

Art Education in the Time of a Pandemic

The Good, the Challenge, and the Future

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From Place to Space

Encountering Design Education Online

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On the Web

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Abstract:

The exponential rise of online and distance learning programmes in the aftermath of COVID-19 is dramatically rewriting the rulebook on the creation and dissemination of knowledge in the post-pandemic world, causing educators to re-evaluate the idea of teaching by locating it in a more abstract, virtual space as compared to the physical classrooms that students have been more familiar with in the past. While focussing on the subject area of art education, this paper examines some of the best-in-class online practices that were in place before the COVID-19 pandemic and highlights the more successful e-learning initiatives that were launched after the lockdown, contextualising some of these through the personal experiences of the author both as a participant and also as an art educator. Clearly – though technology enables, it can be limiting too. While this paper will highlight some of the challenges educators and students may face, it will focus more on how the transition to digital is imminent with the pandemic serving to herald the arrival of more hybrid models of learning platforms in the not-so-distant future.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced schools and universities that have historically used traditional means of learning in the form of face-to-face education to move from physical to virtual classrooms. Suddenly the onus of providing the infrastructure for accessing learning has shifted from the provider to the consumer. This shift from brick-and-mortar to online classrooms has affected every stakeholder - the student, the educator and the education system - with the imminent possibility of the adoption of online learning becoming a more permanent education solution in many parts of the world. How this will impact the quality, consistency and efficacy of education, and bridge equality gaps going forward remains to be seen.

Necessity Breeds Invention - The Good

In the pre-COVID-19 world the education sector had already been witnessing high growth and adoption in education technology with global ‘edtech’ investments reaching US\$18.66 billion in 2019 with the overall market for online education projected to reach US\$350 billion by 2025, according to the World Economic Forum (Li and Lalani 2020). This included language apps, virtual tutoring, video conferencing tools and online learning platforms like Moodle used by leaders in

distance learning programmes such as the Oxford University's Department of Continuing Education. A 2017 study by KPMG and Google entitled 'Online Education in India: 2021' predicted that India's online education market was set to grow to US\$1.96 billion with 9.6 million users by 2021 from US\$247 million and around 1.6 million users in 2016. The growth drivers identified by this study include the low-cost of online education, the availability of quality education, a growing job-seeking population, the Government's digital initiatives, significant increase in disposable personal income, and internet and smartphone penetration amongst the masses (KPMG and Google 2017, 12-13). It is these drivers that were responsible for the significant surge in usage since COVID-19 during which over 500 million students were affected by the closure of schools and colleges during the national lockdown. The necessity to go online - supported by research that suggests that online learning has been shown to increase retention of information, takes less time, ensures consistency and quality, and is cheaper - will in most probability result in permanent changes to the way in which we impart education in the post-COVID-19 scenario. The changes seem to be here to stay.

In the past art and design education required in-person participation but the past few years have seen far-reaching developments in this sector that have enabled students to access world-class learning opportunities from the comfort of their homes. Several leading international programmes have started to offer online courses that are more accessible and affordable, thereby attracting new students to their campuses - including the University of Oxford, School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), California College of Arts (CalArts), Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), Seoul Institute of the Arts and the Paris College of Art. The Department for Continuing Education at the University of Oxford which began 140 years ago with an aim to bring Oxford teaching to the widest possible audience, launched their online courses - some of the first fully online learning in the UK - as early as 1999 with the help of a newly formed Technology-Assisted Lifelong Learning (TALL) division. Using learning management platforms such as Moodle and Canvas, Oxford currently offers more than 120 online short courses in humanities and science including subjects such as archaeology, creative writing, cultural studies, film, and art and architectural history. Coursework is an integral part of these courses and students can gain credits that are transferable to longer award programmes such as the Certificate of Higher

Education which is equivalent to the first year of under-graduate study at Oxford. The Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas (two of which are entirely online) are equivalent to the second and third year of under-graduate study, and are designed with flexibility in mind as many students study alongside work and family commitments. These are part-time with online components and many subjects offer the chance to progress to a higher level of study by transferring the credit to another academic institution such as the Open University or modular universities such as Oxford Brookes University which has four faculties including the Faculty of Technology, Design and Environment that includes its Schools of Art, Architecture and Built Environment. The Department also has more than 35 part-time postgraduate certificates, diplomas, Master's degrees and DPhils, most of which are taught as a blend of short residences in Oxford and online components (Oxford University Department for Continuing Education, n.d.).

