

# THE CHALLENGES OF ART EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF DISTANCE LEARNING FOR HIGHER AND GENERAL EDUCATION

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**Abstract.** Globalisation and advancements in digital technologies have significantly influenced education, particularly in the shift to distance learning. While not new, the importance of distance education grew during the COVID-19 pandemic, simultaneously exposing numerous challenges.

This paper aims to reveal problematic aspects of arts education in the context of distance learning in higher and general education. It identifies differences between art studies and general art education, examines activity models and working methods, and discusses the learning environment's importance in distance education. The methods employed include analysis and systematisation of information.

The following conclusions were reached. The fundamental differences between art studies and general art education are most evident in purpose and content, distinguishing professional competencies from self-expression. Dependence on technology complicates some traditional methods but enables broader access to content through well-designed tools. A well-equipped learning environment enhances students' capacity and shapes school culture, influencing attitudes towards artistic expression and intercultural competence, evolving with cultural contexts.

**Keywords:** Distance education; distance learning; learning environment; art education

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## INTRODUCTION

Globalisation, the rapid development of digital technologies and the penetration of digital technologies in education and studies are constantly introducing certain adjustments. The usual emphasis is on the impact on quality, flexibility and accessibility of the learning process. On the other hand, we are witnessing how quickly, despite constructive progress, the established system can be seriously challenged, for example by pandemic constraints, warfare, climate or economic problems, and so, when it comes to studies and education, the focus naturally turns more towards distance learning. And although distance education, as Lamanauskas & Makarskaitė-Petkevičienė (2021) points out, is not a new subject in university practice, nor is it a new area of research, due to the constant changes in the technological and educational environment, it is, according to Melnikovas (2017), cyclical, constantly evolving, and remains relevant.

Interest in distance education increased particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the global quarantine restricted the activities of contact schools, making distance education the only form of education that could be used without interrupting the learning process. At the same time, a number of problems have emerged for which no adequate preparation had been made. As revealed by various studies conducted by Merfeldaitė et al. (2020), Mishra et al. (2020), Lamanauskas & Makarskaitė-Petkevičienė (2021), Bilyakovska (2023), Prima et al. (2023), the problems were related to both technical resources, such as lack of computers, software, network capacity, and human resources, such as teachers' and students' willingness to use the technical equipment, lack of time, lack of adequately prepared teaching and learning materials, gaps in managerial work, and motivation.

Meanwhile, according to the researchers, the main advantages of distance education are its flexibility, convenience, accessibility and attractiveness, especially through modern computer technologies and the digitisation of content.

It should be noted that when analysing the science-art interface, the most common models in the scientific literature identify art as an aid to create a clearer or more playful presentation of scientific content. According to Kalogiannakis et al. (2021), to address the problems of content interest and learning motivation, the methodology of playfulness of the educational process is used, where fun visualisation and playfulness of the game principles, or their individual elements, are transferred to scientific or work situations. However, it was not possible to find any scientific work directly addressing the issues of the visual arts situation in distance education. Therefore, it is reasonable to ask what is the situation with visual arts subjects, i.e. art studies in the general context of distance education? How do or should the methods of teacher-pupil, teacher-student, teacher-student activity change? What is the role of the learning environment and what special skills and conditions does such learning require?

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The aim of this paper is to highlight the challenges of art education in the context of distance learning for higher and general education. To achieve this aim, **the objectives are:** to identify the differences between art studies and general art education; to provide an overview of the activity models and working methods that enable the successful achievement of the objectives of the subject; and to discuss the importance of the learning environment in distance learning.

The article is based on **the methods** of selecting scientific publications, analysing their content and organising the information into logical, task-oriented semantic fragments, as well as personal experience of practical work in a higher education institution and a general education school.

## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ART STUDIES AND GENERAL ART EDUCATION

In order to highlight the problematic aspects of art education arising from the application of distance learning in higher education and general secondary education, it is worth first of all highlighting the fundamental differences between art education in art studies and art education in general education schools. These are most evident in terms of content and purpose. To take the Lithuanian situation as an example: while the purpose of art education in general education, which, according to the updated visual arts curricula, consists of the elective subjects of Art, Media Arts and History of Art, is 'to enable pupils to acquire the skills of creative expression in the arts, aesthetic appreciation of the environment and cognitive skills of visual creation' (summarised by the *General Curriculum (Bendrosios programos)*, 2022), it is much more difficult to define the purpose of the subjects of study in tertiary education in a generalised way. Especially in the field of study, which are directly oriented towards very specific activities requiring a high level of professionalism, as opposed to general education, which focuses on general cognition and self-expression.

However, it is not only the content and purpose of learning that differ, but also the maturity, motivation, attitudes, behavioural patterns, etc. of learners. It is difficult to expect that all 20 to 30 students in a class will have the same or at least a similar interest in art, when peers in the same group are united from the outset by their choice of study programme.

As Jucevičienė & Lipinskienė (2001) note, the critical aspects relevant to a particular student may differ from the critical aspects identified by other students. Therefore, it is very important to show and emphasise to students that each of them may see and perceive the same phenomenon differently. This is essentially the principle of individualised education, which is particularly relevant in the overall process of art education or art studies. The authors point out that such an individualised approach enables all participants in the teaching/learning process, including teachers, to develop their own experience alongside their own perception, while also becoming familiar with other students' ways of perceiving, and the critical aspects they have identified accordingly, so that two forms of learning – knowledge acquired on both an individual and a collective level – are intertwined and complement each other.

However, in distance learning conditions, where, according to Laužackas (2008), distance and/or time separates the learner and the teacher, and ICT is used for the transfer of information, the possibility of adequately applying the same methods of teaching and learning that were common during contact work changes. Of course, the activity model and working methods of a particular session are the competence and responsibility of each teacher at the same time, and the choice of the appropriate methods is as important as the content itself, which is why special attention must be paid to it.

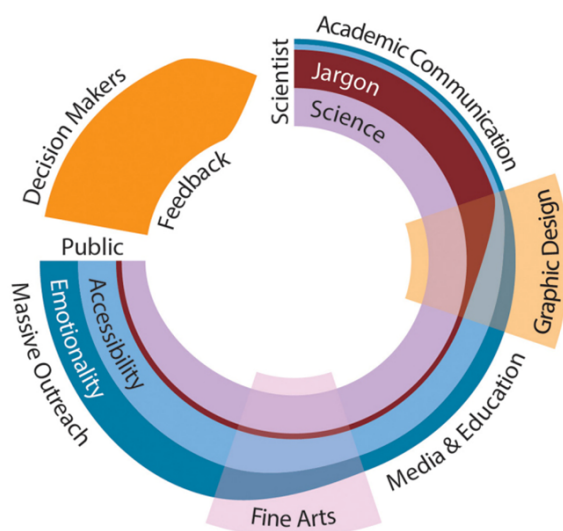


Figure 1. **Accessibility and emotionality in science education and communication**

Source: Zaelzer, C. (2020). The Value in Science-Art Partnerships for Science Education and Science Communication. *Eneuro*, 7(4), p. 3.

As already mentioned in the introduction, the most common models in the scientific literature identify art as an aid to enliven or play with more complex scientific situations. Here, according to Braund & Reiss (2019) and Zaelzer (2020), the advantage of art is that it operates through emotions and experiences, and is therefore highly engaging and thus helps to delve deeper into even quite complex research questions. A visual example of this is illustrated in Figure 1, where a diagram drawn by the authors depicts the adaptation of scientific information for the general public through artistic solutions (see Figure 1).

## THE ROLE OF ACTIVITY MODELS AND THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Traditionally, art studies and art education have been based on a wide range of individual practical-creative activities, accompanied by a wide range of oral and demonstrative methods, ensuring both the transfer of information to the learner and feedback, with real-time reactions to changes in the situation, and discussion of mistakes and solutions. In the case of distance education, this requires additional resources: filming or photographic equipment (in some cases tripods, additional lighting), software and the skills to use it all, replacing some of the spoken information with written information. Since, as mentioned above, distance and/or time separates the participants in distance education, each consultation, observation or evaluation comment leads to two extremes: in one case, lengthy descriptions, which are very time and energy consuming, in the other case, laconic and formal phrases.

