

Teaching at a Distance: Seven Teachable Moments for Art Teachers

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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 rather be reading a book, walking outside, or having a conversation with a person than a screen. So when our district asked us to teach remotely with livestreaming during the pandemic, I panicked. Then I realized that I was experiencing the same feelings that students in my classroom might be feeling if they did not feel confident in their drawing abilities, if they were shy and afraid to reach out, or if they were perfectionists who were 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.

If You Are Having Artist's Block, Start With Something You Love

How was I supposed to create something new while being under pressure to deliver the lesson remotely? Then I remembered what I tell my middle school students—find something about the task that you love to get you started. In addition to teaching art, I am also an artist, and I have had the pleasure of being awarded 13 artist residencies through the National Park Service. I started with my love of our national parks and sending snail mail, and then fused the two to create a postcard design assignment.

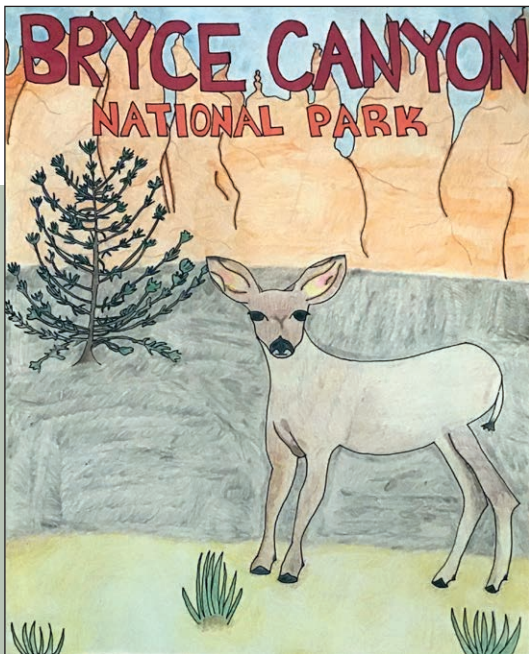


Figure 1 (left). Bryce Canyon student artwork 1. A 6th-grade student's colored pencil artwork of Bryce Canyon National Park.

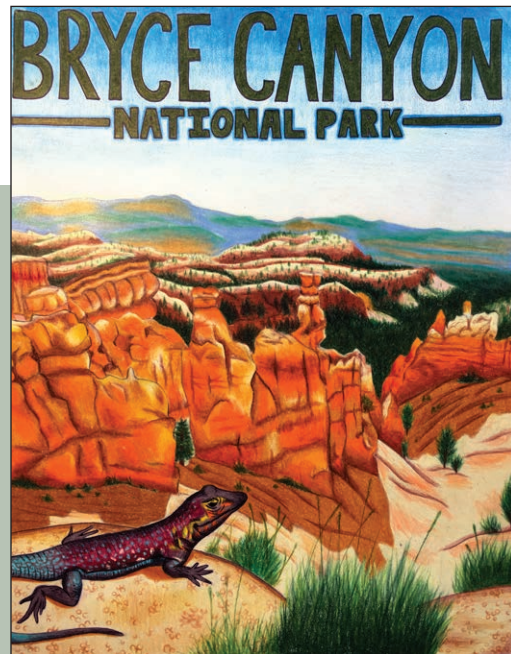


Figure 2 (right). Bryce Canyon student artwork 2. An 8th-grade student's colored pencil artwork of Bryce Canyon National Park.

