

Teaching art education in time of Covid-19: Reflections on an art educator's journey

Martha Christopoulou

Abstract

This paper presents a reflective case study of an attempt to teach a studio-based art course for preservice early childhood teachers during the Covid-19 lockdown, between March and June 2020, in Athens, Greece. It presents my efforts to redesign the course syllabus and artmaking activities and create an interactive and supportive distance learning class environment to enable students to keep a creative mindset through this challenging time. Reflections on choices regarding synchronous and asynchronous instruction, lesson objectives and content, art making assignments and assessment illustrate the observations, feelings and lessons learned in regards to how teaching and learning has been kept up during lockdown and how it worked (or not) for students and me as an art teacher. This paper concludes with highlighting the strengths and challenges of the pedagogical and instructional responses used during this crisis and proposes changes in the curriculum instruction in order to facilitate transformative learning experience for diverse student needs, preferences and aspirations. It, also, suggests ways to incorporate the transformations made into my future teaching.

Keywords: distance learning, studio art, preservice teachers, early childhood education

Introduction

Studio art practice for preservice early childhood teachers who attend the Department of Early Childhood Education at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens is provided in spring semester between February and May each year. This practical experience aims to help future early childhood teachers develop an understanding of art making and acquire art skills and knowledge about art forms, media and techniques, in order to transfer and apply them to real kindergarten classrooms. Working as an adjunct lecturer in this faculty, I had originally designed my syllabus so that preservice early childhood teachers conceptualised the role of meaning making in the artistic process by providing them opportunities of artistic thinking and creative response to certain themes and issues (Franco, Ward and Unrath, 2015). Specifically, the syllabus aimed at enhancing students' creativity and understanding of self and ideas of art making. Art lessons were developed around big ideas including identity, relationships and personal or community stories, along with exploration of elements and principles of art and design, art forms, techniques and media. Lessons included introduction about artists and their exemplary work or art forms, instruction on and demonstration

of techniques and use of media, exploration of themes/big ideas through art making, reflections on artmaking and learning and peer critique on art works.

As a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Greek government decided to suspend the operation of all educational institutions nationwide in March 11th, 2020. To ensure that education was disrupted as little as possible the Department of Early Childhood Education, as most educational institutions in Greece, shifted to online distance learning. Although my initial response to this transition was that I cannot teach studio art online, I started re-organising my lesson plans and the evaluation process and planned for remote learning of these preservice early childhood teachers. This paper presents my attempts to redesign the course syllabus and artmaking activities and create an interactive and supportive distance learning class environment to enable students to keep a creative mindset through this challenging time. It also discusses reflections on choices regarding synchronous and asynchronous instruction, lesson objectives and content, art making assignments and assessment. These reflections illustrate observations, feelings and lessons learned regarding how teaching and learning has been kept up during lockdown and how it worked (or not) for students and me as an art teacher. This paper highlights the strengths and challenges of the pedagogical and instructional approaches used during remote teaching and learning and proposes changes in the curriculum instruction to facilitate transformative learning experience for diverse student needs, preferences, and aspirations.

Redesigning, rewriting and reinventing

Before adjusting to the emerging situation of remote learning I had to answer two essential questions: “whether and how the syllabus for distance studio art learning should differ from the studio-based learning and what kind of pedagogical and instructional approach was most appropriate for remote learning. Looking at relevant literature of open and distance learning education enabled me to determine key principles in order to review and partly rewrite the course syllabus. According to Mehrotra, Hollister & McGahey, (2001) these refer to the details provided regarding the objectives, the delivery methods an educator can use, types of art-making assignments, the required materials and supplies and approaches to evaluation. Also, I conceptualised distance learning as the education that enables students to operate autonomously and take responsibility on their own learning (Lionarakis, 2005).

