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# 'Way more relevant and a little less theoretical': how teaching artists designed for online learning in a pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

The move to remote learning in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic presented design challenges for teaching and learning. Though research is emerging on teacher adaptation during the pandemic that documents challenges and the perspectives of stakeholders, the field is lacking close descriptive accounts that illustrate what classrooms looked and felt like. We followed teaching artists as adaptive experts who designed responsive and emotionally safe spaces for students during the transition to remote learning. Our exploratory study was guided by the following research questions: (1) How did teaching artists design for teaching and learning during the pandemic? (2) What can be learned from teaching artists in responding to extraordinary circumstances moving forward? We found that teaching artists designed for online learning through centering relationships and resourcefulness, providing emotional support, cultivating introspection and empathy, expanding what counted as arts practice, and including families. We end with implications for research and practice.

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## KEYWORDS

Pedagogical openness; remote learning; COVID-19 pandemic; teaching artists

## Introduction

The move to remote learning precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic presented design challenges for teaching and learning. This unprecedented time resulted in what some called 'learning loss' (e.g., Dorn et al. 2020), though asset-minded educators flipped this narrative, instead positioning youth and their families 'as knowledgeable instructional partners' and reframing 'communities as learning spaces and resources' (McKinney de Royston and Vossoughi 2021). The impact of the pandemic on student learning, experience, and mental health cannot yet be fully assessed, however, we are beginning to learn from and reflect on experiences in pandemic teaching and learning (e.g., Reich 2021), recognizing the extraordinary work of teachers who adapted to challenging circumstances. With a bit of distance from the height of the pandemic, now is an appropriate moment to reflect on what we can learn from teachers – and in the case of this study, teaching artists – and what they did to create welcoming digitally mediated spaces that attended to students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Through supporting vulnerability and broadening notions of learning in online spaces, these experienced teaching artists flipped the deficit-oriented 'learning loss' narrative on its head (Dahn et al. 2021; Sikkema et al. 2021).

Though some research is emerging on teacher adaptation during the pandemic that documents teachers' challenges (e.g., Horn and McGugan 2020; Marshall, Shannon, and Love 2020), the field is

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lacking in close descriptive accounts of teaching and learning that illustrate what classrooms looked and felt like during the shift online at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like Horn and McGugan (2020), in this paper we argue that during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers had to demonstrate their adaptive expertise (Hatano and Inagaki 1986) – the ability to adapt to novel situations and use expert knowledge to invent new solutions to new problems. In the case of this study, we followed teaching artists as adaptive experts who created responsive and emotionally safe spaces for students during the move online. We argue that the teaching artists' backgrounds in the arts, as well as an arts-based training that encouraged them to operate with a disposition toward pedagogical openness (Eco 1989; Campbell 2018), supported their adaptive expertise as they designed online learning environments responsive to students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Our exploratory study was guided by the following research questions: (1) How did teaching artists design for teaching and learning during the pandemic? (2) What can be learned from teaching artists in responding to extraordinary circumstances moving forward?

We situate our exploratory study within the emerging literature on teacher practice during the pandemic and use the concept of adaptive expertise as our theoretical frame for understanding how teaching artists oriented their pedagogical practice given extraordinary circumstances. Through case studies that include analysis of interviews, multimedia reflections, and instructional videos of three teaching artists, we illustrate how teaching artists designed rich instructional experiences during the pandemic, consider what they offer in responding to unforeseen and unprecedented challenges in education, and discuss what we might learn from their work going forward. Implications for research and practice are discussed, including how teachers may draw upon pedagogical openness to support the development of adaptive expertise in present and future novel situations.

## Background

### *Educational research in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic*

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact in educational settings in precipitating what has become known as emergency remote teaching (ERT; Hodges et al. 2020). Unlike online learning environments that are intentionally remote from the start, ERT surfaced in response to school closures. At present, educational research reflects the need for understanding the ways in which these unprecedented circumstances have affected teaching and learning in higher education and K-12 spaces. A large part of recent work around educational response to COVID-19 has employed more easily distributed data collection methods such as surveys (e.g., Lucas, Nelson, and Sims 2020; Marshall, Shannon, and Love 2020; Asanov et al. 2021; Azubuike, Adegboye, and Quadri 2021) to efficiently document the experiences of a large number of varied stakeholders and take inventory of their perspectives on remote instruction.

