

Title: Art education in the time of the coronavirus. Reflecting today, Anticipating tomorrow

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#3 Case Study Template

Title: Home-Base Visual Arts Lessons piloted by the ALERT PROGRAMME, Very Special Arts Singapore

Abstract: This paper shares how the visual arts department reached out to learners through activity sheets, video recording and online learning. The *Arts in Learning, Rehabilitation and Training* (ALERT), offered home-based art lessons for its learners and tried two asynchronous models and one synchronous model; these were rolled out one at a time between the months of April to July (2020) during the circuit-breaker period in Singapore.

Keywords: *Online learning, home-based, visual arts, lessons.*

Country: Singapore

Organisation: Very Special Arts Singapore [VSA(S)] is the leading non-profit charity organisation dedicated to providing opportunities for persons with disabilities (PWDs) to be involved in the arts sphere. VSA(S) works to create and provide access and opportunities for PWDs through the arts. It promotes visual, performing and literary arts through various programmes and events for PWDs. VSA(S) has also established pathways for them to progress and excel in their fields and pursue a career in the arts. It created Singapore's first inclusive theatre and first inclusive literary art programme, and was founded and launched by Ambassador-at-Large Prof Tommy Koh.

Situation: The Covid-19 pandemic led to a circuit breaker period in Singapore where schools and the classroom were closed. Every staff, teaching-artists and learners were to remain at home. Contact was limited to online discussion and meeting. As parents gave feedback for the request of classes, likewise, VSA(S) wanted to stay in touch with families and to provide support where possible. The organisation tried different ways to reach out to the members through online visual arts lessons.

Learners: The age of the learners are children aged 6 years old to adults aged 30 years old.

There is a wide range of learners and learner's interest enrolled under the ALERT Programme. The profile of the learners are persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder, persons with Down Syndrome, persons with learning challenges, etc.

Programme: The ALERT programme is a person-centered programme with an Individual Visual Arts Development Plan (IDP) for every learner. The curriculum has five levels with four terms per level. Each term has its own objective and learning point. When the circuit breaker was enforced, the programme was beginning on the second term for the year. The teaching-artists bridge the art making process between the IDP and the curriculum

Objective: The overarching objective of the ALERT PROGRAMME is to

- (1) build the learner's self-esteem as well as confidence through art making
- (2) expose our learners to different medium used in art making
- (3) introduce the Elements of Art through art making and theme
- (4) practice self-help and social skills

For the home-based visual arts lesson, a guideline for each level was set to ensure that there is a match and relevance and continuity with the ALERT PROGRAMME.

Methods: The first approach was Asynchronous learning, there are two methods tested out. These art lessons did not take place at a fixed time or place. Instead, a set of activities and responses were scheduled for the administrative staff, the student and their parents and teaching-artists.

VSA(S) tried two methods: the first was activity sheets and the second method was a series of video recordings on how to carry out a visual arts project. For these, our main consideration was that many of our learners were having home-based learning with their schools for the first time, and their parents may be working from home. When it comes to the visual art projects, we assume that there would be minimum support if parents are not confident in art making themselves. Hence, we decided to keep the visual art activities short, simple and optional for students and parents to participate. To provide a little more support to the parents, there was no collection of fees for the activities or resources.

For method one and method two, communication was done via email, WhatsApp and an online google form for submissions. The learners were provided a fix-date/time after each submission to expect their teachers' reply. The teaching-artists could choose to respond by a phone call or via WhatsApp through the text function, the voice recording function or the video recording.

At the end of the first month of home-based art lessons carried out through the asynchronous approach, there were a total of twelve art lessons carried out over four levels.

From the month of May, we moved towards a synchronous approach as VSA(S) began to conduct online visual art lessons. These online art lessons were paid for by parents at a subsidies rate. The reasons for the change was that our learners and parents were more familiar with online learning and with the Singapore mid-year school holiday being brought forward, there were a pool of learners who were available and equipped to attend online art lessons.

These online art lessons were held on a weekly basis via Google Hangout or Zoom by three of the teaching-artists who were available to try out a new teaching platform. The synchronous approach allowed the teaching-artist to interact with the learners better.

