

Creativity restarted: Private art studio during the coronavirus crisis and its functioning

Petra Vichrová

Abstract: The paper presents the functioning of a private art studio in the period of limitation of its activities, based on the government measures against the spread of the coronavirus crisis. It describes the search for ways how not to lose contact with students and ways they can continue to learn distantly through digital tools and social media. The text also describes the approaches of parents and children to this form of teaching and a later return to the usual way of conducting lessons. At the end of the article, the traced facts are summarized and a possible way of using material, that indicated the connection of studio teaching with the distant home environment, is indicated.

Keywords: private art studio, leisure education, coronavirus crisis, distance learning, contact, restart

Introduction

This article describes the activities of a private recreational art education studio, which has been operating for ten years in the centre of the South Bohemian metropolis České Budějovice. Leisure education is a specific area of education and its educational functions are focused on the intentional and purposeful influence on the individuals' personality (Pávková, 2014, p. 14). In this case, it is mainly about enhancing and deepening the interests in the field of art education and discovering and developing the specific abilities of each student.

The studio is an open educational platform for a wide range of people from preschool children to adults. Currently, the studio is attended by approximately 120 students. Most of them attend two-hour lessons at regular weekly intervals and the other part consists of those who are preparing for entrance exams to either high school or art colleges. In addition to these individual preparations for the aptitude exams, the tuition takes place in homogeneous groups of about twelve participants. The specific tasks for each group take into account the previous experience of students gained in the studio and beyond, and the task complexity also corresponds to the ontogenetic differences of children's artistic expression at a certain age. The goals and contents of the lessons reflect the current perspectives and goals of art education and are related to the framework of the educational plan formulated by the curriculum of the Czech state authority.

The problem that we will look at further is the comparison of the studio's activities before the coronavirus crisis, the situation during the pandemic and the continuation of the studio's activities after the release of government emergency measures. Focus will be aimed mainly at students who attend regular group lessons.

1 Open/Closed

The specialisation of the art studio tries in many respects to advance and sometimes replace school art education, which is, especially in case of younger schoolchildren and preschool children, often designed as a "series of uniformly repeating art "themes", two and three-dimensional, which could be summarized rather as a presentation of finished products. Precisely due to its craft form, but often also due to a certain shallowness of content." (Řepa, 2019, p. 160). This is confirmed by some children, who are themselves attending the studio, when they comment on school art education, and by similar conclusions resulting from observing the current situation in practice.

The studio is attended mainly by students who are intrinsically motivated to perform visual arts, and in the lecture they usually immerse themselves in the activities with deep interest. Free time activities are generally defined by the free choice to perform activities that provide satisfaction and joy to an individual and become an opportunity for relaxation and personal development (Pávková, 2014, p. 11). However, it is logical that certain activities are more attractive for the students and others are less attractive. This is naturally a reflection of their individual temperament and artistic typology. The choice of varied artistic themes leads to the application of suitable artistic means, which gradually lead students to independence in other artistic activities. Children are also familiar with the individual forms of these activities, such as two-dimensional or three-dimensional activities together with mixed media actions. The studio provides both imaginative and experimental activities, predominant with younger children, as well as study-based tasks predominant with adolescents.

The change in the established way of tuition in the studio towards the home environment came suddenly and unexpectedly. Moreover, this change was preceded by the relocation of the studio to newly renovated premises. Each group of students was informed about the move in their lecture, and the following lectures were to take place already in the new premises. The new studio space provided more facilities, easier access, but also a fresh inspiration for creative work. The relocation of all the studio's facilities was planned for the weekends so that lectures could continue in the new environment from the following Monday.

The last week of running the studio in the existing premises, the first measures by the government against the spread of coronavirus SARS-COV-2 were already enforced. First there were closures of all primary and secondary schools from Wednesday, March 12, 2020, and later all public art schools and public studios for children and youth. As the studio concerned is a private institution and is therefore not subject to the provisions of the Ministry of Education, lectures continued until the end of that week. The art studio stopped and temporarily interrupted tuition only after the government decree on the general closure of private establishments was enforced.

The first week after the sudden interruption of studio activities was generally a waiting time. This time was used for moving in completion, random necessary works, placement of things, cleaning and preparation for

the fresh start and further operation of the studio. In retrospect, it should be noted that the original idea of moving the studio in three days and make it fully functional was rather utopian. The coronavirus "helped" a bit in this aspect.

