections as well as their artworks.

The purpose of this article is to explore how the students experienced the transition to online education after the outbreak of COVID-19 and examine educational implications for teachers who want to improve teaching strategies and engagement with their students in online classrooms. Three themes are examined based on the students' reflections: 1) new characteristics of and experiences within virtual learning, 2) isolation and connection, and 3) embracement and adjustment. We end the paper by providing the key learnings from our students' online class experiences and artistic creations and recommendations for future research. In addition, we suggest that exchanging narratives about students' learning and art making experiences helps educators build their own teaching communities and serves as a strategy to overcome challenges and develop resilience in uncertain times full of changes and transitions.

The Writing and Art Making Process

Approximately 40 students enrolled in undergraduate art education method courses (Early Experiences for Prospective Teachers, Art in the Elementary School, and Integrating the Arts in the Elementary Curriculum) at two different universities located in the same southeastern

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state participated in the writing and art making activities from Spring 2020 through Spring 2021. The participating students were sophomores, juniors, or seniors, and included both art majors and non-art majors. They were asked to craft a reflection paper and an art piece based on the guiding questions that we provided (see Appendix). The students described what they encountered and felt in their virtual classes during the pandemic. We analyzed the reflections by identifying emerging themes. The themes of new characteristics and experiences of online learning, isolation and connection, and embracement and adjustment emerged as dominant concepts.

Utilizing various art media, the students created artwork that illustrated their pandemic experiences in unique and personalized ways (Figures 2–10). For example, in her acrylic painting, Kate visually represented the virtual assistance she had received and the communications/connections she had made via her devices during the quarantine (Figure 2). In her reflection about the artwork, Kate explained her experience:

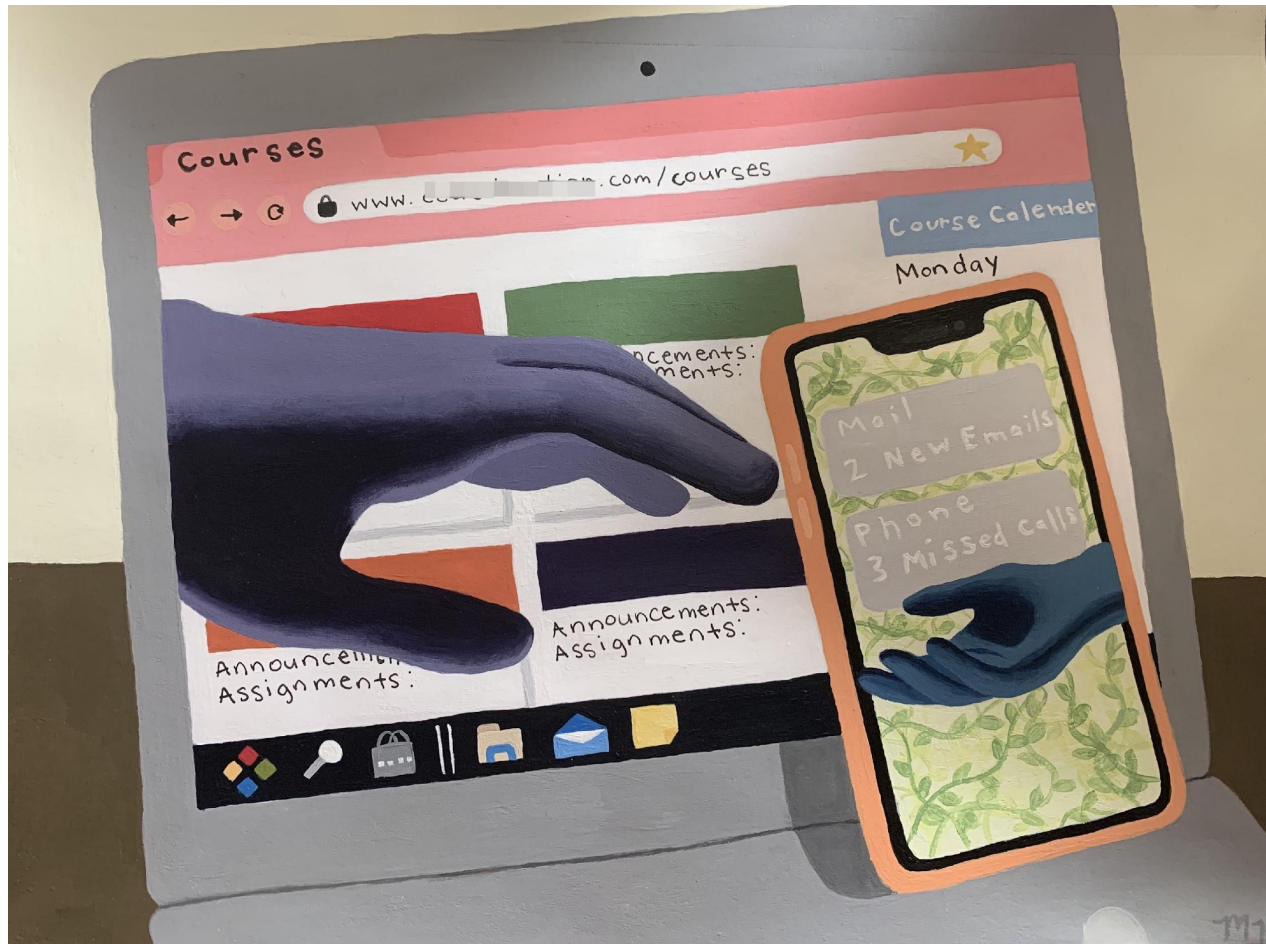
I demonstrated virtual helping hands and connections as my laptop and phone were important essentials for helping me through my 2020 spring semester. My phone helped me stay connected with friends, family, and classmates while my laptop was needed for my course work, completing assignments, and communicating with my [instructor].
(personal communication, July 7, 2020)

