SHELLSHOCKED BY THE PANDEMIC: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF REDESIGNING STUDIO ART CLASSES FOR ONLINE DELIVERY

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Abstract

In March of 2020, face-to-face university classes were abruptly changed to online delivery due to the world-wide Covid-19 pandemic. Although this was challenging for all classes, it was particularly challenging for studio art classes, which by their very nature, are a completely hands-on form of learning. This paper will explore the instructional changes, the curriculum changes, and the institutional changes which I worked through in order to deliver art instruction online for introductory classes designed for non-majors: Drawing I and Visual Order (2-D design). It will further explore the benefits and drawbacks of online delivery in art, and how the hybrid versions of my courses have actually reaped the benefits of adding technology to my newly-revised curricula.

Introduction

Walsh University is a small Catholic university of distinction with total enrollment of 2,400 students from 46 states and 35 countries. The undergraduate total is about 1600 students. Although many classes are still taught face-to-face, many have gone online, with many more online transitions in the works. Like all universities, Walsh sees the future with a heavy emphasis on online instruction, but without losing the personal touch of face-to-face classes.

Currently, I am the only art instructor on campus. There is no art major at Walsh University, but there is an art minor. Every year, I work with 5 to 10 art minors. Last year, we began a Visual and Performing Arts major where enrolled students are educated in all art disciplines, and then choose a particular art form as their focus area. This will most probably produce even more art minors on campus.

In my role as Professional Assistant Professor of Art and Studio Coordinator, I teach a variety of studio art classes: Drawing I & II, Visual Order (Intro to 2D-Design), Composition and Color Concepts, Painting I, Watercolors, and the occasional independent study. In addition to studio classes, I also teach the Exhibition Design course every spring for our Museum Studies department. Among

other learning experiences, this class requires students to jury, mat, and install the Annual Student Art Exhibition in our campus gallery.

However, the two classes I teach the most are introductory classes designed for non-majors which count as a general education courses for the students' art requirement: Drawing I and Visual Order. Both of these courses cover fundamental skills, and students come to these courses with a wide variety of skill levels. Students must meet basic requirements, but are graded on their individual improvement, and thus do not compete with each other. This provides a nurturing environment where students can grow at their own pace. I expect more from students with advanced skills than I do from students who have never taken art before. After critiques, students are permitted take suggestions and work back into their pieces for a higher grade. This promotes learning and prevents grades from being punitive. Writing composition theory has long promoted the benefits of revision (cf. Faigley & Witte, 1981), but it clearly exists for art classes too. For example, Seton (2021) identifies two big general advantages: 1) They can help rebuild authentic learning conversations with students; and 2) They help ensure that all students can internalize critical content (paras. 5-6).

When the pandemic abruptly forced classes to go online in March of 2020, I was teaching two sections of Drawing I, one section of Visual Order, and one section of Exhibition Design. Faculty had four days to adapt to online delivery of our course materials. All faculty got a crash course in how to use Zoom, and those of us who had never used Sakai, our learning management system, got a crash course in that as well.

I was among those who had never used Sakai. As an artist whose work is completely hands on, I am, in technological terms, a laggard (Rogers, 2003). I use technology if and only if I need to. Leading up to the pandemic, I had been teaching studio art classes for over 40 years, but had never integrated the use of a Learning Management System (LMS) into my design or delivery at any institution. This was for two major reasons. First, I had started teaching these or similar courses before the existence of an LMS, and I was satisfied with the way they had evolved based upon learner outcomes. Second, educational policies with respect to the use of online intellectual property remain somewhat ambiguous and vary from institution to institution; as an artist, I wanted to protect my intellectual property by not posting it in a public way where it might be appropriated or misused by others.

And up until March 2020, there was no need for me to engage in online classes. Students come to a studio art class to work with their hands, not a computer. That privilege is reserved for graphic design, and someone else teaches that at Walsh University. (However, my Visual Order course is the prerequisite for Graphic Design I). In any case, I was in for a very rude awakening.

