Racing to Adapt: K-12 Art Education in the Virtual Classroom

Whitney Rupp

University of Florida

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Dr. Heidi Powell

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Abstract

Walking into K-12 art classrooms, one is likely to see a plethora of supplies--paint, pastels, papers, found objects for sculpture, drying racks, kilns, printmaking materials--the list is long. Art educators are skilled materials managers and trained to teach use of traditional media to facilitate student learning. Few art educators would have guessed that they and their students would suddenly be separated from their classrooms and supplies, while still expected to continue with teaching and learning. On Wednesday, March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (WHO.int, 2020). Art educators around the world were given days or, in some cases, hours-notice that they would be moving to virtual learning. Ill-equipped for the task, but demanded to adapt, a huge need for guidance in online teaching has emerged in the field of art education. Art educators need to establish their vital roles in their schools' respective online communities. Parents, students, and administrators must see the value and need for art education in curriculum, whether on campus or through distance learning. This article attempts to identify specific needs and challenges for k-12 art educators to adapt to virtual learning as well as propose a plan to empower and equip art educators to teach online.

Adapting Art Education Practices for Virtual Learning

Redefining Pedagogy and Curriculum

Randy Quinn, Associate professor of Art Education and former Distance Learning director for East Carolina University is one art educator who saw this problem coming for years. Learning from isolated school closures brought on by H1N1 virus and the antibiotic-resistant Staphylococcus called MRSA, Quinn stated in 2011, "art educators must consider e-learning when devising curricula and pedagogy in anticipation of emergencies, such as pandemics or natural disasters, which might force students to learn from remote locations" (Quinn, 2011, p.

19). Quinn (2011) provides reflections on his own pedagogy teaching post-secondary art education online that could be adapted as advice for k-12 educators. Quinn (2011) explains that constraints and limits are necessary when assigning a task or project. Based on student feedback, Quinn (2011) shares the insight, "many students would likely feel more comfortable working in an autonomous fashion when a structure--even is it a very loose one--has been applied to the e-learning environment" (pp. 23-24). I find this to be true in my own experience as a distance learning student through the University of Florida online. Stating expectations clearly and providing structure promotes my creativity and willingness to work autonomously while ensuring a progression of learning (Quin, 2011).

Art educators now have the challenge of rewriting some aspects of curriculum to fit the progression of learning into a virtual model. With students not necessarily having access to the materials available in the physical art room, educators may have to give students flexibility in media options or focus on digital art. However, developing a quality curriculum should remain the focus over basing lessons on technology. The appeal of digital media should not overshadow including content that addresses personal, social, and global issues (Taylor & Carpenter, 2007). Canadian university level art educators, Joanna Black and Kathy Browning (2011) assert, "it is recommended that technology play a secondary role to creative pedagogy enabling the concepts of teaching and learning to drive the art education curriculum" (p.33). While developing lessons that creatively utilize technology and digital media has value, intentional focus on meaningful content should have the greatest impact on curriculum in a virtual classroom setting.

Preparing Art Educators and Students with Tech Skills

In my own workplace, a k-12 private school in Georgia, students in middle and high school are issued one-to-one Chromebooks. Students and teachers utilize Google Classroom

year-round for assignments and some assessments. While this likely made our transition to

virtual learning smoother than those not utilizing an online platform, additional training was

needed for teachers and students in the days before the move to virtual learning. Middle school

and high school students practiced using Google Meet in the days prior to virtual learning.

Regardless of what platform or programs are used, students and teachers need instructions for

using various technologies (Quinn, 2011). Students will also need guidance in their cultural

citizenship and ethics of navigating digital and creative commons (Delacruz, 2009). Preparing

students to use online platforms and resources responsibly is something that needs to be

addressed in the future if schools do not currently have a plan in place (Quinn, 2011).

Collaboration to Understand Online Resources

Collaboration among educators is critical to a successful transition to virtual learning. In

my own school, where we are two weeks into virtual learning, teachers continually share

technology resources and websites with colleagues through the app GroupMe and through Zoom

faculty meetings. As Taylor and Carpenter (2007) state, "While life in a digital world might be

natural for digital kids, many of their teachers struggle to navigate the same digital landscape"

(p. 88). Educators preparing for virtual teaching will have to dedicate additional time

independently and collaboratively in order to familiarize themselves with new apps, programs,

and web-based platforms before using them with students. Thankfully, many sites like Zoom,

Davis Digital, Scholastic, and others are waiving fees for educators during the COVID-19

pandemic. As Russell & Flynn (2000) expressed, "...in today's world the problems we are facing

are so complex that solutions can no longer be generated and successfully implemented in a

vacuum. Cross-disciplinary and cross-sector collaboration is required to have the desired impact"

(p. 2). Collaboration is essential for educators if they are to succeed in the virtual world of teaching.

Establishing Student Engagement

Another key component that should be addressed by art educators is the idea of building a positive learning environment online for students. Continuing to make personal connections and meet the holistic needs of students from a distance will have a positive effect on student engagement. When students feel care and support from their teachers, they too will feel more confident adjusting to new forms of technology use (Bucholz & Sheffler, 2009; Reid in Burton, 2009; Delacruz, 2009).

<p align="center">**Conclusion and Remaining Questions**</p>

Art educators in the process of transitioning to virtual learning face many challenges. There is a need for guidance and education in the areas of technology, curriculum and pedagogy adjustments for online learning, and in the effort to build a new positive learning environment in the form of a virtual classroom. Art education can be supported by connecting to professional learning communities. I have personally heard from many fellow educators that the sudden move to virtual learning has forced them to learn new technologies they would not have taken the time to tackle in the regular classroom. This leads one to ask many questions about the future. How will technology use change when educators return to the physical school building? Which websites and programs will be worth investing in later when they are no longer free? How might our students want to see technology use in the physical classroom? What new roles and responsibilities will we have as art educators teaching in the virtual art classroom?

Summary of My Critical Action Plan

I propose that the creation of a comprehensive web-based resource for k-12 educators would support a smoother transition and result in collaboration, teacher confidence, and improved quality of curriculum. This resource would be shared on social media, where it could quickly reach educators in need of guidance and resources and provide another outlet for collaboration. I would submit my research brief to NAEA Advisory in order to start a conversation about the critical needs of art educators moving to online teaching. Successful transitions to a virtual art classroom will provide teacher support, ensure student learning, and allow stakeholders (students, parents, administrators and community members) to see art as a vital component in the school's curriculum regardless of physical or virtual setting.

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