

Teaching at a Distance: 10 Teachable Moments for Art Teachers

Heather Heckel

Editor's Note: As a frequent contributor to the NYSATA News, Heather Heckel has previously shown us the deep connections between her artistic life and her art classrooms. Now, prevented from physical contact with her students, she explains how those connections provided the inspiration for her distance teaching and lessons for her practice.

I am a rare breed of millennial who considers herself a Luddite. I am not interested in social media, I still have an iPhone 6, and I would much rather be reading a physical book, walking outside, or having a conversation with a person than a screen. So when our district asked us to move beyond emailing (the only mode of communication I felt comfortable with) to “live instruction” which had to include at least our voice, I panicked. Then I realized that I was experiencing some of the same feelings that a student in my classroom might be feeling if she did not feel confident in her drawing abilities, or if he was shy and afraid to reach out, or a perfectionist afraid to try new things for fear of failure. This was an opportunity for me to teach myself the lessons that I am always trying to teach my students.

1. Have artist's block? Start with something you love!

How was I supposed to create something new with all the added pressures of delivering a lesson remotely? Then I remembered what I tell my students, find something about it that you love to get you started. In the last edition of the NYSATA News, I wrote about my love of National Parks, so I needed to develop a lesson for sixth and eighth grade students relating to that theme.

2. Highlight strengths.

What was a benefit of these new restrictions? In my classroom I have a set of encyclopedias and several reference books; we do not have computers where students can search the internet for reference images and

up-to-date information. Now that students were homebound with internet access and I had chosen a theme, I decided to have students travel virtually for what would be their Spring Break by conducting some online research to create their own postcards inspired by the parks.

3. Try something new!

I would have to eventually deliver my lesson, but I was actively avoiding Google Classroom. I had never used it before because I preferred paper copies. I like to hold things in my hands and write feedback using a pen. However, now we need a platform to connect with students and I decided to jump in. Luckily this interface is intuitive, and it matched my style of simple and accessible organization. Once I entered all my students into my classes for the new quarter I realized that my attitude had shifted from reluctant to enthusiastic. By trying something new I had discovered that I liked it, and instead of being a threat, it is just another mode of communication with my students.

4. Get experience with a variety of media.

Now that I had gained some experience in Google Classroom I was done, right? Well, maybe I would finally give Google Arts and Culture a try since I've heard so much about how it offers great visual resources from all over the world. Google Arts & Culture provided The Hidden World of the National Parks, an interactive platform for five National Parks: Kenai Fjords in Alaska, Hawai'i Volcanoes, Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico, Bryce Canyon





in Utah, and Dry Tortugas in Florida.¹ This was perfect for my lesson, and I could show students how to access and use the website using Kaptura (more new technology!), a great screen capturing program that I had used during my time at Savannah College of Art and Design. I would also have students tell me their plans using a Google Forms Survey before they started creating their artwork.

5. It is OK to make mistakes because they are part of the creative process.

Once I had my ideas and communication platform, it was time to create the content of the assignment. My first video lesson took me several hours to record because I kept messing up my words and having to start over. Did I look weird on video? Did I pause too long? Can they hear my keyboard clicking in the background? Does the electrical outlet on the wall behind me distract from my presentation? To put all my recordings together I had to teach myself the program on my Mac that I had always ignored: iMovie. Thank goodness it too is intuitive, and I learned as I went. However, every time I tried to download my video that was over a gigabyte my computer would crash. After a massive software update and accepting the fact that it did not have to be perfect I got the point – the important part was connecting with my students and communicating the requirements of the assignment!



6. Exercise choice.

This experience has reminded me that an excellent technique for differentiation is offering choice. Students were able to choose which park they wanted to investigate, and the media, content and layout they would use. Since each student has access to different art supplies at home, and it has been fun to see how they problem solve within the parameters of the assignment by using what materials they have available.

7. Give and receive prompt feedback.

Google Classroom provides an accessible way to give and receive feedback quickly. Personal comments on assignments are a great way to talk to students about their artwork, and if