Pandemic Blues: The Covid Shutdown Spring 2020

As it happened, we were a little over halfway through the 16-week semester when in February 2020, all classes at Walsh University were forced to abruptly pivot to online learning. In four days, I had to figure out what to do with my four classes. I realized that I would need to substitute instructional materials for my real-time teaching presence and demonstrations, and devise a new way for students to submit their work for feedback and grading.

My Exhibition Design students already had a very busy semester. They had installed an art exhibition at a gallery off campus, and had installed another exhibition in the Hoover Historical Center on campus. At the point when face-to-face classes shut down, they had just juried and matted the work for the Annual Student Art Exhibition. But now we couldn't hang it. It was evident by that time, however, that my students had truly completed almost all the requirements for the course. So with the permission of my division chair—and to the great relief of my students—I asked them to write their final reflection papers, and I averaged all their grades. The semester was over for them.

Studio art was a very different story. The first half of the semester, students in both Drawing I and Visual Order were working with black and white mediums. By midterm, they needed to learn basic color theory and how to use color mediums. The only silver lining in this transition was that since we were halfway through the semester, my students had already mastered some basic skills and vocabulary. This worked to our mutual advantage when communicating in writing with my students.

Email directions flew out 2-3 times a week. Students worked on their projects at home. They photographed their work on their cellphones and emailed their projects to me for feedback during the creation process, and also later for grading. Zoom was not an option. I could not watch my students working on their projects via Zoom because it would have been impossible for them to set up cameras in the right spot and for me to monitor the individual progress of 49 students in tiny windows on my screen.

In both courses, there was a constant barrage of emails to answer. It seemed I was on call 24/7. Indeed for the first three weeks of adjustment, I was putting in 16-hour days, seven days a week. I felt that because of the sudden change, my students needed extra support. But with 49 students, this quickly became all-consuming. Because I am not the best typist, typing was a particularly frustrating chore for me.

Not only was emailing constant, but also it was hard to describe in words what a stroke of the hand could say in seconds. It couldn't replace my watching them draw or paint and seeing first-hand where they were having trouble. I could only surmise

what they were doing based on what their pieces looked like. And even then, I was looking at photographs, which were most often not very good. I did come up with some very colorful descriptive sayings that semester, such as "Spread your oil pastels like peanut butter," and "Don't beat your shading stumps to death."

But emails were only the start. In order to finish out the semester online I needed to create demonstration videos and lectures in order to introduce projects. Over the span of four weeks, I created in total eight demonstration videos and voiced over four PowerPoint lectures. For my Drawing I classes, I created a voiced-over color lecture video, and created two oil pastel demonstration videos on camera. For my Visual Order class, I created a voiced-over color lecture video, two voiced-over project introduction videos, and six project demonstration videos on camera.

I recorded my lectures on Zoom and uploaded them to Sakai. The videos were all created in my home studio, using my cell phone attached to a small tripod which was propped up on some stacked canvases in order to get the camera at the proper height. I tried my best to make them informative and just a little fun. Since I had never made videos before, I was fortunate that my friend and colleague, Litsa Varonis, could talk me through the process of creating my own YouTube Library, uploading the videos to it, and creating links to Sakai so that my students could see them. It was quite the learning experience—a sort of baptism by fire.

Lessons Learned

Even though it required making more demonstration videos, Visual Order was easier to finish online than Drawing I was. This is because each project was graded individually, and the course did not require a final portfolio presentation at the end of the semester. In Drawing I, final portfolio reviews were fraught with peril. Even though I repeatedly sent instructions to students on how to photograph, compile, and upload their portfolios to Sakai, students continued to struggle with it, and results were not optimal. Part of the problem was the photographic file sizes varied greatly, and many students didn't have comparable devices. The other part of the problem was that students just didn't follow directions. Most students had to email me the images in their final portfolios, because they would not upload to Sakai.

