Art and Design Education in Times of COVID-19: Distance Learning and the Importance of Interaction and Empathy

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Highlights

At the period of worldwide public health emergency of COVID-19, the majority of educational institutions in the world have faced the forced emergency lockdown and migration into the digital, online or virtual learning and teaching environments. Basically, it must be stated up front that digital media and processes have long been part of art instruction, and the maker movement has introduced 3-D printing, especially in design classes. But distance learning presents yet another set of challenges for these subjects. This article examines how this change has affected the teaching of art and design, looks at two case studies (secondary school and university) and refers to discussions at art education conferences and papers on the post-pandemic challenges of digitization in the arts.

Keywords: interaction, art and design education, distance teaching, 21st century skills, COVID-19

1 Introduction

During the worldwide public health emergency that is the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of educational institutions have been facing emergency lockdowns and experienced a forced migration into digital spaces, online or virtual learning and teaching environments. While digital media and digital processes have long been part of art instruction, e.g. 3D-printing as introduced by the maker movement, and especially also of design classes, distance learning presents yet another, complex set of challenges for these subjects. Certainly a distinction has to be made in general regarding the use of digital media and computer mediated communication (CMC) methods, which have been used especially by the pandemic as a teaching method also in art and design classes.

This article examines how this shift from analogue to digital has affected art and design education, as the subjects tend to be called in Austria. First two case studies will be presented, Due to personal experience as a teacher in both secondary and tertiary education and specific interest in the area of applied didactics this article will start by presenting two case studies which will be illustrate the issue of ZOOM fatigue in practice and how it happened at school and university. Further it refers to discussions at art and design education conferences and papers on the post-pandemic challenges of digitization in the arts.

2 Case study 1

A secondary school in Austria. During the first COVID-19-related lockdown in Austria, most of the schools continued education via emails. Only some schools immediately moved to using CMC where it was possible to see each other 'in virtual person', such as Zoom or Teams etc. Based on personal experience and reports from colleagues, students displayed very high motivation and active participation. For some students, CMC was the only way to see and interact with their teachers face to face. Indeed, it appears that ZOOM allowed for much closer interaction than the physical classroom, which may be due to the fact that in a physical, 'real' classroom or lecture hall, not everybody gets to sit in the first row right in front of the teacher; some students sit further away or in the back. In ZOOM, however, everybody has a front row seat, making interactions much more personal and almost intimate. However, even at the beginning of the ZOOM classrooms, it soon became obvious that holding a lesson via ZOOM is different: it requires a lot more interaction such as individual or group work; otherwise the lesson will be mostly taught ex-cathedra, which quickly leads to fatigue. A student art teacher taught a class on senses for the first time. She had prepared interactive sessions, which she thought of as a question-answer method. The starting point was a slide that represented icons for all five senses. The students, however, immediately discovered the possibilities of drawing in ZOOM and scribbled

the answers directly on the slide containing the questions. The student reacted positively and was pleased with the numerous interactions that took place, not verbally, but visually, for the time being. However, this experience already indicates the tangible that becomes possible with digital teaching. The tasks can be given in increasingly visual ways in the form of drawings, and words are relegated to the background. Visual literacy is practiced and encouraged. Even if this example involved 'overwriting', a certain form of aesthetics emerged spontaneously. A concrete change in art lessons in the future could be the use of digital communication tools, so that tasks of theoretical teaching can already be designed visually and interactively.

Figure 1. Zoom interaction in a secondary art class @ Ruth Mateus-Berr

3 Case study 2

Art University seminar, first semester Students were introduced to digital communication. This assignment was about getting to know each other, reflecting on the importance of communication, 'reading faces of children and others – with pandemic constraints', learning about facial expressions as an essential element of a character portrayal in a graphic novel, and understanding CMC´s mechanisms. Students explore how the lack of body language in CMC and having to deduce meaning from facial expressions alone, restrains and reduces the capacity to generate empathy and thereby heavily impacts teaching rationales as well.