This was the only art and architectural history programme that this author found available online while exploring distance education that would teach these subjects thoroughly and through collaborative learning between students and faculty, while at the same time given educational credentials from one of the world's most prestigious universities. While the cost of each individual course - which took up to 10 weeks to complete as well the Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE) in Art History which took 3 years - is higher than most under-graduate tuition fees for similar courses and degrees in India, it is definitely more economical when compared to the funds that would be needed to physically study in Oxford. Another significant consideration to be made is the fact that these are courses that are simply not available in any classroom setting anywhere in the city of Mumbai, where the author is a resident, or for that matter anywhere in the country. 'Learning to look at Modern Art', 'The Northern Renaissance', 'Art Nouveau', 'Western Architecture – the Modern Era', 'The Impressionists' and 'Islamic Art and Architecture' were a few of the 14 courses completed which involved the writing of scores of 750 and 1500 word assignments, daily reading and posting on online forums, regular class discussions that were moderated by Oxford University tutors, with three long-essay submissions for being awarded the CertHE, that were marked using the University's high standards of rubrics. The quality of art historical education received and the exposure to

international scholarship was best-in-class and incomparable to any other art education delivery system that the author had access to – physical or otherwise.

In other parts of the world by 2017, art and design schools like the SAIC, CalArts and RISD also started offering credit and non-credit courses online for the first time, to make classes accessible to learners worldwide. Along with other prestigious art institutions across the globe, these schools have partnered with Kadenze, an online education platform tailored for art and creative technology courses. Launched in 2015 Kadenze aims at creating a network of art schools interested in advancing online creative arts education which had been left out of the rise of MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) platforms due to the challenges faced by faculty in moving face-to-face instructions and student evaluation online, given that the field relies highly on personal interactions and supervision. The Kadenze platform comes with specialised tools designed to benefit students and faculty members of the creative arts, such as giving music students the facility to upload uncompressed audio files and art students the ability to upload a personal portfolio of their work. Kadenze is both a MOOC provider as well as an online program management company and while it offers free courses like Coursera or edX, it also provides partners with instructional designers and animators for help on the production aspect of online education (Straumsheim 2015).

These online courses have often allowed students to build portfolios and make forays into the art, music or design world before actually applying for on-campus courses, making them “more prepared and better applicants” according to Jordan Hochenbaum, a co-founder of Kadenze who teaches music technology at CalArts. SAIC’s “Touring Modernism: From the French Avant-Garde to American Pop and Beyond” used a green room and Kadenze’s sophisticated video technology to create a museum experience for students as they virtually toured the Institute’s exhibits. Faculty of CalArts’ sound production course found it easier in many ways to teach students sound mixing, and monitor their development and progression on an online platform, while encouraging students to interact with each other in online galleries. Around half of Kadenze courses can be taken for credit and if a student took all credit-eligible courses offered by a partner school they could earn credits equivalent

to several semesters of art school – saving time and receiving top-quality education at a fraction of the cost of face-to-face classes (Tate 2017).

While institutions such as these have been forerunners in the adoption of education technology, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it all the more urgent for universities to realise that the future of higher education lies in information technology and distance learning programmes. The University of Cambridge suspended face-to-face lectures until most of 2021 and has opted for a combination of online teaching and distance education. In Morocco under the direction of the Ministry of Education all in-person teaching has been banned indefinitely and universities have been instructed to contribute to the building of a national and publicly accessible database with the assistance of the Centre National pour la Recherche Scientifique et Technique (CNRST), a public institution that implements research and technology programmes, and national TV and radio stations. In a collaborative programme on an unprecedented scale, university professors have joined in to enhance their university websites with downloadable materials, and audio and video recordings of lectures.

Educational institutions have been forced to rethink and re-evaluate their stance on online education and on the potential of distance learning, which until the pandemic was either offered only by open universities or was limited to those subject areas where online assessment was easier through a series of impersonal quizzes or peer-graded assignments, with limited faculty-student interactions. Now these educators need to consider online delivery of education as a core channel while formulating their dissemination strategy, which in the post-COVID-19 world will need to focus on collaborative learning like the Moroccan initiative, using a robust system like the University of Oxford, while harnessing the power of digital platforms providers such as Kadenze, in order to create a new education culture which will be democratic, non-elitist and accessible to a larger student population.