In the following sections, we explain in detail what students shared about their online learning experiences through their reflections and artwork, under the three overarching themes introduced above.

Figure 2

Artwork by Kate, Acrylics on Paper, 2020.

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Online Course Experiences During the Pandemic

The participating students shared their course experiences with regard to the changes in course design and structure due to the abrupt transition to online instruction. Emily pointed out that shifting from a traditional course to an online course was an “eye-opening experience” (personal communication, July 1, 2020). According to her, the transition to virtual learning was not seamless, but her classes turned out to be successful. Emily explained she was not good at meeting new people, so meeting classmates online eased her social anxiety.

Mary found the first virtual semester to be more challenging, stating, “I don’t feel I was able to give my online courses the focus and attention they needed” (personal communication, July 1, 2020). The first author met with Mary via Webex to learn what challenges prevented her

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from focusing and paying attention. It turned out that her mother, a social worker, was being tested for the virus, and her grandfather was scheduled to have surgery. The use of a video conferencing tool was greatly effective in helping students in situations such as Mary's (Verma, et al., 2020). Since Mary had not completed most of her assignments, the instructor decided to meet with her via Webex every day for a week. Together, they "set goals and made a specific action plan" that she "would stick to and complete all coursework" (personal communication, July 1, 2020). Some students pointed out that they used Webex for their classes and found video calls to be helpful although they cannot entirely replace face-to-face conversations.

Many educators (Orhan-Karsak & Yurtçu, 2021; Reilly, 2020) have called attention to the mixed emotions students experienced while taking virtual classes during the pandemic. The desire to express these feelings was apparent in some of the students' artwork. For instance, Paul showed the emotions he felt over losing the 'fun' aspect of art classes for most of his learning time (Figure 3).

In my drawing, I had a work desk, with my computer doing assignments, and paperwork next to it. Instead of work, the paper is scribbled on and the word fun is crossed out...I was trying to express the overload of work that took over having fun and enjoying my time. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

Figure 3

Digital Print by Paul, 2021.



Meanwhile, other students focused on the anxiety they felt due to uncertainty related to pandemic situations. Brittany expressed her mixed emotions in her digital artwork (Figure 4):

During the pandemic, I have looked for many outlets to feel more positive. I personally felt a lot of mixed emotions during quarantine, some were positive and some were negative. I created this piece to represent my feelings towards the pandemic and quarantine. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

Figure 4

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Digital Print by Brittany, 2021.