Some traditional methods, such as working from life, creative collaboration in groups, collaborative project work, have to take on completely new forms, or become impossible in principle (e.g. drawing from life and drawing from a photograph, while similar on the surface, are very different methods). Individual masterclasses or seminars, case studies are hardly possible in distance education, unless they are carefully and technically prepared in advance. The realities and technical resources required for such a high quality preparation of teaching material can be seen in Figures 2 and 3.

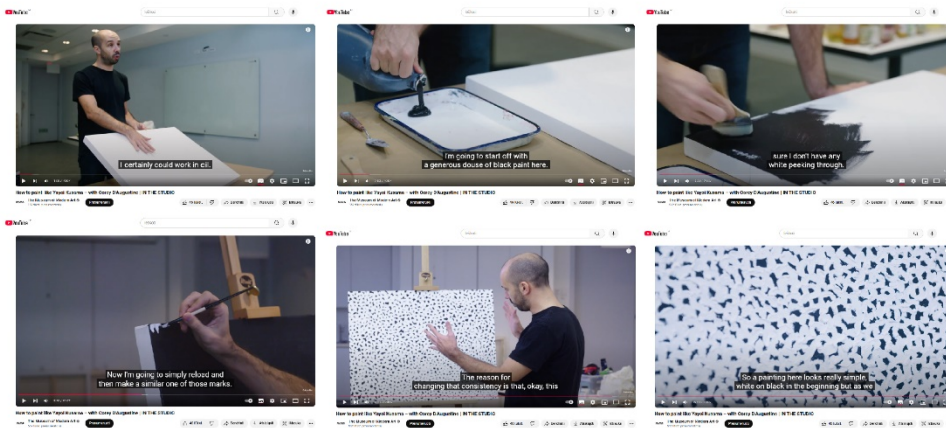


Figure 2. Compilation of video snippets from MoMA's training sessions

Source: The Museum of Modern Art. (March 23, 2017). *How to paint like Yayoi Kusama – with Corey D'Augustine* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/fZBC3nmvJb8?t=25>

Figure 2 is a compilation of video excerpts from a training session organised by MoMA, the Museum of Modern Art. It shows at least 6 different filming angles and layouts, allowing to convey in detail the relevant visual information to the user (learner) according to the lesson plan, together with a professionally recorded soundtrack, without any noise or other distractions.

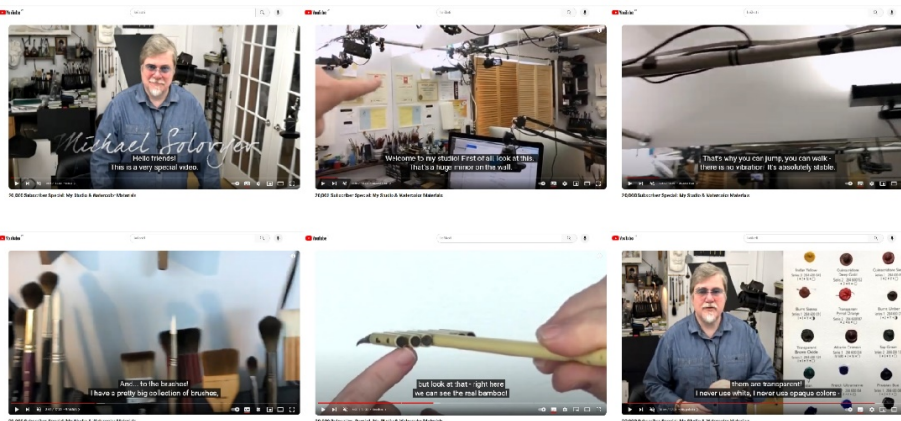


Figure 3. Compilation of video parts on the studio of M. Solovyev

Source: Watercolor. (Jul 21, 2020). *Michael Solovyev demo 1 Join* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/BsG8SGWYqOc>

A similar situation is captured in Figure 3, a compilation of video fragments from the studio of M. Solovyev, a member of the Canadian and American Watercolour Association, where the author holds distance watercolour courses. This figure shows not only the different perspectives and viewpoints, but also the state-of-the-art studio equipment, which simultaneously captures the artist's movements, palette, the work in progress, and, when necessary, individual parts of the studio. There are also subtitles, although the original recording has a professionally produced soundtrack, a frame saver and different camera shots in one frame.