Across educational levels, budding pandemic research has focused on the personal experiences of students, teachers, and parents. For students, survey studies have addressed student access to resources (Asanov et al. 2021), student engagement (Lucas, Nelson, and Sims 2020), student perspectives on the transition to remote learning (Manca and Delfino 2021), and the difficulties students have found in remote learning (Rotas and Cahapay 2020). Through surveys and qualitative work with a particular STEAM program, Thompson et al. (2021) found that counterspaces were valuable for maintaining a strong community for Black and Latina girls and their families in the shift online. Other recent work has interrogated the challenges that teachers faced in transitioning their practice to an online environment (e.g., Marshall, Shannon, and Love 2020). This has necessitated an examination of how to support teachers, with emergent findings highlighting the affordances of MOOCs for professional development (PD) opportunities (Boltz et al. 2021) and pointing to social media as a viable space for educators to exchange ideas and support one another (Carpenter, Krutka, and Kimmons 2020). Furthermore, with the stay-at-home orders serving as a bridge between family and classroom settings, communication with families has never been more

important, with research suggesting it should be consistent, personalized, and inclusive (Coleman et al. 2021). Some recent work also examined the experience of parents, their challenges, and larger insights on remote learning curricula (e.g., Garbe et al. 2020; Fontenelle-Tereshchuk 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has surfaced educational inequities with respect to access and connectivity (e.g., Azubuike, Adegboye, and Quadri 2021), pointing to a digital divide that could exacerbate existing achievement gaps (Dorn et al. 2020). ERT has further had an impact on students with special needs, either posing as a hindrance to learning, as was found in the case of some students with ADHD (Becker et al. 2020), or as an unexpected opportunity for a more accessible learning environment, as was found in the case of some students with ASD (Reicher 2020). In the face of educational challenges, inequities, and ever-changing circumstances, a few articles examined the effects on student mental health (Asanov et al. 2021; Lischer, Safi, and Dickson 2021), calling for a focus on care and caring, and for educators to support student well-being (Berry 2020). To address the existing inequities, Dreesen et al. (2020), among others, highlight some principles for more equitable remote learning (e.g., diverse channels for instructional delivery; increased support for teachers and parents), with implications for policy makers.

Research on the effect of the pandemic on arts education has largely favored post-secondary classrooms, focusing on the affordances and limitations of remote instruction and adaptations of course structures (Cziboly and Bethlenfalvy 2020; Papp-Danka and Lanszki 2020; Li, Li, and Han 2021). However, research in the arts at the K-12 level has been limited, with different districts adhering to different policies, and cuts on funding or difficulty in offering certain activities leading to few offerings (Tuttle and Hansen 2021). Feindler et al. (2021) examined inequitable levels of access to and support of the arts across the U.S., with some districts keeping the arts as part of the curriculum while others only offering them as supplemental courses or not at all. Moreover, budding research has centered on the effect of COVID-19 on policy and leadership across disciplines. For instance, Schmid and McGreevy-Nichols (2021) reflected on how the dance community came together in response to the pandemic to provide guidance on maintaining quality dance education. On the other hand, a large-scale survey with music educators illuminated a disparate treatment of music classes at the elementary and secondary levels, which varied on a national scale (Shaw and Mayo 2021), with implications for policy makers, calling for greater equity for all students. However, current arts education research is largely missing close, descriptive accounts of teacher practice in online classrooms. To address this gap, the present paper sheds light on the ways in which teaching artists adapted their instruction online, illuminating some salient approaches to teaching and learning in the arts at the K-12 level in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Adaptive expertise as a theoretical framework***

Adaptive expertise differs from routine expertise in describing an expert's disposition toward learning and response to change (Hatano and Inagaki 1986). That is, though both adaptive and routine experts possess domain knowledge, adaptive experts are more apt at responding to a novel situation or reacting in a crisis; adaptive experts continue learning throughout their lifetime, which fosters a flexibility and creative outlook that allows them to seek and find the most appropriate, and often innovative, ways of addressing a problem (Carbonell et al. 2014). Such qualities are especially useful during unprecedented circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic, which has upended regular educational practices.