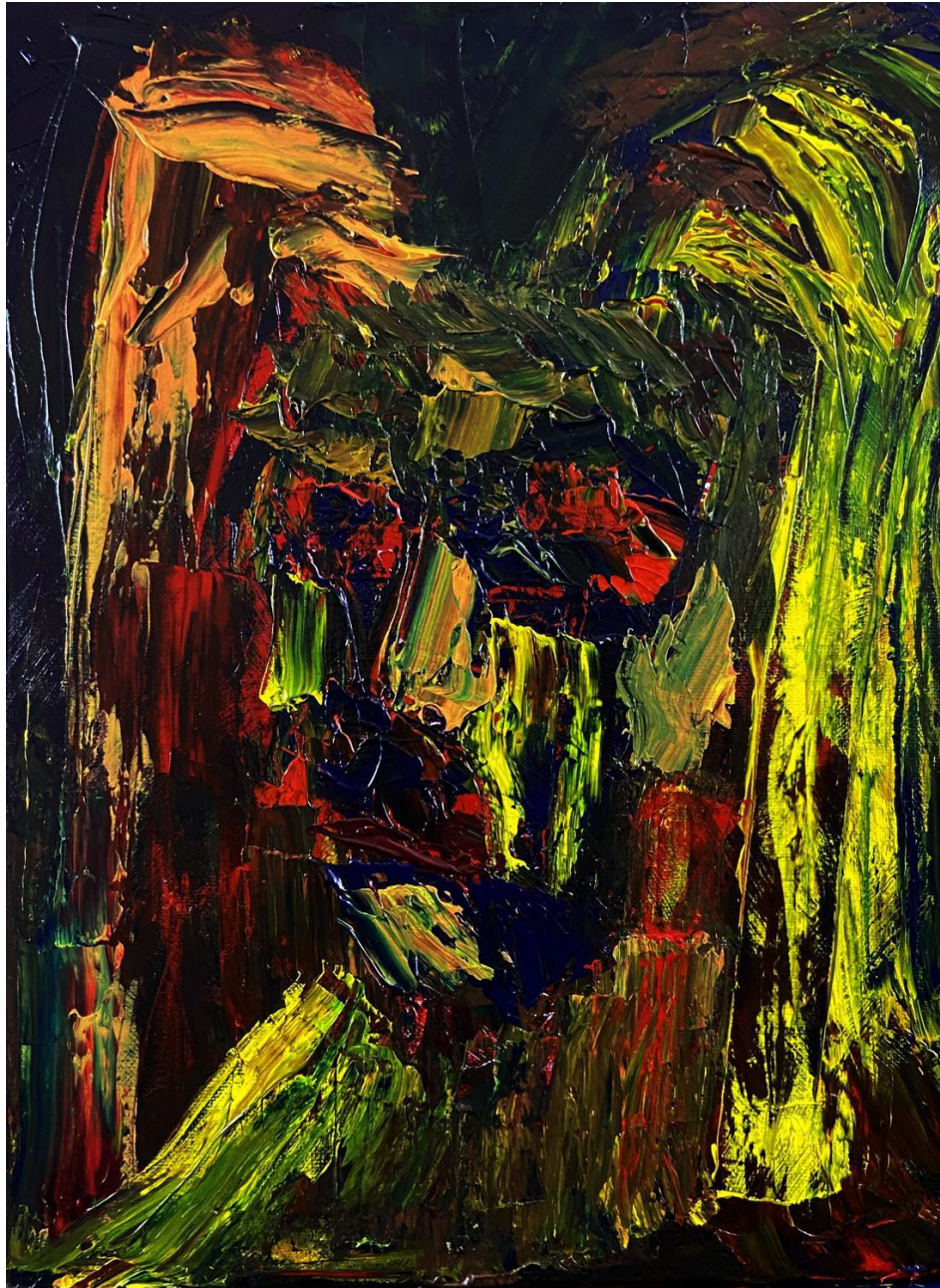


Effective methods of expression in art are ones that “allow participants to slow down and honor the process of meaning-making of their unique experiences” (Culshaw, 2019, p. 270). Steven described the emotions that he endeavored to deliver through his painting (Figure 5): “I painted this last semester when I was really struggling with online art classes and the pandemic in general. I wanted to show all of my pain and frustration” (personal communication, February 16, 2021). This section examined the students’ remote learning experiences and their mixed feelings following various pandemic experiences. In the next section, we focus on the students’ written and artistic responses regarding the issues of isolation and connection.