Art educators in pandemic mode have needed to introduce a new medium into their teaching - video-conferencing – which in subject areas like video, digital and graphics art and design doesn't pose problems as they are primarily screen-based, whereas sculpture, ceramics and painting are not. With physical resources like studios, kilns, darkrooms, print-shops and wood-shops inaccessible, teachers have been forced to

leave traditional studio practices behind and make some creative decisions in order to effectively deliver art-making instructions. Arties Vierkant, an artist-educator at the University of Pennsylvania has felt since the 2008 financial crisis which was driven by real estate, that it is necessary to “stop relying on the spaces and conventions upheld by traditional gatekeepers of art and culture” (Dancewicz 2020). A teacher who uses the internet as an artistic medium for more than a decade, Vierkant has suggested reviving “surf clubs” (web-surfing groups with co-authored blogs) for experimental arts education during COVID-19 social distancing restrictions. Conceptual feminist artist Constantina Zavitsanos, an educator at the New School, has been flexible in her teaching methodology for some time by allowing students who are sick, disabled or feel more comfortable producing art in a non-classroom setting to attend lectures using Zoom. Zavitsanos believes that there are other “possibilities for mediation and transmission” and that “we can convey things in multiple modalities - we have to adapt” (Ibid). She feels that the brick-and-mortar classroom can often pose physical and conceptual limits to art-making and even before the COVID-19 pandemic, her courses were operating in what the artist calls “non-contiguous” spaces with Zoom classes that had both video instructions as well as peer-evaluation forums based on students’ pre-recorded submissions. The pandemic has inspired art teachers - who themselves are facing the challenges posed by the lockdown and working from home - to look at alternative ways of art-making and art-education at a time of limited institutional resources. While Aki Sasamoto who teaches sculpture at Yale has transformed the institution’s ninety-minute group critiques into online reading and discussion groups on “flexible practices”, Candice Lin is remotely teaching her ceramics students at the University of California to fire their work at low temperatures with backyard materials like coal, fans, and barbecue grills (Ibid).

India’s new National Education Policy states “New circumstances and realities require new initiatives. The recent rise in epidemics and pandemics necessitates that we are ready with alternative modes of quality education whenever and wherever traditional and in-person modes of education are not possible” (National Education Policy 2020, 58) . In May this year, the Indian Government announced its plans to expand e-learning in higher education, by liberalising open, distance, and online education regulatory frameworks. These plans permit the top 100 universities in the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) to start online courses without the

need for any fresh approvals from the education regulators, with the online component in conventional universities also having been raised from the present 20 per cent to 40 per cent. There are plans underway to expand this eligibility to conduct online degrees to over 200 universities - a move that will significantly enhance access to higher education. Amity University Online already offers 24 different online degrees, diplomas and certification programs on their award-winning Learning Management System, designed and delivered by over 6000 eminent corporate experts and faculties, and in partnership with world-leaders in online education such as Harvard Business School Online and Wharton Online. The liberalisation of e-learning is also going to open doors to a previously limited market - for foreign online education services companies to increase their existing presence in India and partner more deeply with institutions here (McKenzie 2020).

The learning acquired during the COVID-19 crisis, albeit amidst challenging circumstances that vary across disciplines and institutions, coupled with the Government's relaxation of regulatory guidelines, opens up a field of opportunities and invites a rethinking of art education while keeping in mind its limitations – with the ultimate goal of presenting a more feasible solution for the post-pandemic future.

Teaching Art Online - The Challenge

The critics of this rapid, forced move to online learning tend to focus more on the challenges rather than on means to overcome them. There are without any doubt, critical issues that need to be considered before hastily adopting digital learning solutions that maybe detrimental to the delivery of good-quality, consistent, easily accessible education. There are large student populations without reliable internet access that would require a more integrated distance learning platform – which in India could be a combination of SWAYAM (Study Webs of Active Learning for Young Aspiring Minds), which is a portal for Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that has produced over 2,000 recorded online courses; Diksha which is a Ministry of Human Resource Development platform for e-learning; and the 32 direct-to-home (DTH) Swayam Prabha television channels. The digital divide might be lesser in the niche area of art and design education, but as education starts its inevitable shift to more e-learning possibilities educators must ensure that these

changes do not further amplify any existing inequalities that exist in access to high-quality learning opportunities.

Another key challenge would be the training and development involved to help art educators to make the transition from face-to-face teaching to the creation and production of online or video content that would be as effective as in-person learning. There is evidence that learning online can be more effective with students retaining up to 60% more material as they can often learn at their own pace, with “re-reading, skipping, or accelerating through concepts as they choose” (Li and Lalani 2020). While this will vary depending upon the subject area and the level of education, many art educators are of the opinion that it gives students the opportunity to think about more existential questions such as the production of art in challenging situations and in times of crisis. Despite innovative initiatives by art teachers, the main shortcoming of digital classrooms is the difficulty in developing student-teacher relationships when it is apparent that “Design education is humanistic learning where real human connection is a must”, as stated by Nitin Kulkarni, Chairperson, Master of Design, National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), Mumbai. This author faced this while teaching college-level AP (Advanced Placement) Art History curricula of the US College Board at a leading Mumbai school. A programme that covers over thirty thousand years of world art history that needs to be taught while discussing 250 artworks through visual analysis, comparative studies, cross-cultural examples, video viewing and class discussions, needed to be completely revamped with animated presentations, virtual museum and gallery tours, online interactions with artists and curators, and group discussions forums – all of which made the Zoom version of the programme more exciting and riveting than the classroom one.