In their study of highly-effective mathematics teachers' responses to instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, Horn and McGugan (2020) positioned educators as adaptive experts, given an affinity for lifelong learning, embrace of a flexible approach, and well-rounded expertise. Additionally, the arts as a discipline support adaptivity through a focus on cognitive flexibility, imagination, creativity, complexity, and grappling with ill-structured problems (Tan and Ponnusamy 2014). Bringing together this positioning of teachers and the arts in relation to adaptability, we argue that teaching

artists are particularly well-suited to study as exemplars of adaptive expertise, given their interdisciplinary knowledge and experience as teachers and artists, which could translate to greater flexibility and creativity in approaches to the design of learning environments.

## Methods

### *Chicago arts partnerships in education (CAPE)*

The nonprofit arts organization Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE) fosters relationships between schools, teaching artists, and teachers across the Chicagoland area. CAPE adopts a long-term partnership model whereby Chicago Public Schools teachers are paired up with teaching artists for the purposes of co-creating and co-teaching arts-integrated units that integrate inquiry-based practices within K-12 classrooms and after school programs. Integral to CAPE's approach is its call for active engagement in research and collective inquiry by teachers, teaching artists, students, and staff as they take on the role of Artist/Researchers (A/R; Sikkema 2016). To this end, CAPE staff tailored professional development (PD) sessions for its teachers and teaching artists during the 2019–2020 academic year, centered around the concept of openness. The twice quarterly PD sessions began in January, 2020 (pre-pandemic), and data collection occurred August, 2020–October 2020, after the pandemic had moved classes online.

The concept of openness has been a topic of interest across educational contexts, as in open access and open educational resources (e.g., Kamenetz 2010; Wiley and Green 2012), open course and open teaching (e.g., the DS106 project, a free digital storytelling course), and open-source learning (Preston 2021). Alternatively, in this context, CAPE defined openness within the arts, drawing from Eco (1989) who described any work of art as unfinished and open to interpretation from an audience. Campbell (2018) translates this notion of openness to pedagogical settings, positioning it as an educational value. Through a lens of openness in arts teaching, students are encouraged to draw on their individual experiences, as they take on a critical approach in interpreting a work of art (Campbell 2018). During two workshops in January, 2020, one aimed at the elementary school level and another one at the high school level, CAPE teaching artists and their teacher partners read excerpts from Eco (1989) and Campbell's (2018) work on openness, reflecting on their teaching practices and considering how to explicitly integrate openness in how they designed learning experiences for students. Prior to these workshops, CAPE teaching pairs were encouraged to discuss their shared interests as shaped by their lived experiences in order to derive a 'Big Idea' and an 'Inquiry Question' that would guide their subsequent research and lesson designs. During the workshops, CAPE staff further led discussions around uncertainty as a byproduct of operating from a place of openness that fosters greater freedom in the exploration of ideas. Though the PD began prior to the pandemic, the shift to remote learning deepened CAPE teaching artists' inquiry into how openness, and specifically an openness to uncertainty, could help them reflect on changes brought about by the new mode of teaching, with respect to space, the body, student voice, and identity (Sikkema 2020; Dahn et al. 2021).

We hypothesize that the teaching artists' background in the arts and as teachers, coupled with the openness PD supported the ways in which they designed for online learning. In their interviews, teaching artists reflected on how openness acted as a mechanism to inform their practice. Though we can't say for sure whether or not they would have responded similarly without the PD, openness provided a common language for them to discuss their design choices. For the purpose of our analysis, we consider pedagogical openness to be aligned with principles of adaptive expertise that encourage flexibility and an openness to lifelong learning, especially appropriate for novel situations that require adaptability (Carbonell et al. 2014). That is, we found pedagogical openness as it was framed in the CAPE professional developments to be a way to support the operationalization of adaptive expertise in the arts. The case studies in this paper illustrate learning experiences teaching artists designed with openness

at top of mind, which in turn demonstrated their adaptive expertise as teaching artists and responsiveness during the move to online learning.