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Figure 5

Painting by Steven, 2021.

**Isolation and Connection**

In response to questions about isolation, some students answered that they did not feel isolated because they could still contact the people they needed to (Phirangee & Malec, 2017).

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Kate found that during the spring semester, her professors had students use discussion boards more frequently, and students were more responsive when posting comments, compared to previous semesters. In all of our respective classes, we designed and implemented a peer feedback system using Canvas and Padlet. For example, the second author required that each student leave feedback for at least three peers. When students created artworks, they were expected to submit their process, reflection papers, challenges, and final versions to the online learning platform. In all submission processes, students needed to share feedback with other students. They were given specific guidelines for the feedback, such as netiquette, appropriate languages, and terms for critique. In addition, beyond sharing feedback with small groups, discussion boards were utilized for the whole class to communicate with each other. On the discussion boards, we posted problems that students were required to discuss, and students were able to post questions regarding class topics, personal questions about art materials, supplies, and expression methods, and any other small items they wanted to share with the whole class.

Other students reported that they felt isolated while taking online courses (Al-Samarraie et al., 2017). Mary described the “change from physically being in a school environment while having a schedule for schoolwork and peers to discuss with, to moving home to online classes and following the stay-at-home order...caused a lot of the feeling of isolation for [her]” (personal communication, July 1, 2020). Cindy stated that she “felt isolated from classmates, friends, and the world in general,” as she loved interacting with people; she said that the lack of human contact was “depressing” (personal communication, June 29, 2020). Figure 6 clearly shows the feeling of isolation Taylor experienced during quarantine. She described the sequence of changing emotions and responses she felt:

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Quarantining spring 2020, felt more of a time to just relax. I like staying home so quarantining was never a problem for me. During quarantine, I would always be on my computer playing video games and it felt more of an escape for me. When it came down to school during quarantine last year, I did feel a sense of isolation. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

Figure 6

Photograph by Taylor, 2020.

