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Aesthetic Anchors: Bridging the Distance during the Pandemic

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The high school students in my classes saw it coming, but we didn’t think it would ever reach us. We first learned about COVID-19 in SAT test prep and journalism classes from a daily student news channel we watched to keep up with current events—a recommended strategy for standardized test takers and an essential exercise for journalism students. While a few students saw the same broadcast with me twice in one day, I saw each broadcast three times with each class. This is how the students and I became well-versed in the lockdown of Wuhan, as it was presented to the world.

We saw the city streets that usually teem with people deserted save for individuals in full body coverings disinfecting public spaces. Schools were closed and social distancing was strictly enforced. Grocery shopping became incredibly systematic—one newsclip showed a man ensuring that people kept their distance in a grocery store. Masks covered the faces of everyone caught on camera.

News coverage about the coronavirus expanded just as the disease did—making its way around the globe. Erroneously thinking that, like Ebola and Zika, which devastated different parts of the world, the coronavirus would be mitigated before it reached the United States, I remember one day asking a class, “Can you imagine if that happened here?”

Then it did.

At the beginning of March, a student scurried into journalism class alarmed by a text that her father, a doctor on a mission in Honduras, had tested positive for COVID-19. The following day, in a test prep class, a young man asked the thirty-four other students, who were all seated at their desks in clusters of four, “If this thing is out there, why are we still in school?” That was on a Thursday. On Friday, we learned that the school was indeed going to close and we would meet virtually on Monday.

While the transition to online learning was abrupt, for me, the virtual learning space was a familiar one. For years, I had taught online graduate-level courses. Despite the miniscule turnaround time, the transition was personally not much of a problem. One of the things that bothered me most, though, was leaving behind the student artwork that blanketed my classroom walls.

Strategies

Prior to the pandemic, I asked students in the test prep class to create visual art that was “aesthetically pleasing,” as I described it. This was one method to help them remember certain strategies to use for the SAT test. While many students asked for a specific definition of aesthetically pleasing, they seemed ready to engage once parameters were outlined.

Students created a 3 1/2 x 10-inch banner to remember THIEVES, a time-saving acronym to employ when reading nonfiction passages. **T**itle, **h**eading, **i**ntroduction, **e**very first sentence, **v**isuals and vocabulary, **e**nd of passage, and **s**ummary became THIEVES, an efficient strategy for students to identify the main idea of a nonfiction passage because of the uniform structure. If students looked at the title and then the first sentence of each paragraph, along with the last sentence or two at the end of the passage, the main idea would emerge. Some students found the strategy useful and others found it confusing, but, ultimately, this artistic endeavor helped them remember the acronym.

Students scrambled to get their slips of colored paper and create small works of art showcasing the acronym and its meaning. They happily chattered away as they worked with markers and colored pencils. They created incredibly colorful work using bold stripes, multicolored polka dots, and block letters and cursive ones, all spelling out the acronym THIEVES and what it meant. By the time all four test prep classes completed the project, students created nearly 150 individual banners that would hang in front of the room.

The display of their vibrant work formed a multicolored mosaic that stretched from floor to ceiling along one side of the classroom door, over the top of the door and down the other side, into the corner and then onto the front wall until it stopped at one of the two big whiteboards. Students would sometimes stop on their way in or out of the classroom to find their own work or admire someone else’s. This marvelous display provided three things—a point of visual excitement in the room, a point of reference for students, and a source of joy for me, as I saw it constantly throughout the day.

Reading Comprehension

The SAT reading test, as most people know, is comprised of short fiction and nonfiction passages followed by a series of text-dependent questions. I often measured reading comprehension for the fiction passages by asking students to read the passage and then draw what they understood about the story—character, setting, and plot—in as much detail as possible. Whether the assignment was to create a four-panel cartoon or a single scene, students were eager to take blank sheets of paper, markers or colored pencils, and sketch out their understanding of the action taking place in the chosen passage.

Even those students who initially objected, claiming that they had no artistic abilities, would settle down and start to work, inspired by the other students in their cluster of four (two of the four desks faced each other and two sat side by side, so students were in close quarters and the room was at capacity). Students discussed the reading, shared thoughts about what they were going to create, and engaged in lively conversation. The sound of thirty-five young voices would fill the room as they chatted about their choices and other topics.