With an increasingly technology and infrastructure dependent world, students of art and design might feel ill-equipped to learn the subject when the institution’s resources and tools are inaccessible to them. The importance of equipment such as printmaking tools; laser-cutting, woodworking and 3-D printing machines; and access to both digital technology and physical spaces to paint, carve or sculpt have all become important in 21st century art education. The pandemic and its cutting off of access to these facilities has enabled both students and teachers to consider an important fact – that as Andrew Schulz, dean of the University of Arizona’s College of Fine Arts, says

“historically, the visual arts have been a solitary practice, so in some regard, it’s easier to reproduce this in a remote teaching context” (Flaherty 2020). While this has caused some furore in colleges with students and parents demanding tuition fee refunds as the promised facilities are not accessible, it has also helped educators and learners focus on what lies at the core of art and design – creative thinking, artistic intent and an individualistic response to a changing environment.

Finally while commentators on the situation have looked at the inequalities and concerns from the point of view of the students, few have focussed on the teachers – many of whom need to juggle homes, children, tightening finances and personal crises during the lockdown. While these maybe temporary pandemic-related issues, they may gain some permanence if e-learning becomes the ‘new normal’ and they need to be addressed. Teachers across the world especially in the creative arts have found teaching online to be more work, requiring greater preparation and mental effort than in-person, classroom teaching. They are needing to adapt traditional art and design teaching techniques to - as artist and educator Kaitlin Pomerantz says - “rewrite syllabi, learn new technology, use our own devices and data plans, and field the manifold needs of our students,” (Dancewicz 2020) - all without adequate instructions or additional financial resources. In the absence of a brick-and-mortar school which offers social interaction and solace to students, teachers have often needed to act as counsellors, mentors, confidantes and empathisers – all of which they may not necessarily be qualified to do. This has brought into question inequities in relation to the educators themselves and is an issue that institutions must resolve in order to keep the morale of teachers as high as those of the students affected by the lockdown.

It is clear therefore that while digital technology poses some challenges, it also provides huge opportunities to enhance the product offering of a traditional educational system, that has been receiving a fair amount of criticism in recent times for its emphasis on theoretical, classroom and rote learning. A new and improved method of educating students, in the arts, humanities and the sciences, is the need of the hour – clearly COVID-19 has been the catalyst for the change that we need.

The Best of Both Worlds - The Post-Pandemic Future

While the COVID-19 pandemic required institutions the world over to implement a hurried, rough-and-ready online substitute to classroom training, it was useful to jolt the education behemoth out of a stupor that has been plaguing the sector, particularly in large countries like India, for decades. The World Economic Forum in its 2022 Skills Outlook (Future of Jobs Report 2018) lists analytical thinking, active learning, creativity, initiative, and critical thinking as growing skills that will be more relevant for success in the future - as opposed to manual dexterity, reading, writing, mathematics and active listening, all of which the Forum believes are declining in importance. It is the development of these latter skills that formed the bedrock of our education system till date and perhaps COVID-19 has given us the opportunity to move online and create a more effective, active-learning method of educating students without the traditional “push knowledge” approach that created a passive, sluggish, inert student body.

While India’s National Educational Policy (NEP) 2020 has had its fair share of critics, not only has it liberalised online and distance education – there are further relaxations on the anvil. This bodes well for a country that by 2030 is set to have the largest working-age population in the world, who will need not only basic education but also the job and life skills that higher education provides. The NEP has stated a goal of increasing the enrolment of students for higher education from 25% to 50% by 2035, a doubling in numbers that might not be adequately backed up by infrastructure, capacity and new universities. An obvious solution would be high-quality online courses or integrated programmes that have both digital and classroom components, to reduce the pressure on existing educational institutions. As Rupamanjari Ghosh, Vice-Chancellor, Shiv Nadar University says "Offline or conventional face-to-face education will not become obsolete, but it is becoming clear that the hybrid or blended model is here to stay" (Farooqui 2 June 2020).

The ‘new normal’ will possibly see not only such a hybrid model, it will also be able to go beyond the realms of traditional educational delivery systems – by bridging social classes, breaking down age barriers, crossing state and national borders, and redefining what it means to be a ‘learner’. It will be able to provide the students of today with the tools, skills and resilience that they will need to not only to create a job

for themselves in the post-COVID-19 economy but also to be able to manage the crises of the future – which will be many.

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