These are examples of technically excellent examples of distance learning, illustrating the multimedia and modern technology capabilities required by the distance learning environment for visual arts. However, as Neifachas et al. (2022) point out, the term “learning environment” encompasses two dimensions in parallel: the environment organised by the teacher and the environment in which the students learn. Various relevant sources link a well-equipped learning environment directly to the creation and enhancement of learners' learning power. For example, Jucevičienė & Lipinskienė (2001) explain learning power as the autonomy and responsibility given to the student by the learning environment to control his/her own learning process and to maintain the motivation for quality learning, while the *Lithuania's vision for the future “Lithuania 2050” (Lietuvos ateities vizija „Lietuva 2050“*, 2023) emphasises the creative powers of the individual, stating that in order to develop these powers not only the quality of curricula is important, but also the physical environment of educational institutions, which is free from material resources that could in any way restrict learning (*Lietuvos ateities vizija „Lietuva 2050“*, 2023).

However, art education or art studies are not limited to technical facilities, theoretical knowledge and/or practical skills. Scholars are quite unanimous in their view that the cultural environment is an integral part of the learning process in order to develop the skills of aesthetic appreciation of the environment and the cognitive abilities of visual creativity. Burkė (2019) highlights the noticeable link between the creation of educational spaces as aesthetic environments and the formation of students' attitudes towards artistic expression.

Summarising the findings of various studies, Vilbikienė (2022) argues that the physical learning environment is a multifactorial holistic experience, which in turn shapes the culture of the school, manifested through the attitudes, behaviour, values, beliefs, habits, attitudes, and traditions of community members. Such a cultural context, according to Radzevičienė (2007), is understood as a specific culture, i.e. a worldview that is acquired and transmitted through teaching and social relationships. Through learning it, cultural competence is acquired, which may change with the changing cultural context.

The specificity of distance education in a globalised context clearly implies a growing multicultural context and the increasing importance of intercultural competence. However, this in part changes the relationship with the specific local cultural environment, some of the methods of operation and in some cases the set of value attitudes. And while there are sometimes doubts about the effectiveness of distance learning, it must be acknowledged that the evolution of information and communication technologies has made it inevitable that this field will evolve.

## CONCLUSIONS

The identified fundamental differences between art studies and art education in general education are most evident in terms of content and the purpose of the specific subjects, with a distinction between the competences necessary for professional performance and the development of individual self-expression and general aesthetic education. There may also be some differences due to the individual attitudes of the learners, personal needs or critical aspects relevant to a particular student. Meanwhile, research on the science-art interface treats the arts as a tool to enliven or gamify more complex learning situations.

In terms of operational models and working methods, distance learning itself becomes an important aspect, with distance and/or time separating the pupil or student and the teacher or lecturer. While it is understood that the choice of operational methods is the competence and responsibility of each teacher, the direct dependence on digital technologies implies the adaptation of methods to specific human resources and material environments. Distance and/or time differences and dependence on information technology make some traditional methods complicated or inapplicable, but the careful and high-quality development of teaching/learning tools opens up the possibility of creating wider and easier access to relevant content.

Researchers interpret the learning environment as a term that encompasses two dimensions in parallel: the one organised by the educator and the one in which the pupil or student learns; a well-equipped physical learning environment is linked to the creation and enhancement of the learner's power to learn and is seen as a multifactorial, holistic experience that, in turn, shapes the school culture. It shapes students' attitudes towards artistic expression and their overall cultural competence, which in turn changes as the cultural context changes.

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