The goal for these exercises was to create something that demonstrated their understanding of the details from the reading. Some students’ work was simple in execution, while others’ captured as much detail as possible within the forty-five minutes of class time they were given for this project, which was always planned for the end of the class period. At the bell, students stacked their work on the table at the front of the room on their way out. Sometimes students asked for additional class time to complete their drawings, so during the last class meeting of the week students had the chance to revisit any uncompleted work.

Once graded, I displayed the drawings strategically on the walls on both sides of the classroom. I hung work near where students sat so their own creations were in their sightlines. Student after student would locate their own work and smile. Students from the journalism classes often pointed to individual pieces and took time while waiting for class to start to ask questions, discuss the work, and take obvious pleasure in the viewing. All this art was bathed in sunlight, as the entire back wall of the classroom was made up of seven consecutive floor-to-ceiling windows.

Being surrounded by these artistic creations brought joy into the classroom. That joyful presence was, of course, left behind when in-person learning stopped abruptly the Friday we were sent home. But what the weeks following our move to virtual learning showed was that our aesthetically pleasing activities played probably an even more crucial role in the transition than they did while students were face to face.

Bridging the Distance

Once we moved to the online environment, things changed. High school students, of course, are tech savvy. Cell phones were a constant distraction in class, and students’ dependence on technology was real. During one class meeting, for instance, a student picked up their phone to figure out how to draw a cat that was described a certain way in a practice test passage. Regardless of the pervasive nature of technology, though, the move to virtual learning cut many students off—from support systems and from access to learning in general.

It is widely known that education inequalities moved center stage when schools shut down. Even though several schools supplied technology for their students to learn remotely, not all students had internet access, despite internet providers’ efforts to provide wider access. In addition to those inequities, the transition to digital spaces had a significant impact on students’ emotional well-being.

While some students couldn’t wait to not be in school anymore, others seemed truly saddened about the disruption of their in-person routines. A young woman in one of the test prep classes voiced her disappointment the day before schools closed when, at the beginning of class, she talked about how much she would miss our class and expressed concern about what was going to happen. I reminded her and the class that we had an idea about how things would unfold—we had watched the crisis from the beginning, on our daily student news show.

We knew probably more than most people the tragic outcome the pandemic would have and that this move to the virtual was going to last for a while. But, we also noted that society would still function and remembered the segment from the news show with the man in the

grocery store in China making sure patrons kept physical distance from one another. The student perked up, smiled, and said, “That’s right, we have seen this,” and many of the other students also seemed a little relieved.

When we went online, some students never skipped a beat in class, others struggled a bit, and still others simply disappeared. (It’s also interesting to note that some students who did not do well in person excelled in the virtual learning space.) And many students commented in class chats that they missed seeing their friends in person.

In the journalism classes, creative writing assignments designed to address what students were experiencing resulted in some outstanding written work. In the test prep classes, though, it was the visual artwork, assignments that easily translated from in-person to digital learning spaces, that helped so many of the students do impressive work in the midst of the chaos of the circumstances. Posting a few literature passages from various practice tests into our virtual space and asking students to do what they had been doing in the classroom—to create visual representations of what they understood from their reading—yielded significant results.

Without the constraints of a singular class period, the work that many students submitted was often stellar. One student in particular uploaded photos of the paintings she did on canvas to demonstrate her reading comprehension. Another student who noted in a private message that he did not have access to colored pencils and markers at home posted photos of wonderfully detailed drawings done in pencil. And several students who opted out of various other assignments consistently chose to complete the reading comprehension assignments.

By the close of the school year, the test prep virtual classrooms were filled with row upon row of students’ visual art submissions in response to various literature passages. Most students finished the semester strongly, and their work simultaneously infused joy within virtual spaces in ways similar to what took place in the physical space that we no longer occupied.

It is easy to imagine how creativity and aesthetically pleasing activities can be manifested in all learning environments regardless of the class content. Moving forward, it seems imperative to infuse learning activities and spaces—both physical and virtual—with joy through creative expression, particularly visual art. Clearly visual art and other forms of creative expression enhance student learning in traditional situations. What this pandemic has shown is that visual art and creative expression are stabilizing and restorative in times of crisis and extreme uncertainty.