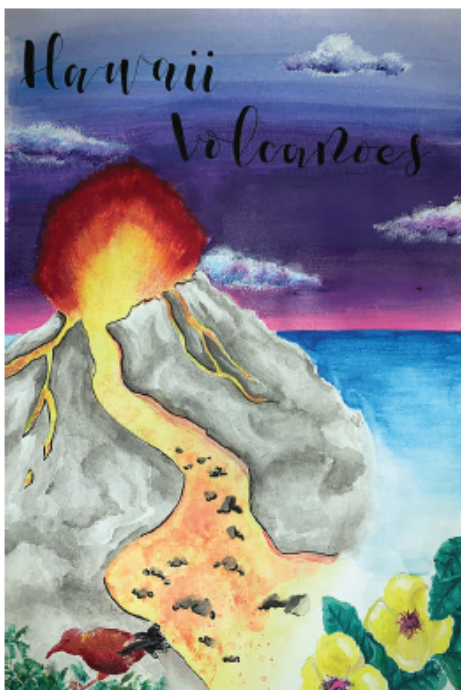
you set up email notifications you can be notified when they ask you a question. I also created a slideshow of students' artwork using Google Slides so the entire class could see what each other created, and give shout outs about what they notice. In-progress and final critiques are important whether they are spoken or typed. In fact, having students respond digitally gave every student a voice, even the quiet ones who might not otherwise volunteer their thoughts.

8. Art is everywhere!

All of this learning and teaching was happening from the comfort of my own desk, because like everyone else I was staying home and practicing social distancing too. The time saved from not commuting and not having anywhere else to go focused my free time on the ultimate never ending art project: home improvement. My partner and I ripped up old carpet, painted banisters and cut moldings – all by ourselves. All of a sudden I found myself identifying the elements and principles of design in everything: the repetition of the rectangular shapes of the staircase, the contrast of textures in the discarded carpet lying next to the newly revealed hardwood floors. Staying at home also means homemade everything for every meal. I learned how to bake sourdough bread, and making several different kinds of cookies many times a week sounded like a good idea: variety! The shishito peppers I had never made before had the most amazing chartreuse color, how would I mix that hue if I were using oil paint? Look at the emphasis of the dark chocolate chips in the beige dough surrounding them. One afternoon it dawned on me that following the directions of a recipe is much more similar to following the steps of an art lesson than I had previously thought. Hadn't I always said the elements of design are the ingredients and the principles of design are the finished recipe – now I really get it!

9. Step outside your comfort zone (that is where the magic happens!).

I am really only comfortable with creating two-dimensional artwork, and suddenly my home was providing all



kinds of three-dimensional tasks. Regarding the aforementioned stairs, I became quite experienced with wielding a flathead screwdriver and needle nose pliers to remove carpet staples in the hardwood floors. This was like an archaeological dig which uncovered buried craftsmanship (or lack thereof), evidence that for example whoever had put the carpet in had used an excessive amount of staples. I was now kneading dough and paying attention to plating breakfast, lunch, snacks, and dinner. I have a newfound and humbling appreciation for interior design, the culinary arts, power tools, and the fine craft of men's haircuts, which are all on my radar now.

10. Collaborate, or see what your neighbor is doing.

Coincidentally in this time of extreme isolation there has been extreme unity. There are so many resources available online from professional organizations, and the art teachers in my district are kind enough to post their lesson plans in a shared folder. This present time has inspired incredible motivation to collaborate, and it seems we are communicating with each other more than we might have when we were in closer physical proximity. It is

interesting how restrictions can sometimes promote growth.

This experience will certainly have an impact on my teaching moving forward. I will be sure to mine more resources on Google Arts and Culture, and museum and local and national arts organizations websites. I am now more open to trying new lessons in the classroom, even if they might not turn out the way I thought. I am inspired to connect with my students on a more personal level since I understand how much they need my support, and how important the arts are in helping to alleviate stress and fostering emotional growth. Maybe my mandatory technological upgrade will make me more relatable to my students since I now understand what all the excitement is about!

Notes:

1 "The Hidden Worlds of the National Parks," *Google Arts & Culture*, <https://artsandculture.withgoogle.com/en-us/national-parks-service/parks>. Accessed on April 22, 2020.

More about the National Park postcard design project: Sixth and eighth grade students were introduced to careers in the arts including graphic design,

illustration, and artist residencies. Our art historical inspiration was the WPA National Park Poster Program. Students then researched one of five featured National Parks using Google Arts & Culture and individual park websites, and chose at least one plant and one animal that lives inside the park. They also had to include a foreground, middle ground, background and use professional bubble lettering to advertise the park's name. The extra credit prompt was to design a postage stamp and write a postcard to someone they know describing what they had learned during this project.



Heather Heckel has taught art in New York for seven years so far, at both middle school and high school levels. Her favorite thing to do during the summer is to travel to be an artist-in-residence for the

National Park Service at various locations across the country. To date, she has completed eight residencies in Arkansas, Connecticut, Washington, California, Iowa, Indiana, Arizona and Nebraska. Her portfolio and a list of awards and publications may be viewed at www.HeatherHeckel.com.)

She would love to hear about how her story relates to yours:

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