Perhaps what astonished me most about online learning was plagiarism. It is very easy and tempting for students to plagiarize because images are so easily available online. When classes went online, I had two incidents of plagiarism. The first one was easy to resolve after the student told me she took her image directly from an online source. Once I explained to her why this was wrong—even though the image was free from copyright—I allowed her to redo her assignment. The other plagiarism case with an international student was much more difficult to navigate because he claimed that work he submitted--which I had found online--was his

own. His skill level had also somehow exponentially improved once he returned to his home country. In order to better safeguard against plagiarism and copyright infringement, which can be a problem for students (Varonis et al., 2015) I have added greater detail to the explanation in my syllabus about what constitutes plagiarism in art, and I go over it multiple times throughout the term.

I found that my better students--who stayed proactive and regularly submitted their work for feedback--did well finishing the semester online. Most of the problems arose when students didn't turn in their projects until the last minute and didn't ask questions before turning it in. Another source of aggravation was when students were given sufficient feedback, and still they continued to turn in projects with no changes.

One of the main reasons that we were able to successfully complete these studio courses online was because we were over half way through the semester, and students had already built up a certain level of skill and understood basic art vocabulary. Starting studio art courses online would be MUCH more difficult. I was very grateful that Walsh University was able to return to face-to-face classes in Fall 2020.

Preparing for Fall 2020 Classes: Accommodating Institutional and Technological Changes

By the summer of 2020, no one really knew the future of the pandemic, and thus, what fall classes would look like. Would it be safe to return to face-to-face classes or would we need to continue online? To this end, Walsh University instituted the policy that all faculty needed to be ready to start fall classes completely online. In addition, the university switched to an 8-week format for classes. This format had been talked about prior to the pandemic. But it was implemented so that if we had to close down classes again, we might be able to complete some before doing so. Instead of teaching four classes for 16 weeks, we would now be teaching at least two 8-week classes for Fall I, and two 8-week classes for Fall II. Class times would be longer for more intensive learning. Moreover, because of the great financial strain caused by the pandemic, faculty were required to teach 30 hours of classes for the 2020-21 academic year instead of the usual 24 hours. Scholarship expectations were reduced to compensate. However, as a professional artist passionate about creating and exhibiting my work, my scholarship continued on almost as usual.

Since I already had done the work to end the semester in Drawing I and Visual Order, my task now was to create the beginnings. Additionally, I had to change my syllabi from a 16-week term to an 8-week term, a schedule many institutions in the

area were adopting prior to the pandemic (Miller & Varonis, 2017). This was quite a transformation that took almost all of my summer to complete. I created 12 new demonstration videos and voiced over five PowerPoint lectures during the summer months of 2020. I also created four new syllabi for my fall courses. Everything was uploaded to Sakai and ready to go by the first day of class Fall 2020.

Face-to-face Classes, Social Distancing, and Quarantines

Fortunately, by fall 2020 we returned to face-to-face classes at Walsh University. The university instituted social-distancing protocols. Faculty, staff, and students were required to wear masks. University-wide, the plan was to have a blend of face-to-face and synchronous learning in all classes. Half the class would attend on A days while the other half Zoomed in, reversing the groups on B days. Over the summer, chairs were removed from classrooms to maintain proper social-distancing. Tables were spaced so that students sat six feet apart from each other.

Before classes began, I walked into the Lattavo Art Studio to find that there were only 12 student chairs and tables in the room. My classes cap at 15, and there was no way I could pivot to synchronous remote delivery. Zoom did not work for my studio art classes for the following reasons: 1) There is no camera in the studio; it is attached to the computer in the back room. 2) Even if there were a camera, I don't lecture from a stationary point; I walk around the room giving students individualized instruction. 3) Students work on projects at different paces. 4) I can't see what students are doing on Zoom; and 5) Drawing students can't see still-life on Zoom.

My solution was found with a tape measure. I plotted out three spaces where tables and chairs could be put back into the studio and would still ensure a six-foot distance between students. Once I got the approval from the provost, three tables and chairs were returned to my studio so all students could attend, and classes could proceed almost normally.

I say "almost normally" because students could no longer gather around my desk to see demonstrations. It became obvious that having lecture and demonstration content on Sakai for my art courses was essential in order to introduce projects in a socially distanced manner.