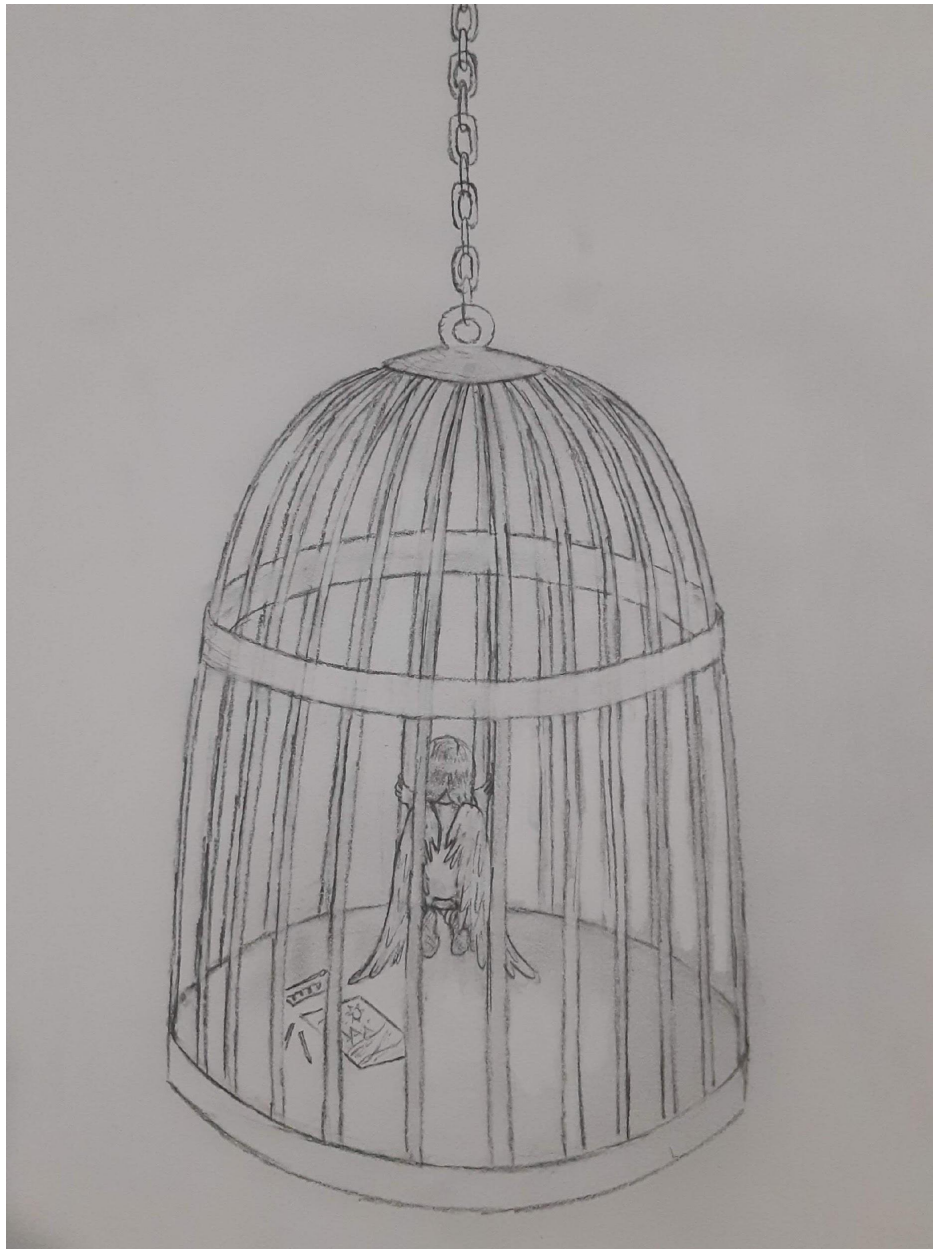


Art is a great vehicle for expressing emotions (Brown, 2019). Another student, Janet, took this approach, expressing her feelings during quarantine and the pandemic in a drawing (Figure 7): “I felt like a bird trapped in a cage just wanting to go outside. But I needed a reason to go outside and I never had a good reason, but I had a need to get out” (personal communication, February 16, 2021).

Figure 7

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Drawing by Janet, 2021.



There were students who focused on computers and their relation to isolation. John, who found the school now to be “so computer-centric,” shared his concerns and frustrations about the changes in his life and school experiences:

The pandemic as a whole honestly flipped my entire life around, even though I had family and friends to be around being in isolation just made the world shrink. I tried to

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expand my circle with more online talking but it just felt so stale and boring. Face to face is just a whole different level rather than over the phone. (personal communication,

February 16, 2021)

Andy also described feeling emotions from living a computer-centric life and presented them visually in a digital print (Figure 8):

My everyday consists of a computer screen for hours on end. It's almost as if the computer has become my only means of living. Because I'm consistently behind my computer screen, most of my time is spent alone. It can be a struggle to have so much time alone, as I become consumed with my inner thoughts. (personal communication, February 16, 2021).

Figure 8

Digital Print by Andy, 2021.

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The students delineated ways to stay connected in class. Most of them communicated with their instructors via email, discussion board forums, and announcements on Canvas. Three students reported that they texted their classmates. Kate stated that her classes voluntarily decided to use group chat on an app, with which they sent reminders about class assignments and tests, asked questions about course activities, and shared thoughts on the class and their circumstances in general. One student specifically pointed out the positive impact of turning on video cameras during synchronous class sessions. Peter reported that it helped him stay connected (Figure 9):

In my personal response to the pandemic, it feels like a major part of me shut down. I lost a large part of where I was getting my social interactions from class... I feel less isolated online this semester and I feel like a big role that's being played in that is everyone having their cameras on, that was never the case previously for my online classes.