The major aims of the course were to provide students with fundamental understanding of core principles of art making and the role of meaning making in the artistic process and enhance their

creativity. The objectives related to skills and knowledge of art forms remained mostly the same. These included exploration of visual organization in two-dimensional and/or three-dimensional projects created using analog and/or digital processes; development of students' understanding of a range of media and techniques; development of mastery (i.e., "quality") in concept, composition, and execution; developing an understanding of art making as an ongoing process that involves informed and critical decision making. However, considering how this pandemic changed our lives and the way society functions, enhancing preservice early childhood teachers' ability to process and respond artistically to events unfolding around them was added to these objectives. An emphasis was also given to developing their understanding of art as a way of knowing of the self and the world.

Methods of delivery of lessons were examined regarding not only their weaknesses and strengths but also students' access to technological devices and my own knowledge and predispositions towards them. Under these distanced circumstances I chose not to use synchronous distance learning as I felt uncertain whether I could provide a comprehensive video instruction for material and spatial mediums. Feelings of discomfort and lack of experience of recording myself instructing students were among the reasons that also guided my decision. Other reasons included practical matters, such as the students' Internet accessibility, and the pace of the lesson. However, video conferencing was used once in order to get in touch with the preservice early childhood teachers and explain what was expected by them and for the final presentation of their work.

Asynchronous mode for distance instruction was used to deliver the course aims, objectives and content. It took the form of assignments placed on an open e-class platform provided by the University. Choosing asynchronous over synchronous learning was based on the fact that the preservice early childhood teachers were already familiar with this e-learning platform. Another reason was that asynchronous assignments gave the students, who were struggling in their own ways with the new realities of COVID-19, the opportunity to work in their own pace. Finally, the open e-class platform enabled me to organise, store and distribute educational materials, including multimedia content such as videos, in advance so that students could proceed in their own pace.

Lesson units were redesigned regarding the art making assignments as most of the students did not have access to materials, facilities, and equipment for art making at home. They included a short introduction about the theme/issue to be explored, detailed guidelines for the hands-on activities and information about the media, processes and techniques to be used with images and videos to

view and/or PowerPoint presentations. Art making activities involved drawing, sketching, painting, photography, collage, weaving and other creative projects. The preservice early childhood teachers were allowed to use media of their choice from a list provided for them that included water-colours, pencils, acrylics, crayons, pencil-colours, felt-tips, hand-made colours, found-objects, etc.

Art making was approached not only as exploration of media and processes but also as a connection to personal experience and meaning making. For example, recalling childhood memories or responding to current displacement from school and social isolation due to the lockdown were used as themes to get preservice early childhood teachers express themselves capturing present or past contexts, connect with themselves and the world around them and apply creativity to the projects and the situation of this distance learning. Such kinds of themes provided entry points into artistic thinking and creative response and encouraged these students to conceptualise meaning-making (Franco, Ward and Unrath, 2015). According to Pringle (2009), meaning-making is an active process that involves the creation of knowledge and understanding through experimentation with artistic media and realization of ideas, engagement with and reflection on previous or ongoing experience. In this sense, creativity and reflection are the key components for meaning making.

According to Walker (2004), preservice teachers need to engage in reflection upon art making processes as part of their pedagogical practice. Reflective writing in the form of visual diaries was included in all lesson units. Sangvanich and Chinokul (2018, p. 320) state that reflective writing may provide opportunities to students to make connections between knowledge, skills and creation. During this remote learning the preservice early childhood teachers were asked to reflect on the ways they embodied knowledge in terms of decision making, inspiration or research for creating art, the media, techniques and work processes they used, organisation and expression of ideas, the most successful aspects of their work, the difficulties they encountered, the ways they overcame them and the things they learned through art making. Reflective writing was chosen because it may relate to student-teacher development process as it provides opportunities to address teaching and learning issues that preservice early childhood teachers may deal with in their classrooms (Sangvanich and Chinokul, 2018). In particular, this precarious circumstance of remote and home learning it may have provided them with opportunities to think the needs of their future classroom. Moreover, asking students to reflect on their art making and seek deeper understanding through their artworks gave them opportunities to connect to their media and artistic process. On the other hand, reflective writing provided me with information about the context of these preservice early childhood teachers' artmaking and the ways they engaged to it.