Another upside to having online content on Sakai was that if a student missed class for any reason, they had a better opportunity to catch up, at least on content, if not practice. When Drawing I students missed class because they had to quarantine, I sent them photos of the class still life so that they could work at home. I now have digital files of photos to send students in the event of any absence. Most importantly, when students watched the demo videos before class, it left us more

time in class to work on projects and to develop skills, an approach also known as the flipped classroom (see Bishop & Verlager, 2013, for a survey of early research in this area).

The downside to online content was that when students were told to watch videos for class, often over half of them didn't, and wondered why they couldn't understand what was going on in class. I eventually caught them all up, but it took away time I could have spent helping my better students who did the work in advance, as they were supposed to. I continue to develop ways to make students more accountable for this.

Another benefit from all the changes we made at Walsh University in 2020 is that I have found the 8-week class format more efficacious for teaching Exhibition Design and studio art classes than the 16-week format. We have more time in class together to work on projects more intensely. Students maintain better concentration and momentum in their work, and student work has improved as a result. The only downside that I see to 8-week terms is that drop/add, calculating midterm grades, and calculating final grades happens twice a semester instead of once.

Beyond 2020: Post-Pandemic Course Structures

All my courses have changed in some way as a result of my mandatory jump into online learning as a result of the pandemic.

Exhibition Design has changed mostly because of the switch to 8-week terms. Aside from posting the syllabus on Sakai, it remains a hands-on course. The main focus of the course is still presenting the Annual Student Art Exhibition at Walsh University. This means that we have only three additional weeks available for other projects. This has worked well, as I have made many off-campus connections with museums, galleries, and non-profits who need help installing exhibitions.

The Visual Order curriculum has remained virtually unchanged since the shutdown. The only real difference is that watching demonstration videos before classes is now required, and the videos for each project are hosted on Sakai, listed on the syllabus, and announced in class.

Drawing I has undergone the most transformation since the pandemic. I have eliminated the portfolio review and replaced it with projects that can be graded individually. Videos to watch before class have also been posted on the syllabus and announced in class. Because of the 8-week term, I needed to adjust course content while maintaining my institutionally-approved learning objectives. The concept of perspective takes about two weeks' time for students to learn properly and is difficult to fit into an 8-week format. I now touch on perspective in Drawing

I, but do not go into it in great detail. Since most of my students are non-majors, this has not been a problem.

For Watercolors, I created a brand-new PowerPoint Terminology Introduction. In watercolor, there are multitudes of demonstration videos made by various artists in the public domain. I watched over 50 of them, selected the 23 videos best suited for my class, and posted them on Sakai for my Watercolor students. This gives them a broad variety of approaches to the medium.

Since we have returned to face-to-face classes, I have added some online content to my other courses such as syllabi, vocabulary lectures, and color lectures, project rubrics for grading, and other handouts. I can now return to in-class demonstrations, which most students understand better because they can see it up close. Should we ever go online again, I will know just what to do.

Conclusions

Although it was a tremendous amount of work, creating online content has been transformative for my classes. While nothing can take the place of hands-on learning in studio art and Exhibition Design classes, online content has been a welcome addition. Online content has helped my students study for quizzes and come better prepared for class. It has guided my students when they work outside of class. It has helped students catch up when they miss class. Most importantly, when online content is used as project introduction, it enables students to spend more time working on their projects in class with better concentration.

The changes I have made to my Drawing I class as a result of having to teach it online have been positive. Grading individual projects instead of having midterm and final portfolio reviews has simplified grading for me, and simplified preparation for my students without sacrificing the quality of their work. Switching to 8-week terms has given all my classes more concentrated studio time, resulting in better project outcomes.

The Covid-19 pandemic has revolutionized the way schools and universities deliver instruction to their students. As teachers, we have learned new skills. As communicators, we have found new ways to connect. As people, we have learned to be open to change and to do our best to stay flexible. The pandemic forced me to confront one of my worst fears—teaching visual art online. Nothing should shake me too hard going forward.

Acknowledgements

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