(personal communication, February 17, 2021)

Figure 9

Drawing by Peter, 2021.

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Some students stressed the importance of maintaining a learning community. Cindy warned that it was easy to feel disconnected while learning online. Mary remarked, “Keeping online communication with peers and instructors...are lessons that I have learned that were key for success during this time” (personal communication, July 1, 2020). As demonstrated in their reflections and art pieces, the students experienced varied levels of isolation and endeavored to fight its negative effects by staying connected and communicating through a supportive online community.

Embrace and Adjustment

Although the students reported inability to complete some important course activities due to situations caused by the pandemic, they felt that they needed to embrace the circumstances with a positive mindset rather than complain about what they missed in class. For example, Emily finished only 10 hours of the expected 16 hours of public school observations due to the closure of K–12 schools. Another student, Cindy, confessed that she did not make as much hands-on art as she had anticipated because the course unexpectedly adopted an online format. However, both students said that ‘considering’ the challenges presented by COVID-19, their courses were effective. They could ‘see’ the efforts of the instructor and students to engage in teaching and learning.

Students in one of the classes painted what they had experienced during the semester for their final project. This assignment allowed free choice of size and medium. Cindy showed noteworthy attitudinal changes during the Spring 2020 semester. Explaining her artwork (Figure 10), she said, “I painted this painting of the stars and space because space is endless, and that’s what I feel now” (personal communication, April 20, 2020). As illustrated in her painting, she felt the pandemic was endless, but she endeavored to embrace the situation while participating in

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the art classes. At the end of the semester, Cindy said that when classes changed to an online format, her creation of a virtual project for her community based on prior community art projects in which she had participated helped her accept the situation. Instead of feeling confined, she embraced the transition to online learning and finished the class successfully by thinking about her surroundings and community.

Figure 10

Artwork by Cindy, Mixed Media on Paper, 2020



Mary stated that stress from COVID-19 could not be avoided, but she emphasized the importance of accepting the reality of it: “It was a very big transition during a stressful time, but I feel that both teachers and students were navigating this transition by doing the best they could” (personal communication, July 1, 2020). Mary understood that not only she and her classmates

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but also people in other schools had to stay in quarantine; this awareness enabled her to deal with the situation in a positive manner. Figure 11 presents selected student narratives organized based on emergent themes and categories.

Figure 11

Student Narratives Organized Based on Emergent Themes and Categories

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COURSE EXPERIENCES

QUALITY OF THE ONLINE COURSE

"While the transition wasn't seamless, things still worked out and went well."

"My response to my online learning experience in Spring 2020 is it was different due to the many changes to my course work and adjusting to using video chatting on my laptop to communicate with my practicum mentor."

VIDEO CONFERENCING TOOL USE

"Being able to connect over video chat certainly helped. Video calls can't replace face to face conversations but they are the best substitute."

"After communicating through email, my instructor would set up virtual meetings through WebEX that were especially helpful to physically talk through the questions and issues I was experiencing."

"While I had been an online student, I had never used video chatting to communicate with my professors or having meetings."

ISOLATION AND CONNECTION

NOT FEELING ISOLATED

"I didn't really feel isolated because I could still contact the people I needed."

"I did not feel isolated during class activities because the professors had us students use discussion boards more frequently and throughout my years of online, it seemed that students were more responsive when commenting."

PERSONALITY AND ONLINE COMMUNICATION

"I'm not much of a social butterfly anyway, so going out and meeting people in real life isn't something I personally missed."

"I knew how to discipline myself to complete assignments and studying. I learned techniques to be productive while completing courses online."

IMPORTANCE OF STAYING COMMUNICATED

"I learned that communication was very important."

"While figuring out how to work WebEx to have meetings with my practicum mentor, I found that it is important to connect with people."

BENEFITS OF CONTACTING METHODS

"If I needed to talk to someone I could text, email or call them if I really needed to. I would email my professors and text my classmates to ask them questions if I had any."

"I stay in contact with my friends and family through different social media direct messages, facetime, calling, and texting."