Students were sent into ZOOM break-out rooms in pairs and asked to mimic five different emotions. Subsequently, they were asked to put the fotos of their faces onto Padlet (a low-threshold computer interaction tool). They experienced how difficult it is to 'read faces' when wearing a mask on and how much certain parts of the face have to be overemphasized in order to recognize the expressed feeling well.
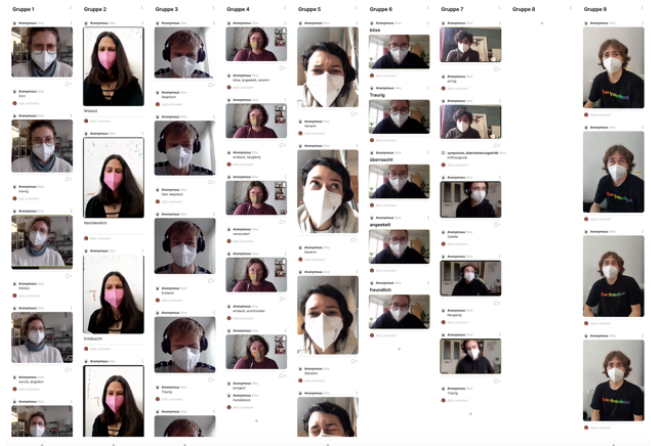

Figure 2. Padlet interaction with Padlet at Art University @ Ruth Mateus-Berr

They were instructed to watch a short video about intercultural communication and the whole class discussed how misunderstandings come into existence through interpretations of body language. Art & Design didactics here interacts a lot with the reference science of psychology and pedagogy. The special feature of art and design education, however, is that it integrates visual interactions. Overall, this was at the same time an exercise for the design of characters that they should create in their graphic novel on a position in didactics for art, which formed part of their grade for this seminar.

Here, too, the digital possibilities changed the form of the lessons: real exercises – like with the mask, would take far more time to do in an analogue way and would not give the students the opportunity to look at and reflect on the overall results as quickly. The possibility of faster interactive processes is also due to the program ZOOM, which makes it possible to randomly sort people into groups. This eliminates the decision-making process of individual persons, which of course could also be criticized. In general, this form of teaching as certainly evoked the already long-awaited change in the teacher role. Kaur & Bhatt noticed (2020, 41) that this emergency migration to the digital changed the teacher's role from input provider to facilitator. Marić (2020) believes, that "the main challenge of online or remote distance teaching will probably include addressing the emotional and psychological needs of both learners and teachers (specifically physical and mental health)" and according to Kaur & Batt (2020, 42, cited in Maric 2020), "the access to information would no longer be the primary concern, and the next greatest

challenge for teachers would be to equip themselves with 'inter-personal skills' and keep the students engaged, interested and invested in their education", highlighting the importance of life-long learning. The less interaction takes place, the more fatigue is produced. But there exists another challenge: CMC requires a high level of sustained, as illustrated by considerable effort need-ed just to read others' reactions in their faces. This attitude, also named 'empathy', is essential. However, normally an emphatic encounter takes place in person, one sees, hears, smells and feels each other in a room. CMC is usually limited to facial percep-tion only. Empathy is our capacity to grasp and understand the mental and emotional lives of others (Lanzoni, 2019), and it lies at the core of prosocial development. It serves to regulate rela-tionships, and to support collaboration and group cohesion by facilitating awareness, understanding and sensitivity to others' perspectives and feelings (Decety & Jackson 2004): it is a higher-order mental process which includes (1) the rapid sharing of another's emotional state from multiple sensorial afferences (af-fective resonance), (2) appreciating the other's point of view and prior experience (perspective taking/ Theory of Mind, ToM), and (3) the ability to modulate one's own affective response to the sharing of another's emotional experience (emotion regula-tion). Yet, the ability to effectively empathise has been suggested to be negatively impacted by the usage of videoconferencing tools (Turkle, 2016) and the question arises how to close this gap in teacher training at the tertiary level – especially in arts train-ing, which is very much determined by continuous feedback. In studio teaching, the role of empathy in the relationship between teachers and students is particularly relevant, which probably cannot be closed so easily by CMC.