Keeping the disruption the students were facing in mind, an attempt was made to extend the lessons beyond physical proximity by asking them to submit, along with the written reflections and the photograph of their final artwork, “process shots” i.e. photographs taken to document the artmaking process. This served to abstract portions of the art making process as it evolved for reflection. The photographs as well as the written reflections were used to recreate the artistic process, give a sense of a studio-in-distance, and maintain a sense of continuance with the skills these preservice early childhood teachers had learned during the face-to-face lessons. Moreover, the process of selecting photographs and writing reflections was considered essential for preservice early childhood teachers to gain control over the learning environment, connect and personalise the learning process and being invested in their own learning and thus increase ownership over their own artmaking (O’Neill and Barton, 2005). On the other hand, I had the opportunity to become a voyeur to their art making processes. Looking at the photographs of the artmaking process enabled me to better understand the difficulties they faced, adjust my instructions accordingly and send them a more focused feedback.

The preservice early childhood teachers were provided with appropriate, specific and descriptive feedback on the task in the form of written comments right after they submitted their artworks via email or through the open e-class platform. According to Mehrotra, Hollister & McGahey, (2001), in open distance education focused, detailed and timely feedback is necessary so that students are informed about their progress and their achievements and set clear expectations. Focusing on the product and the process of artmaking as well as student progress seem to be most beneficial for students since it can promote ownership (Low, 2015). So, providing clear information about the strengths and weaknesses of their artwork, the process and progress aimed at enabling these preservice early childhood teachers to facilitate decision-making.

Learning outcomes were assessed in a way that was relevant to the specific circumstances of remote learning due to the pandemic, the adjustments made with regards to the lesson content, the delivery methods and characteristics and situations of these preservice early childhood teachers. Gates (2017), supports the idea that knowing students is an essential aspect of assessing their work. However, as I did not have the opportunity to really know them due the suspension of the face-to-face lessons, I tried to understand whether these preservice early childhood teachers challenged themselves, took risks and learned important, planned or unplanned, concepts through their written reflections. Assessment was used as a vehicle for communicating the course goals to the preservice early childhood teachers as this gave them opportunities to identify misunderstandings and difficulties to guide instruction (Mehrotra, Hollister & McGahey, 2001). It was also used as a source

of information needed to assign student grades. In order to grade these preservice early childhood teachers' performance and progress, I established a set of criteria. These involved their participation to lessons; quality of art making regarding the use of elements and principles of art and design, problem-solving, use of media and techniques, expression of ideas and creativity; critical reflections, and quality of final presentation.

Reflections and lessons learned from remote studio-based learning

This reflection came as a comprehension of my experience of this remote studio-based teaching and it revolves around puzzling, surprising, confusing and, sometimes, frustrating episodes of my own work as an art teacher (Watson and Wilcox, 2000). Adapting to changing learning landscapes requires art teachers to transform their strategies and pedagogy. However, when this change suddenly happened on March 2020 due to the circumstances created by COVID-19 restrictions, feelings of discomfort and insecurity occurred especially as I consider teaching studio-based art as a highly experimental procedure with media and techniques. Revisioning my teaching practice and aims during this crisis was the immediate response. Yet, what was missing it was some kind of guidance from the University Department or sharing with colleagues in Greece. Social media and newly created online groups by art educators elsewhere provided a solace whilst attempting to modify objectives and lesson contents for the group of preservice early childhood teachers I taught. In hindsight, this experience of remote studio-based teaching and learning was on one hand meaningful as it enabled me to look at my own content with fresh eyes, but on the other it was stressful as I had to work around my students' circumstances, learning digital tools that I had never used before and changing up my lesson plans.