FEELING ISOLATED AND CHALLENGED

"The change from physically being in a school environment while having a schedule for schoolwork and peers to discuss with, to moving home to online classes and following the stay-at-home order is what caused a lot of the feeling of isolation for me."

"I felt isolated after transitioning into my new 'normal' at home and falling behind in the class."

FORMING A SUPPORT COMMUNITY

"Most of my classes created a group chat on an app and many students sent reminders about assignments, tests, and quizzes along with asking questions and their thoughts and feelings about the class and what was going on in the world."

"These connections helped me not to feel alone and see how other people are dealing with the state of the world and their own quarantine."

EMBRACEMENT

NAVIGATING THE PANDEMIC SITUATION WITH A POSITIVE MINDSET

"It was a very big transition during a stressful time, but I feel that both teachers and students were navigating this transition by doing the best they could."

"Although there were many challenges and transitions ... keeping online communication with peers and instructors and also making times to focus on schoolwork are lessons that I have learned that were key for success during this time."

Conclusion

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Within this article, we explored students' perspectives on their online art education experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participating students found that there were unique features, characteristics, and experiences involved with online teaching and learning. Some of these encounters accompanied various emotions to different degrees. They felt some loneliness due to isolation and social distancing, but they also showed a strong will to stay positive and embrace their personal and school-related situations. We learned that two instructional approaches were effective in promoting students' development of resilience within remote learning. First, the students appreciated the connections they maintained through continuous interactions and the immediate responses they received from their instructor and classmates (Hicks, 2021; LaJevic, 2021). Second, the students valued the possibility of forming a support community through multilayered feedback that enabled the sharing and exchange of opinions, ideas, and responses (Filimowicz & Tzankova, 2017). This community building can happen through the instructor's purposeful planning for the use of small groups, student pairs, and student-instructor communication using discussion board postings and comments, emails, group chat, personal webpages, and Canvas messages. Our students' writing and artistic outcomes demonstrated that these connections created and maintained through a support community formation enabled the students to feel much less isolated and develop a positive mindset toward collaborative learning even with unexpected challenges.

We also noticed that according to the students' written expressions, they felt as if they had met their instructor in person through the video conference meetings. The students seemed to feel that they received personal attention during these virtual encounters, seeing the instructor's face, making eye contact as they spoke, and engaging in physical activities while communicating with their instructor on Webex or Zoom (Hildebrandt, 2021). A follow-up study could assess

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whether students perceive face-to-face video encounters as an actual and authentic form of personal communication with others, and how the visual arts are related to students' use of communication tools and ability to process emotions during the COVID-19 outbreak.

The students' candid stories reminded us of "narrative moments characterized by a spontaneous metaphorical connection of one person's life narrative to that of another" (Lawton et al., 2019, p. 37). We learned that educators could achieve immense professional growth by listening to student voices (Elson, 2020). As students form their own online learning communities to stay connected and improve remote learning, we suggest art educators build teaching communities that enables them to stay connected and develop resilience (Masked, 2021; Xie et al., 2021) by actively sharing their students' experiences through stories, voices, and artistic creations. Through these endeavors, the difficulties and challenges the pandemic has brought can provide art educators with opportunities to find their own ways of staying reflective, collaborative, and hopeful of improving their art teaching.

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Appendix*The Guiding Questions for Students' Reflection Writing*

- How did your online course go in general? What worked? What didn't work?
- What is your response to the online teaching and learning you experienced in Spring 2020?
- Did you feel isolated in this semester? If yes, why do you think you felt isolated? If not, why do you think you didn't feel isolated?
- Did you feel isolated while participating in this course's class activities? If yes, what do you think was the reason for that feeling of isolation? If not, why do you think you didn't feel isolated?
- While you were quarantined in your place, how did you stay connected with people you like? How did you get connected with your classmates? How did you get connected with your instructor? How did the connections help you?
- Regarding the interactions/connections/conversations/communications in your online course experience, what did you find? Could you give some detailed examples, if you can?
- Is there anything else you want to share? Personal stories are greatly welcome.