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Alone Together? Fighting Student Isolation in Online Art Education

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic required most K-16 educators to transition to the realm of online education. Across the nation, a plethora of insights on new technologies, platforms, and secret tips for distance teaching have burgeoned. Yet one critical aspect seems be missing: our students. Aren't they left out in these discussions? This essay recounts my personal journey as an art educator during the emergent culture of COVID-19. Sharing my stories and students' reflections, I particularly focus on strategies to prevent student isolation within virtual art education and explain how to use synchronous and asynchronous methods to stay connected with the students.

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Alone Together? Fighting Student Isolation in Online Art Education

The COVID-19 pandemic required most K-16 educators to transition to the realm of online education. Across the nation, a plethora of insights on new technologies, platforms, and secret tips for distance teaching have burgeoned (Gannon, 2020). Yet one critical aspect seems to be missing: our students. Aren't they left out in these discussions?

Inspired by art educators who emphasized the value of sharing personal narratives (Rolling, 2010; Savage, 2015), this essay recounts my personal journey as an art educator during the emergent culture of COVID-19. Sharing my stories and students' reflections, I want to particularly focus on strategies to prevent student isolation within virtual art education. Figures 1 through 4 present artworks that my students created in response to the pandemic as part of a discussion forum activity.

I have been teaching in the Art Education program of a southeastern university for 12 years. My university has a long history of providing distance education. However, even with long-term expertise and excellent technology support, many faculty members felt unprepared for virtual art teaching when all classes were abruptly moved online. They reached out for support, and as colleagues we actively shared information on distance learning tools.

The Need of a Learning Community

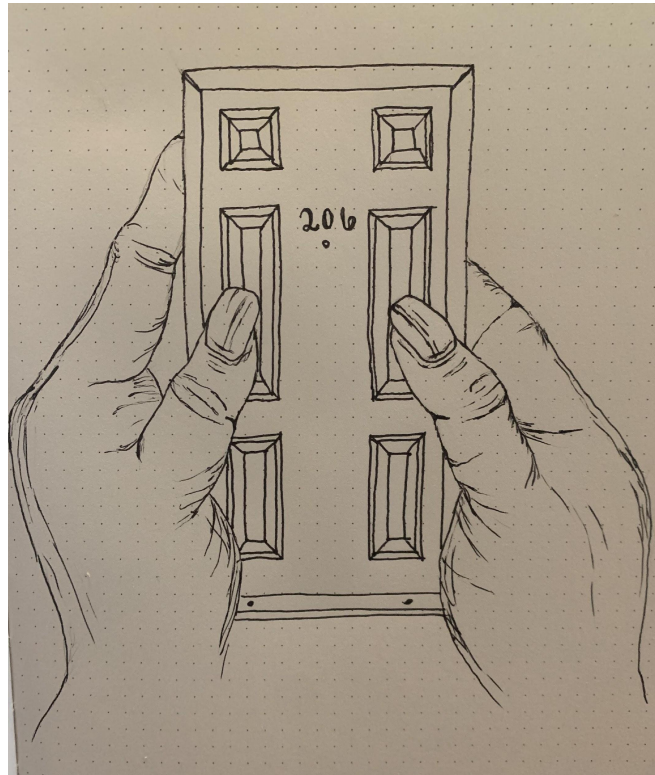
In her book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, Turkle (2011) criticized how much time we spend communicating by means of devices and insisted that we need to focus more on direct dialogues. As I sat in front of a screen in my own home, meeting with students via Webex, I was reminded of her book. During the two and a half months that followed, I embarked on an "Alone Together" journey with my students. While engaged in teaching, I reflected on the experience: My students are now "alone" physically. To

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help them learn and grow, how can I encourage them to feel that we are, in fact, “together?” How can we fight the sense of isolation by working together?

Figure 1

A Student's Pen Drawing. “...me holding my apartment door, symbolizing being in control on my entering and exiting of the thing holding me in from COVID-19.”



My practicum course transitioned to distance learning, so I instead used both synchronous and asynchronous methods to teach the art education course contents and to stay connected with the students. First, I held Webex class sessions at the scheduled class time every week. A student enrolled in this course reported that “being able to connect over video chat certainly helped” (personal communication, July 1, 2020). I regularly asked students about their every-day experiences and feelings. One student noted my efforts to provide support in a written reflection: “[the instructor] also checked up on me to see how I was doing with dealing with my independent study and everyday life” (personal communication, July 7, 2020).

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Second, I organized discussion forums on Canvas and encouraged students to stay actively engaged. While participating in this asynchronous activity, students were required to respond to at least two classmates' postings. This way, they shared feedback on each other's arguments in a respectful manner, and these peer interactions enabled the formation of a supportive learning community. For example, the student who created the painting featured in Figure 2 explained that each color painted in her work represents different feelings she felt during the quarantine. In the discussion forum, her classmate responded, "...I realized that you assigned the colors based on their psychologic properties. This was a well thought out art piece and I really enjoyed hearing about your experiences during the pandemic" (personal communication, October 6, 2020). Another student stated, "I love that you incorporated the emotion you feel with each color. That is a great strategy! Color brings so much to us" (personal communication, October 6, 2020).

Figure 2

A Student's Painting. "I chose a very simple shape, a circle, to show my mixed emotions about the pandemic all bundled together. I chose the circle because it is a common shape, just like I am sure everyone has common feelings/emotions about the pandemic."

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According to students' reflections, this online support community expanded beyond the course structure. The students formed a group chat on an app and helped each other's academic performance and emotional well-being by sending "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" (personal communication, July 7, 2020).

Figure 3

A Student's Clay Piece. "My sculpture is how I felt isolated and trapped, not understanding how this virus could potentially affect me. I was silently screaming, trying to not let my family know just how scared and uncomfortable the virus made me."

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What Students Really Need

In the last week of the semester, I received an email from a student. Amy¹ could not submit most of the required assignments on time and was under a lot of stress due to a family situation related to COVID-19, so she asked for an incomplete grade for the course. Instead, I suggested she attempt to complete all the missing projects with my assistance. I met with her via Webex every day for five consecutive days. By the last day of the week, Amy successfully completed the coursework. Describing this experience, she wrote:

...I learned that communication was very important. After communicating with and expressing to my instructor that I was having issues but wanted to continue and catch up with the course, ... [she was] willing to cooperate with me in getting back on track for the course. (personal communication, July 1, 2020)

Figure 4

A Student's Painting. "In order to describe my frustration of my isolation, I have shown two people yelling with the virus in between them, which describes how many relationships I've lost due to the virus coming in between us."

¹ This is a pseudonym.

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I realized that my students do not want a perfect solution to their problems from me. They want my attention, care, and willingness to help. Combining synchronous and asynchronous methods was helpful in preventing students' isolation within class interactions. I learned that students are capable of building a supportive learning community (Olofsson, 2007), and activities to encourage peer connections play a key role in this process. Through this process, my students felt that they were learning and growing "together" despite the distance between them due to the pandemic.

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