This remote studio-based course for preservice early childhood teachers enabled me to question my assumptions about and rethink what learning and teaching can be as an authentic experience in order to build on the needs of future classrooms. One of the key features of authentic learning is that it allows exploration and inquiry and it is closely connected to everyday life experiences. In this instance of remote learning these preservice early childhood teachers were given opportunities to construct their own knowledge through engaging in self-directed inquiry, problem solving, critical thinking, and reflections in order to create their artworks in response to certain themes. They were also provided with opportunities to re-think and re-imagine through the art making assignments how this experience of remote learning could facilitate transformative experiences in the future. Finally, modifying objectives and lesson content so that the students could create in their own pace and space with media that were on-hand at home aimed at engaging them in a journey of discovery, experimentation and problem-solving relevant to visual perception and visual language. Looking

back, these modifications in objectives, lessons content and instruction led to giving the students ownership of learning as they became more motivated, engaged and self-directed than they had been during face-to-face lessons.

Another problem that had to be taken into account was to find ways to connect and communicate with these preservice early childhood teachers during the lockdown. Although I understood that social and emotional learning and the sense of belonging was important during remote learning, this was quite problematic as I chose to use asynchronous mode of teaching and learning. Despite the consistent and well scheduled communication through assignments and feedback and the clarifications I provided about what was expected from these preservice early childhood teachers, social and emotional learning was not supported entirely. This was resulted to the fact that asynchronous mode of distance learning does not support face-to-face interaction, exchange of knowledge and experience between the students and real time feedback. So, this lack of interaction among the students themselves, the interactions between the teacher and students, and the collaboration in learning were issues that I did not manage to solve during these remote lessons. In retrospect, I should have planned for more synchronous sessions. I should have also used other communication channels, such as forums, wall, and blogs provided by the open e-class platform. However, asynchronous mode of learning offered flexibility to the preservice early childhood teachers who could work on their own pace and reflect on their learning. It also provided them with more time to engage with and explore course materials, media and techniques.

As the institutional resources that art making relies upon were unavailable, the preservice early childhood teachers were asked to work with found objects, digital photography, and whatever material and media they had at home. According to their reflections, this seemed to be liberating for some of them because they used whatever media they liked or were familiar with. For example, a student said she used eye-shadows to achieve a certain effect on her painting. Also, the variety of themes such as portrait, personal memories, and social issues seemed that engaged these students in exploration and expansion of their understanding of the self and the world and created a space to cultivate problem solving and thinking skills. According to these preservice early childhood teachers' reflections perceptual and conceptual understanding as well as critical reasoning and practical skills were developed through the exploration of themes, media and techniques.

Regarding the decision to invite these preservice early childhood teachers to reflect in regular basis and in written form, this seemed to provide a way of engaging in constructive criticism and

monitoring the art making process through this remote learning. The “process shots” of the different stages of work in progress that they were encouraged to take and submit along with their written reflections seemed to produce a comprehensive record of the creative process. In the normal studio-based lesson students’ piece of work once completed it existed in its final form. Within this remote studio art each piece existed as an ongoing process since the preservice early childhood teachers were asked to record the different stages of its development. This gave opportunities to the students and me to refer to specific points of the creation, call attention to certain difficulties in the use of media and emphasise on the importance of artist intention.

Among the issues that came into play during this remote studio learning was the context of students’ own artmaking which in some extent affected the way they engaged. Lack of technological resources, distress caused by social isolation and disengagement to lessons were observed. According to Mehrotra, Hollister & McGahey (2001), accommodating the special needs, characteristics and life situations of each student is an important challenge in online distance education. This was not achieved entirely mainly because of my lack of previous online teaching experience. So, a few students invested limited work just to gain a grade while one student asked to take the class on a pass/fail basis.

Regarding my own performance as a teacher, I discovered a shift to my teaching that I never imagined. This involved changes of the requirements or expectations for the studio-based course, which encompassed new opportunities to focus on offering more options and choices to these preservice early childhood teachers and increase ownership in art making. It also involved changes of the feedback provided to the students as this was detailed and thorough, yet time consuming. The increased volume of work during this emergency distance studio art education was an issue that I did not manage to solve. However, I appreciated the fact that I remained flexible when designing lesson content and assignments. Finally, the gain of this experience was that I came to a realisation that there is no best practice when it comes in emergencies like the one all educators and students lived during the past few months.