After a week-long waiting phase to see the whole situation clearly, it was confirmed that the resumption of activities of school institutions, art organisations, cultural events and leisure groups was still far off. Similarly to public art education institutions under the management of Ministry of Education, the studio also shifted to distant learning mode. The impulse was not only a commitment to parents and children who attend the art studio and would lose the opportunity to express themselves creatively, but the motivation was also financial, because the studio is a private entity without grant support or other subsidies. Its operation is thus completely dependent on the course fees, which are paid for half a year in advance. The rent and creative materials are paid from this amount and the overall operation of the studio is covered by it. At the same time, the issue of a possible refund of the amount for non-provided services was addressed, but this option would significantly reinforce the uncertainty in the continuation of the studio's activities. The distant learning was therefore supposed to partially replace the work in the studio and thus not broaden the gaps in tuition.

At the time, it was not yet entirely clear how long it would take for the government's quarantine measures to be eased and when it would be possible to meet in person again to perform art tasks in the studio environment. After the waiting phase, and thus with a pause of about a week, the parents were provided with information about further steps in the operation of the studio in the new mode. These steps concerned the possibility of home-based creation according to inspirational tasks, which were gradually published on the blog of the art studio. With the premise that it is a leisure time group, the tasks were presented as optional, with the intention to relax from school duties. Naturally, it was assumed that the formulated artistic themes would be a highlight in the time of forced stay in the home environment. The recreational character of the studio did not allow for stronger pedagogical competencies.

2 Online/Offline

A link was created on the blog of the art studio with the working title "Studio at Home", which served as a stimulus for art activities in the distant form of learning (ateliervipart, n. d.). At the same time, a link entitled "Gallery of Home Creative Work" was published on the same blog, with the intention to present the children's art works (inspired by the provided topics). The Facebook profile of the studio, which shared both the thematic units from the blog and other inspiring links, also served to communicate with students and parents. These communication platforms created comfort zones that offered resources for both younger children with the assistance of parents and older and independent students. The individual topics on the blog were addressed to suit both younger and adolescent students.

Gradually, eighteen thematic areas were published, which were mostly inspired by works of art available on

the Internet. We tried to make positive use of the potential of current technological possibilities such as social networks, and to open space for getting the artistic creation closer to the students, leading to their own experience based on the offer of quality source material.

At the same time, the individual units contained a short motivational text together with the basic methodological procedure, and the resulting unit thus combined the receptive and productive components of art education. The creative activity itself did not require special art materials or the professional intervention of an experienced pedagogue and could thus be realised in a domestic environment. The tasks were mainly focused on the reception of visual content, which encouraged the start of art production.

These were mainly practical recommendations for the implementation of leisure activities.

Individual home lessons acquainted the applicant with specific works of art, artistic directions or the work method of the selected artist. They offered educational content in the form of theory, questions, searching, determining and comparing works of art. But above all, they offered children the opportunity to express themselves creatively and authentically. The tasks covered a relatively wide range of applicable media that can be used at home. They offered opportunities to express themselves in drawing, painting, creating a collage, trying a frottage, forming a three-dimensional object, assembling a humorous installation, making a short video animation. The Easter holidays also fell in the period of the coronavirus pause, and therefore other inspirational tasks were also related to them. It was again either a link to visual arts or an environmental perspective associated with our Easter traditions.

Public art institutions, such as some museums (Hradec Králové Museum, Olomouc Museum of Art), galleries (accompanying program of NG Prague), cultural centers (Sladovna Písek) or some public art schools (Ostrava-Svinov), which reacted almost immediately to the situation, became support for the preparation of individual recreational activities. They published teaching materials, functional links to the suggestions of art work from home and galleries made their art collections accessible on their websites. Another source was the newly established website *nedatovano.cz*, which publishes ideas for art education and tips for creating during the pandemic. These pages "were prepared as methodological support for art teachers and for museum and gallery pedagogues" (Tvoříme doma / Bez názvu, 2020). At the same time, there was a Facebook profile, where they invited the public to send pictures in response to published art tasks.

The resource materials we mainly used were thematically designed worksheets or professionally shot videos devoted to a specific area. We have incorporated these sources (with the indication of the source) into our own designed units, complemented with additional information or photo documentation and published on the studio's blog. This form of inspiration package served as the basis for home creation according to the individual possibilities of the household and the children.

A quarter of the tasks were published on the website before the parents were sent information about alternative learning options so that the children already had a choice when they visited the pages for the first time. Additional tasks were added gradually, approximately twice a week. The time spent searching for suitable materials and creating assignments was essentially the same as participative teaching. At the same

time, the individual topics added were shared on the studio's Facebook pages, so that the opportunity to create could reach the widest possible circle of interested students.