4 Recent discussion in the field of art and design education

General experience was exchanged at the INSEA (Interna-tional Society for Education through Art) conference 2020: 'Art Education in Times of Coronavirus' at the live discussion on re-learning, re-thinking, re-framing art education. The partici-pants discussed the post-pandemic situation of art education, talked about the transformative power of the pandemic, as it will change art education, the accessibility of all to digital means, the so-called 'digital poverty'. They stated that art education deliv-ers the possibility to express the feelings as for example to ex-press 'the fear' at the moment of the Lockdown, they mentioned the missing interaction and how a new way, how and where we teach, what kind of new spaces will arise. It was discussed how the 'new normal in art education' (Kuchah Kuchah 2020) will look like, and how artists will react to the pandemic. It has been observed that students who create at home invest more time and that students come into focus who would never stand out in a classroom. They were discussing the function of art education. The healing aspect of art education was reflected, too, and its importance of well-being (SDG 3).

Judith Burton (2020) gets it to the point when she says: "As we find ourselves forced into the broad-sale implementation of online learning far sooner than anyone anticipated, our current crisis highlights all the deepest weaknesses in our education system – but it also offers us an unprecedented opportunity for change."

Students are already accessing online resources of their in-terest and are connected with other students around the world (examples: maker movement, interactive practices with muse-ums etc.). Material -based education such as Tinkering and im-provisational Design proven to work well during the quarantine. Students could dock directly to their living environment and discover things at home that they could incorporate into artistic projects. There are many artistic possibilities with digital means, which students might teach themselves, if led by interest. What then should the art teacher do?

Precht (2020, 169) stresses that "No other challenge is likely to force our schools and universities to rethink as much as pre-serving and nurturing the intrinsic motivation of our children" and this intrinsic motivation should arise especially for areas of interest that do not necessarily count those of the students but are components of general education. The solution may lie in making connections: Gebeshuber (2020) argues that what we need today: teachers that convey understanding and not prima-rily knowledge.

Regardless of specific changes brought about in art and de-sign education by E-learning, one form is still unresolved: until the 20th century – art and design education consisted primarily of the method of imitation, digital learning opens up a variety of interaction. Lines of development of didactics of drawing and art pedagogical thinking often correspond with epochal breaks and paradigm shifts, which characterize, for example, the visual arts in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance or from an imitation of nature, which was still essential until the end of the 19th century, to an autonomous art of moder-nity, which primarily thematizes its own means. The ruptures and paradigm-shifts in the field of visual arts usually reflect changes in the world view and expansions of people's possibili-ties of thinking, which are never limited to individual countries, but at least in Western and Central Europe gain great influence everywhere (Legler 2013, 10-11; Mateus-Berr & Reitstätter 2017).

This is not a problem with digital learning (forced by COV-ID-19) – there were already before COVID-19 – innumerable instruction courses for art and design production, except – and this is essential: students do not have access to the Internet and also do not have the possibility to carry out realizations by means of digital procedures (keyword 'digital poverty'). What definitely comes up short is the very individual and frequently used feed-back that is common in art classes, which is particularly essen-tial for conveying personality (Mateus-Berr & Poscharnig 2014, 502; Mateus-Berr & Jochum 2020) and, above all, 21st century skills in the overall curriculum.

This article described two small examples of the impact of CMC on art and design instruction and argued for moderate, if possible, hybrid instruction in these subject areas.

As examples showed there are new possibilities in presentations and work, opportunities for the subjects, but too much CMC leads to zoom fatigue and low motivation. If CMC is used, interactive teaching methods are preferable to purely frontal teaching methods.

CMC has certain advantages for art and design teaching, such as easier and shorter grouping and work, but at the same time also some disadvantages, such as the absent possibility to 'look over the shoulder' of the art and design practitioners and to be able to give a variety of feedback, which unfortunately can only be done on results and not – as usual – on the process. Long-term effects of distance teaching in art and design education are not yet known and studies are still lacking in the field itself.

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