



Media notes: (left) a hand drawn slide from a presentation with the title of the presentation, (center) a still from a video introducing learners to the format, (right) a hand drawn slide from a presentation with instructions for the exercise

Lanna Cotta

Facilitating Accessible and Reflective Programming During Troubled Times

by Katarina Countiss

Introduction

Before the pandemic, I had two part-time jobs that made my life hard. One was weekdays, the other weekends. My schedule was irregular. I was tired and didn't have enough time for my art practice. During this time, I kept telling myself if I could do art full-time, I would be so happy. When the world shut down, I felt my life open up. I was laid off, the unemployment payments with bonuses were coming in and I suddenly had a lot less stress. People asked me if I was going to stop doing my zine because of the shut down, but it was one of the few constants in my life. I made a few batches of zines by hand instead of copying because the copy shops were closed.

My friend Evan invited me to participate in an improv workshop for the elderly on zoom and I thought it would be a great format to do something to connect people and keep them creatively practicing. "Lanna Cotta" was born and I became a pillar of strength for a small number of people.

Structured Activity

At a time when structure, ritual, and community felt inaccessible, I began hosting a daily drop-in arts activity for all levels. I posted on social media my results of my creative exercises and would facilitate 2-8 learners from 10-11am daily. The exercises ranged from drawing to improv to writing. One of my favorite exercises involved rolling dice to create a chance-based score. We had slides and structured time to check in and at the end of the hour for closing time, someone would nominate a song to close us out. I relished these moments in making this program how I wanted it. The guidance of the slides for me and the participants helped everyone feel safe, calm, and coordinated. I noticed early on in my time in isolation about the abruptness of a zoom room opening and closing. I appreciated sessions that had time to arrive and time to depart, the kind of routine that helps our nervous systems.

Content

The artists that I presented to the group were mostly mid-century surrealists, and they would inspire elements of the day's exercises. During each session, I would facilitate a section called "Share-outs and Reflections." Each learner had an opportunity (in turn order) to reflect out loud on the questions: What do I think? What do I feel? and What do I take away? It makes sense that as an all-levels drop-in activity, the questions that apply to anyone and everyone are about their own experience and process. I was not only a facilitator, but a participant and I would model the sharing and reflecting. This was a good opportunity for me to reflect on how the exercise was structured and make notes about what worked and didn't work. Sometimes the short time to work feels great and sometimes it feels like too little time. With repetition, I learned little moments of demonstration or reminders about how the paper should look folded, or how to adjust for the edge of the paper, little bits of guidance while doing the exercise would help participants feel like they are on the right track.

Personal Impact

I feel relieved after a timed exercise. I feel energized when I learn about an artist that I might not have encountered otherwise. I feel hopeful when I start a sketch that feels like a dip in the water of a much bigger potential project. I feel supported when I experience the rich variety of different starting points, topics, themes, perspectives on creativity that this series provided.

The most effective way for me to learn is to have the pressure of telling someone else about a topic I'm unfamiliar with, especially someone who is hungry for the knowledge. Sometimes, students would have something to add to the conversation and I really enjoyed that feeling of integrating their contribution. I learned that it's best to not assume what they are about to say. Hearing out someone's intuition, question, assertion etc. enriches any session.

Conclusion

After the pandemic subsided, I got a job working as an art instructor and migrated these efforts to a weekly drawing session that I facilitated through [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com) called "Wonder Wednesdays." I continued that for another year, before the demands of my work schedule took priority. I cherished the times I got to use my sense of facilitation towards creating well organized sessions that were accessible, reliable and reflective.

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