Feedback: The teaching-artist provided feedback that the third method was straightforward as they were able to prepare activities and sequences in reaction to the students' responses to each project and they were able to support the art-making and individual development better.

One common challenge faced by teaching-artists was because the online classes allowed for any student who was available at a specific time slot to enrol in the session. It was difficult to control the learning style and pace of the individual learner, some students were under different teaching-artists before the circuit breaker, so this meant that the learner had to adapt to the new way of art learning in different domains. Mr. Billy Soh, shared that *"the quicker students were waiting for others to finish each of the steps in the process."*

Still, the synchronous visual art lessons were preferred over the activity sheets or video recordings. Mr. Billy Soh, gave another the feedback *"Rather well, despite the setting being different from a classroom environment"*. He also shared that through this method, the teachers were able to support the learning progress of the students at different steps since this critical learning point was not possible with the asynchronous methods. He said that *"While it is not a breeze, the pace could be monitored by looking at their progress through each step of the process."*

At the end of the circuit breaker, the general feedback given by the participating teaching-artists, learners and parents highlight some strength and gaps in home-based visual art projects either through activities sheets, video recordings or online art lessons

By the teaching-artists

- The video recording of lessons provided a good control of content, however it was removed as it was expensive, time consuming and required more resources to develop. It was viewed almost similar to an online class.
- The activity sheets provided a lot of uncertainty for teachers as they were not able to customize to the learners, it was challenging for teachers to plan for all learners, including guessing the amount of support each child will receive from a caregiver to carry out the project.
- Students and parents were responsive to WhatsApp for feedback as each teacher was able to share with them individually.
- It was challenging to point out specific details because the teaching-artist was not able to immediately demonstrate to a student or to the group. The students had to wait for the teaching-artist to recreate the image done by the students before demonstration can take place. This resulted in the loss of focus for some students.
- Some parents said it was not easy for them to do the art lessons at home without the teachers, some had work responsibilities while others were not confident in art making themselves. Independent students said a very easy 10min can finish the work. Some Parents said depending on the work, if the child can do it , they will do it.

From the learners and parents

- The effort and time to pull together the activity sheets and videos were acknowledged and appreciated
- Many felt that it is a useful method to guide the learners to learn art at home while there are still gaps in the learning because not all parents are as comfortable in art making as their child
- Many felt that activity sheets and video were successful, however it lacked the interactive component when compared to online classes.
- The online classes were preferred by learners and parents because
 - There was a lot of engagement between teaching-artist and the learners through conversations in class

- The learners and parents felt supported because the teaching-artist was able to address any questions or challenges immediately, including presenting alternative ways of art making.

Reflection A circuit breaker and the pandemic took everyone by surprise, we were all unprepared. At the start of the pandemic and the closure, the organisation took it one step at a time instead of rushing forward to provide a service. It forced the administrative staff and the teaching-artists to think of contributing factors that could make the home-based learning a success while managing expectations of the different individual and their roles. This hurdle has brought forward a new platform to provide visual arts lessons and service to our learners and their parents.

For future closure, the organisation is actively planning and preparing for any closures in the future by setting time and training to promote active home-based learning. One strategy is that the organisation has decided to proceed with activity sheets for the first two-three weeks of a closure. This will be followed by the roll out of online classes by the fourth week. This move is to allow learners and their families to readjust to a new home-base routine as well as to provide the time for enrolment of classes to be processed by the administrator.

To ensure that all learners are equipped with art materials for any home-based learning, at the start of each year, a list of economical materials are issued to parents to prepare at home. Each learner is issued with one set of art materials to use during the face-to-face session, this set will be brought home when notice to the public is issued for home-based learning to resume. With the issuance of the art materials, it will be a chance for administrator and teaching-artists to explain and prepare parents for a possible closure.

The artists teaching with VSA(S) are encouraged to plan art projects with the possibilities of home-based learning to resume at a moment's notice. This could be through the scaffolding of steps for a project or to practice on a specific art-making technique of the learner's choice. The teaching-artists are encouraged to communicate with the parents or caregivers on possible approaches should home-based learning resumes.

Teaching-Artists with VSA(S)

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Esther Ng

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