### **Participants**

We focused on three teaching artists to illustrate how each created a unique learning environment responsive to students' needs. Each case makes distinct contributions to the creation of digital spaces that sustain close online communities, strengthen teacher, student, and family relationships, and incorporate student voice. The first two teaching artists taught in elementary school (Shenequa Brooks and bAnansi Knowbody) and the third taught in high school (Betsy Zacsek). All three teaching artists requested we use their real names. The elementary schools profiled in the cases below each have over 80% of students on free and reduced lunch, and the high school has 93.6% of students on free and reduced lunch. Shenequa and bAnansi taught at a school in which 71% of students were Black and 21% were Latinx. bAnansi taught at an additional school in which 96% of students were Latinx. Betsy taught at a school in which 79.1% of students were Latinx and 19.1% were Black.

The first case, Shenequa, taught textile arts and sculpture and had been working as a teaching artist with CAPE for 4 years. As an 'Artpreneur,' Shenequa sold weavings inspired by her cultural background on Instagram, and at the time of the interview she explained she had 'sold 16 pieces already' since the start of the pandemic. She described art as 'a way of coping.' bAnansi taught visual arts and had been with CAPE for 2 years. As an interdisciplinary artist, bAnansi said that he 'personally dips and dabbles with a number of different artistic explorations.' He explained, 'I lead my life kind of like an art project and all my interactions are an extension of my practice,' noting that even the name he used for the past 10 years was 'already a pseudonym' after we asked him to create an additional alias for the research. Betsy had been with CAPE for 3 years and though she taught visual arts, she envisioned art as an 'expansive practice,' that could encompass anything, from cooking to gardening. The pandemic prompted her to design her online class as a remote cooking club.

### **Data sources**

The study drew on three data sources: (1) semi-structured interviews with the three CAPE teaching artists; (2) written Tumblr posts capturing teaching artists' developing practices and produced artifacts after the start of the pandemic; and (3) multimedia reflection posts by teaching artists that detailed their most recent projects and how their practice changed during the pandemic. The semi-structured interviews enriched our understanding of teaching artists' practice before and after the move to remote learning and how their work as artists and reflections from the openness PD shaped their design of in-person and online learning environments. Tumblr posts and multimedia reflections complemented our understanding of ongoing projects undertaken by teaching artists and co-teachers; pictures of artifacts were common among these data sources, which illustrated the product and sometimes process of these new practices.

Interviews were video recorded over Zoom and later transcribed. The three interviews were 54 minutes on average (ranging from 48 to 62 minutes each). At the beginning of the interview, participants gave verbal informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and the study was conducted with the approval of University of California, Irvine's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Interview questions addressed a range of topics, including how teaching artists considered the concept of openness in their physical/online classroom and curriculum, how they thought about constructing space for students, how they cultivated and engaged community in their practice, and how current events shifted their practice. At the end of the interview, each teaching artist was asked to select a pseudonym. We largely drew on the information from the semi-structured interviews in our analysis as it provided the most detailed picture of how teaching artists reimagined the online learning environment during the pandemic.



In response to the pandemic, the CAPE team created the CAPE Network Forum on Tumblr as ‘a place for CAPE artists, teachers, and program staff members to share ideas, questions, reflections, and video instructions.’ Tumblr is a microblog platform that allows for the publication and sharing of multimedia posts as text, photo, video, and/or audio. Visitors to the CAPE Network Forum’s page can browse posts by category (e.g., subject area, artistic discipline, grade level). We drew on Tumblr posts featuring reflections, videos, and photographs of teaching artists’ past and ongoing initiatives, including photographs of student-produced artifacts, to illustrate teaching artists’ practices during the pandemic. The multimedia reflection posts served a similar purpose; as with some Tumblr posts, they featured both written reflections on teaching artists’ evolving practices during remote learning and photographs and/or videos of produced artifacts and other project-related visual data. The multimedia reflections and Tumblr posts supported triangulation of interview findings.