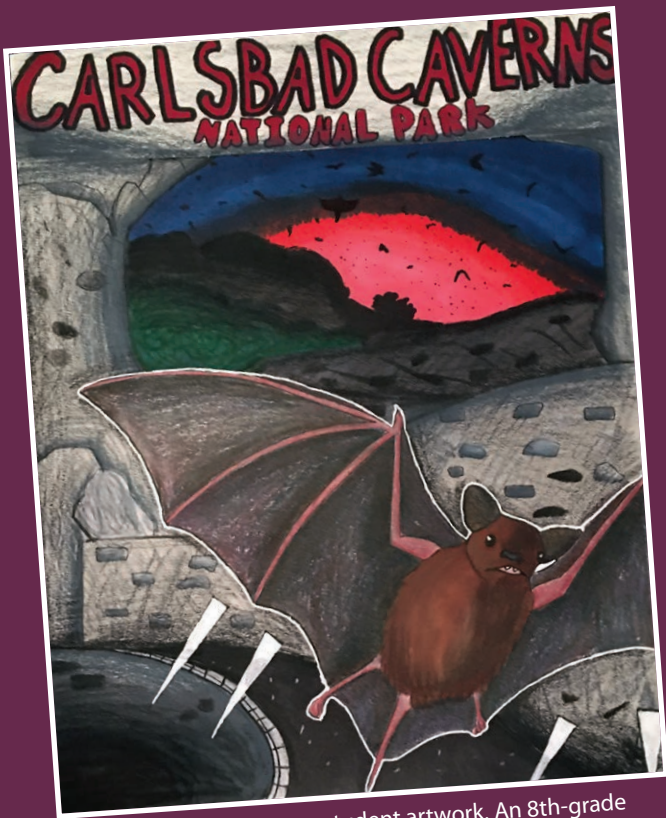


Figure 3. Carlsbad Caverns student artwork. An 8th-grade student's colored pencil and ink artwork of Carlsbad Caverns National Park.



Figure 4. Dry Tortugas student artwork. An 8th-grade student's digital artwork of Dry Tortugas National Park.

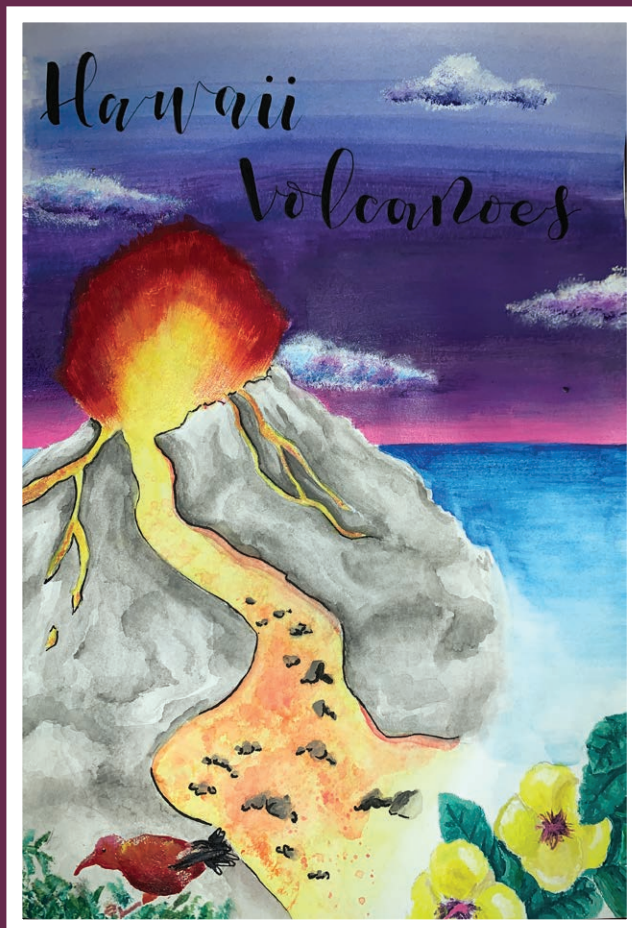


Figure 5. Hawai'i Volcanoes student artwork. An 8th-grade student's watercolor and ink artwork of Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park.