Conclusions

Teaching remotely studio-based art due to the pandemic between March and June 2020 was an extraordinary experience for both the preservice early childhood teachers and me. It caused stress and new opportunities to focus on how to establish engaging and transformative learning experiences in the absence of face-to-face connections and interpersonal exchanges. Delivering

practical activities online required a radical rethinking of lesson content. This was materialised through available e-learning platforms, consistent and well scheduled asynchronous communication and feedback. Difficulties with teaching studio art remotely included the lack of supporting social and emotional learning that occurs through interactions, exchanges and collaborations between students and teacher and the convolution to pay close attention to how students work with media and techniques and how their art making is progressing. Moreover, the fact that the materiality of the class was lacking, required more mental effort, preparation and a workload especially regarding the feedback given to students.

Among the strengths of this remote studio art was that these preservice early childhood teachers operated autonomously and took responsibility on their own learning. Asking students to discover their own personal narratives, expressing them through their own artworks and reflect on the artistic process and outcome seemed to enable most of them to keep a creative mindset, invest in their own learning and increase ownership over their own artmaking. An essential aspect of this remote art making experience was the reflective documentation of the artistic process as it evolved. Recording decisions, changes, and insights which shaped these preservice early childhood teachers' art-making and thinking throughout the making process seemed to provide these students with an awareness of the conceptual nature of the artmaking process (Walker, 2004).

Although I was and probably still am quite sceptical about how meaningful this online and remote experience was, I understand that the frameworks and teaching and learning practices I used could open-up possibilities not only to respond urgently and effectively in such crises but also to create a critical digital pedagogy for teaching online studio art. There should also be acknowledged the fact that synchronous and asynchronous learning are both essential in order to accommodate the sense of community despite the physical separation between teacher and student and facilitate the creation of meaningful educational experiences that may be equivalent to the face-to- studio based art. Regarding the future and despite the uncertainties about how institutions in Greece will operate next academic year, planning for a hybrid instruction that could include synchronous, asynchronous and face-to-face studio-art learning may be the answer to a wholistic way to studio instruction and to build a coherent learning community.

Bibliography

Franco, M. J.; Ward, A. & Unrath, K. (2015). Artmaking as meaning-making: A new model for preservice elementary generalists, *Art Education*, 68 (5), 28-33.

Lionarakis, A. (2005). Open and distance learning education and processes. In A. Lionarakis (Ed.). *Open and Distance Learning. Pedagogical and Technological Applications* (pp. 13-38). Patras: Hellenic Open University.

Low, Sok Hui (2015). "Is This Okay?" Developing Student Ownership in Artmaking through Feedback, *Art Education*, 68:1, 43-49.

Mehrotra, C., Hollister, C. D., & McGahey, L. (2001). *Distance learning: Principles for effective design, delivery, and evaluation*. Sage Publications.

O'Neill, T., & Barton, A. C. (2005). Uncovering student ownership in science learning: The making of a student created mini-documentary. *School Science and Mathematics*, 105(6), 292-301.

Pringle, E. (2009). The artist-led pedagogic process in the contemporary art gallery: Developing a meaning making framework. *International Journal of Art and Design Education* 28 (2), 174-182.

Sangvanich, K. and Chinokul, S. (2018), 'Reflective sketchbook journals for art education students in Thailand', *International Journal of Education Through Art*, 14:3, 319–37.

Walker, S. (2004) Understanding the Artmaking Process: Reflective Practice, *Art Education*, 57 (3), 6-12.

Watson, J. S. and Wilcox, S. (2000) Reading for Understanding: Methods of Reflecting on Practice. *Reflective Practice*, 1 (1), 57-67.