### **Analytical approach**

We took a case study approach (Stake 1995; Merriam 1998) to uncover how teaching artists designed for online learning environments during the pandemic. Our case selection was guided by our aim to richly describe teaching artists’ unique approaches to design. We additionally selected cases based on variability in grade levels taught and the teaching artist’s general approach to describing their artistic practice.

Our approach to working with data included using an open coding approach (Corbin and Strauss 1998) to search for emergent themes guided by our research questions that sought to describe the results of teacher practice within the online environment led by a disposition toward pedagogical openness. Our analysis was an iterative process that required constant comparative analysis (Glaser 1965) working through subsets of data, and writing memos to refine our inferences. The constructs we were most interested in were aligned with our research questions to (1) understand teaching artists’ practice during the pandemic and (2) make inferences about what could be learned from these illustrative cases. During the analytic process, we developed a more substantive understanding of commonalities across interviews as teaching artists’ individual experiences emerged. As we developed emergent themes, we conducted further analysis across the two other sets of data sources to triangulate findings. Below we illustrate our emergent themes (i.e., resourcefulness, centering relationships, providing emotional support, cultivating introspection and empathy, expanding what counted as arts practice, and including families) through case studies to show how teaching artists supported students academically, socially, and emotionally during a challenging period.

## **Findings**

### ***Designing to center relationships and emotional support***

For Shenequa, the adaptive expertise she demonstrated through her orientation toward pedagogical openness required listening to and observing her first-grade students (‘they’re *babies*,’ she emphasized) while being able to ‘adapt and maneuver’ during instruction. She explained that pedagogical openness was about ‘being open to anything happening’ and ‘getting constant feedback’ so that students were a ‘part of building the curriculum.’ In this way, Shenequa positioned openness as a way to explicitly incorporate student voice into lessons, something that was important to her both before and after the necessary move to remote learning. In light of the pandemic, openness further helped Shenequa recognize what she could and could not control and center her design choices on what her students needed, both intellectually and emotionally, in the present moment. In her words, she had ‘to be more patient than ever because it’s like, I have no control over what I thought I had control over at all.’

As Shenequa and her co-teacher designed the online space, they considered how to create experiences that utilized the resources students had at home and focused on building and maintaining teacher-student relationships as well as providing emotional support during their interactions. Empathizing with her students, Shenequa was ‘in awe’ of their adaptability, explaining that they were ‘so resilient.’ In designing for remote learning, she thought that within the collaborative instructional videos she created with her co-teacher they needed to consider how to ‘make this even more accessible, we have to think even more outside of the box. We have to think as if they have no access to anything.’ Shenequa made design decisions based on what students already had at their disposal, thereby honoring students’ different starting points.

As an example of how Shenequa and her co-teacher were responsive to students’ practical realities amidst the pandemic, in one of their instructional videos, they created a short sculpture lesson that worked with ‘what is in the home already, what they already have.’ Shenequa and her co-teacher tasked students with using items they found in their kitchen cabinets (e.g., baking powder, bananas, ketchup, salt, pickles) to play with different forms and create what they called ‘condiment sculptures’ (see [Figure 1](#)). Through a 10-minute instructional video, she and her co-teacher playfully instructed their students to find whatever was available to them while they modeled doing the same.

In our interview, Shenequa explained that the purpose of the activity was to demonstrate resourcefulness through something as simple as ‘stacking objects is a sculpture,’ that they didn’t need specialized art or construction materials. Furthermore, Shenequa and her teaching partner aimed to make their activities fun for students by trying to ‘get them up and moving’ – in the case of the condiment sculpture for example, she gave them short bursts of time to go find their objects and bring them back to the video frame one by one to ‘keep the momentum going.’ Through keeping students engaged in fun ways, Shenequa hoped to attend to their needs and maintain interpersonal connections because as she explained, ‘they may be at home by themselves, probably taking care of someone as well because that’s just the reality of it.’