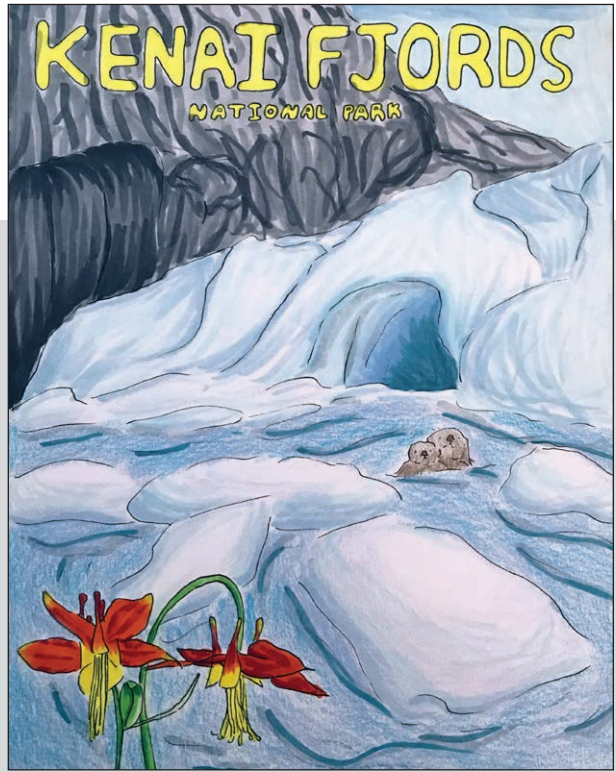
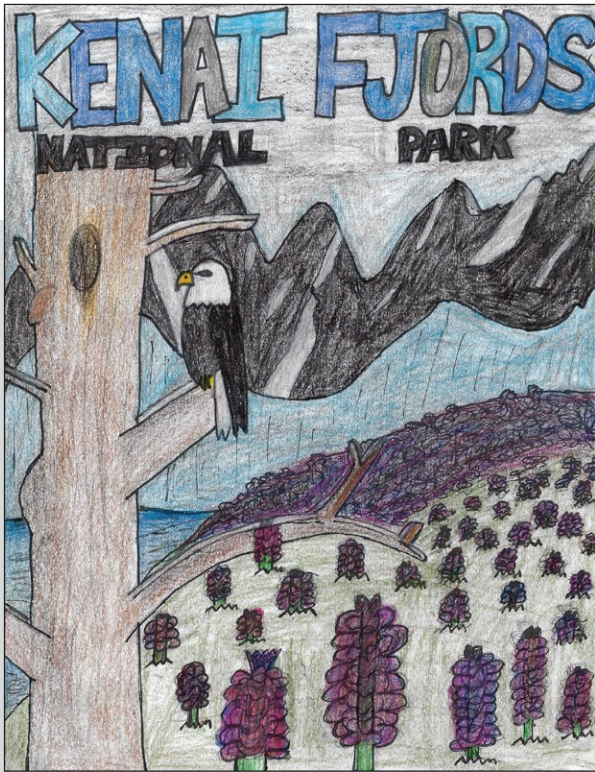


Figure 6 (left). Kenai Fjords student artwork 1. An 8th-grade student's colored pencil artwork of Kenai Fjords National Park.

Figure 7 (right). Kenai Fjords student artwork 2. An 8th-grade student's colored pencil and ink artwork of Kenai Fjords National Park.

Highlight Strengths

What was a benefit of these new restrictions? In my classroom I have a set of encyclopedias and several picture books; we do not have computers where students can search the internet for reference images and up-to-date information. Now that all my students have Chromebooks, I decided to have them travel virtually by conducting online research to create their own postcards inspired by the national parks. Additionally, students were able to revisit lesson materials asynchronously if they needed clarification, which allowed them to learn outside of the classroom.

Get Experience With a Variety of Media

With internet access for everyone, I could finally give Google Arts & Culture a try; it is popular with youth and offers awe-inspiring visual resources from all over the world. According to Google Arts & Culture (n.d.), the website provides an interactive platform called *The Hidden World of the National Parks*. In April 2020, the platform featured images, 3D tours, and information about five national parks: Bryce Canyon in Utah (Figures 1 and 2), Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico (Figure 3), Dry Tortugas in Florida (Figure 4), Hawai'i Volcanoes (Figure 5), and Kenai Fjords in Alaska (Figures 6 and 7). I planned to have students travel virtually through the website while collecting facts and reference images for their postcards.