Responses to the art tasks came almost immediately after the information was sent to the parents. These were mainly emails thanking for this opportunity, because, as one mother of her 11-year-old daughter put it, "Terezka, like all children staying at home, is bored." Similarly positively, but with the opposite motivation, wrote the mother of thirteen-year-old Milan, who appreciated the planned activities with the addition "so that we all don't go crazy from the school tasks from morning to evening". The email often expressed a desire to return to normal mode soon. Some parents of older students have sent a message that they would forward an email with information to their children and that if they created something, they would send the outcomes. About a tenth of the parents of all children who visit the studio reacted in a similar way.

The first outcomes from home creation reacted mainly to the introductory set of tasks, which was placed on the blog after the closing of the studio. But the response rate was very low. A total of eleven children submitted their work, five of them repeatedly. There was also information in each of their email messages that the children were already looking forward to working together with the teacher and others and, above all, to the studio environment. Enthusiasm slowly waned, and with the start of the second month of quarantine, no picture came. The positive finding was that the tasks on the blog were still engaged with, as visible from the traffic on individual tasks on the website. However, the number of visits usually grew only when the task was also shared on the Facebook profile.

The Facebook platform also brought another dimension, which was that the submitted tasks and inspirations from the field of fine arts also appealed to many adults who are either engaged in fine arts as amateurs or practically not interested in fine arts in their everyday lives. According to the comments, they were fascinated by the diversity of fine arts, but also by the non-traditional approaches to it.

3 Restart

The return to normal tuition came exactly two months later. As soon as the government's measures for the area of business were lifted and allowed it, the studio was literally restarted. Not only were the lectures finally started in the new premises, but there was offered the opportunity to come to the studio in have two more substitute morning times. This option was also offered due to the partial compensation of paid but unrealised direct tuition. The offer was positively accepted by the parents, although it could only be used by children who did not have morning online lessons at school.

After the coronavirus break, the vast majority of students returned to the studio immediately and the tuition started again. Some of them started visiting the studio despite the fact that they did not return to school in the school year. Approximately fifteen students did not return to the studio at all. Some because of a person at risk in the family, however the remaining parents did not share the reason why their children

did not return to the studio.

From the reactions of the children, it was clear that they missed working together, as well as contact and communication over the thoughts and implementation of artistic tasks. There were also contributions about spending time in isolation, and ways of spending it. From these debates, it turned out that some students did not want to create independently at home, did not know what to do or were overwhelmed with homework and did not even get tasks from art education at school. It also turned out that some of them did not even learn from their parents about the possibility of using the themes prepared for them. Individual motivation to work independently outside the studio was found only in some students who found space in their leisure time to create according to their own preferences.

Conclusion

The knowledge gained from the experience of the two-month distance method of "tuition" in the recreational area of art education, resulted in rather unsatisfactory findings. This could be caused both due to the voluntariness of the tasks, but also due to the quantity of tasks and level of engagement arising from obligations to schools. For students, this novel way of education could have been exhausting, and for an intrinsically unmotivated child, art tasks could be superfluous.

Experience suggests that distant learning is unlikely to succeed as the main principle of tuition and should be understood as an emergency or supportive solution, for example, in the absence of a student in the class, to avoid a longer pause during a particular subject, which would lead to the child's passivity. It could also serve as a source of certain theoretical background for subsequent studio activities. We believe that in the field of art education, fully functional tuition cannot be built on a remote approach, in which communication, motivation, immediate support and a sense of recognition are important. At the same time, not all children in recreational art class are attuned to art activities and need a stronger external impulse. Even in accordance with the goals of art education together with the evaluation of the outputs of art creation, this form of tuition alone would not stand up. Art activities in the home environment would be limited by both the insufficient background material and the forms of activities and the breadth of applicable media. Art education, which has an exceptional position defined by freelance creative aspect and mutual interaction, could lose this sovereign position if performed only in the mode of distant learning. On the other hand, it is necessary to highlight social media, which has had a major impact on successfully overcoming this emergency state. It has also shown us that the availability of information in the digital age undoubtedly brings many benefits to the educational field. Arousing and maintaining motivation through social networks can in this case be perceived as a supportive means to maintain attention in the absence of studio tuition.

Bibliography

Ateliervipart [website]. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://ateliervipart.blogspot.com/>

Pávková, J. (2014). *Pedagogika volného času*. Univerzita Karlova v Praze: Pedagogická fakulta.

Řepa, K. (2019). Instantní výtvarka. In P. Šobáňová, A. Pospíšil, & K. Řepa (Eds.), *Kvalita ve výtvarné výchově* (s. 125-133). Olomouc: Česká sekce Insea.

Tvoříme doma/Bez názvu [website]. (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.nedatovano.cz/listy/>

Author

Mgr. et. Mgr., MgA. Petra Vichrová

workplace: University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Faculty of Education, Department of Art

private art studio – vipart, České Budějovice

E-mail: p.vichrova@jcu.cz