It Is OK to Make Mistakes, Because They Are Part of the Creative Process

Once I had an idea for a student project, it was time to create the content of the assignment. My first demo video lesson took me several hours to record because I had to teach myself a screen-capturing program, and I had to start over several times because I messed up my words. After 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 purpose of the assignment.

Exercise Choice

This experience has reminded me that an excellent technique for differentiation is offering choice. Students were able to choose which national park they wanted to investigate, as well as the content, compositional layout, and media within the parameters of the project. The national park postcard design project started with my students being introduced to careers in the arts, including graphic design, illustration, and artist residencies. Our art historical inspiration was the Works Progress Administration's national park posters (National Park Posters, n.d.), which students referenced as finished examples for this project. I created a video to demonstrate the steps of the creative process, the requirements to finish the assignment, and examples of complete and successful designs. Students then chose one of five featured national parks

to research, using Google Arts & Culture and individual park websites, and chose at least one plant and one animal that lives inside the park. They were required to include a foreground, middle ground, and background, and to use professional bubble lettering in a font of their choice 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. I do not know if students sent the postcards. However, if I were to teach this lesson again, I would encourage them to do so and ask them to share their stories and any responses they received. Because students had access to different art supplies at home, it was fun to see how they problem solved in a variety of ways using the materials that they had available to them. Notice how one student created digital art to depict Dry Tortugas National Park (Figure 4), while another student used watercolor and a handwritten script font to illustrate her impression of Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park (Figure 6).

I collaborated with my students on a more personal level by encouraging digital activities to get to know one another. I used an open-ended Artist Introduction document at the beginning of the class to understand what students already knew and ask them what they expected, and what they needed from me—it was a place for them to share their hopes and frustrations with me. I created breakout rooms in Zoom where students worked in small groups, and I visited each group to see their progress. I created a shared Google Slides document with each class so students could upload their artwork, and we could see what the class was creating as a whole.

Collaborate, or See What Your Neighbor Is Doing

Coincidentally, in this time of extreme isolation there has been extreme unity within my school district and beyond. It was devastating to learn that there were no more art classrooms when we returned to my school building. Instead, we would be traveling to classrooms where students sat at the same desks all day to enforce social distancing. Because I lost my classroom, I was assigned a “bunk” with the two other art teachers in my building, where we were to store our belongings and go to when we were not teaching. This mandated time together allowed my introverted self to blossom into a more social being. We found ourselves discussing lesson plans, sharing digital versions of worksheets we had previously hand-drawn, eating lunch together, working together on displays for the hallway, and sharing best practices and venting frustrations regarding Wi-Fi and Zoom connections.

Throughout my district, my art colleagues and I shared our lessons and digitally displayed our students' artwork in collaborative slideshows. We met regularly online in our department meetings to support and encourage one another. It was helpful to discover what was working, what was not working, and that we were not alone—our presence could help ease someone else's struggle. We shared resources available online from

professional organizations, including museum websites that offer virtual field trips, and the National Art Education Association's Remote Learning Toolkit. This pandemic 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. Now that all the teachers in my building are traveling between classrooms, we are the ones rushing between classes in the hallways with our backpacks on, saying a quick hello and asking how one another is doing. It is inspiring to see how restrictions can promote growth and solidarity.

Apply What You Have Learned to Future Projects

This experience will certainly have an impact on my teaching methods moving forward. I will be sure to mine more resources from Google Arts & Culture, as well as from museum, 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 planned. I am inspired to connect with my students on a more personal level because I understand how much they need my support, and I know how important the arts are in helping to alleviate stress and fostering emotional growth. Art can provide a place for students to express themselves through open-ended sketchbook prompts, and a time to creatively collaborate with their families—such as recreating famous works of art at home, as suggested by the Getty Museum (Nalewicki, 2020). I connect with my students by checking in with them individually and by setting the Zoom chat function to “Host Only,” which allows students to ask me questions and share with me in confidence when we are remote. I will continue to ask my students what is relevant to them, what apps they are using, what shows they are watching, what music they are listening to, and what games they are playing. Maybe my mandatory technological upgrade will make me more informed about what is important to my students, because I finally understand what all the excitement is about regarding the latest technology! ■

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