Through their videos and messages, Shenequa and her co-teacher aimed to ‘remind [students] that they are loved, they are cared about.’ Despite the move to remote learning, Shenequa wanted to communicate to students that they were still part of a community that was learning and growing together even though they couldn’t be with one another in person. In centering relationships in the design of the online learning environment, Shenequa and her co-teacher created a digital space that became a safe place for students to express their emotions and be present for one another despite the physical distance. Shenequa provided students with emotional support by giving what she called ‘pep talks.’ She explained how expressing emotions and offering students space to process were central to how she thought about designing learning spaces. She elaborated,

I’m always for not dismissing how you feel because that doesn’t get you anywhere. Okay, we are going through these feelings, you are very valid feeling upset, angry, depressed, whatever the case may be, but then we have to look at that we’re still alive.



**Figure 1.** Creating ‘condiment sculptures’ from resources on hand.



In reflecting on a whirlwind of emotions brought on by the pandemic and other current events, Shenequa supported the construction of a digital space that was sensitive to and supportive of students' social and emotional needs. For Shenequa, the comment that they were 'still alive' was connected to the emotional labor required to process the pandemic as well as recent high-profile racial injustices, including the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. She explained her thought process on grappling with how to broach these serious issues with her young students:

Most of the students are Black ... what do I want to talk about? Do I just want them to journal? Do we just criticize or are we just sitting here in silence, and how do I go about doing that because I'm coping with that myself as a Black woman?

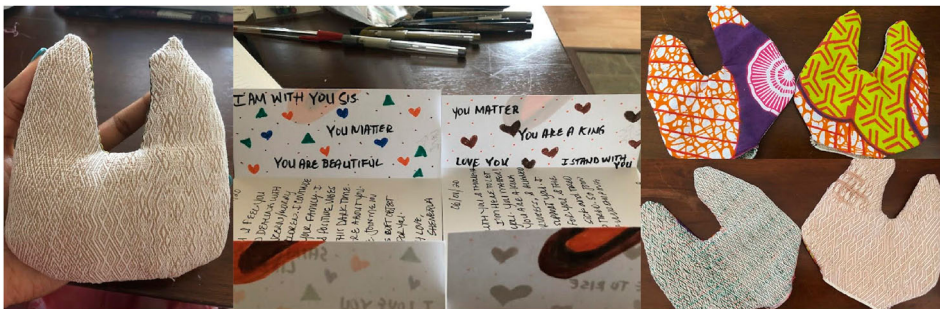
For Shenequa, maintaining connection with students and listening to their thoughts, fears, and hopes was part of her responsibility as their teacher, as an adult figure in their lives, and at the same time, holding this space also supported her own processing and well-being. Acknowledging their shared culture and history, Shenequa took on the role of mentor and rather than focusing on projects to complete or content to cover, she talked about being vulnerable and 'holding space' with students to engage in dialogue.

Through holding space, Shenequa discussed how art making was her own way of 'healing' that she passed on to students. In dealing with the pandemic and recent police killings, Shenequa explained that she

couldn't make anymore because the way I make comes from a very honest place ... there's a celebratory thing that takes place when I make, and that was very much weighed very heavily in my spirit so I stopped and instead I've made healing kits and these soft objects ... infused with lavender ... and I wrote a note to whoever purchased one ... and I match it [by donating] to a Black person who experienced injustice. (see [Figure 2](#))

For Shenequa, these healing kits were a way of giving back to other artists within her community while also finding a way to heal herself. Bringing it back to her students, Shenequa wanted to set up a place of collective healing for them as well, to know that 'it's okay to be vulnerable,' and it's okay to talk and express their feelings or even sit together in 'silence' and just be together.

Shenequa's adaptive expertise was reflected in her flexibility of instruction and readiness to pivot at any point as she drew on student input to build a curriculum responsive to their needs. In tackling instruction in the digital space, Shenequa approached it from a disposition of pedagogical openness, leveraging her creativity in the design of activities, with an eye toward practicality and improvisation, as in the case of the 'condiment sculpture' which encouraged resourcefulness through the use of readily-available household items. Most centrally Shenequa focused on building relationships and prioritizing her students and their mental health first in all aspects of design, especially in the face of current events. Shenequa's emotional support went above and beyond, centering collective healing and forward movement.



**Figure 2.** An example of a handmade healing kit, consisting of lavender-infused soft objects and a handwritten note.

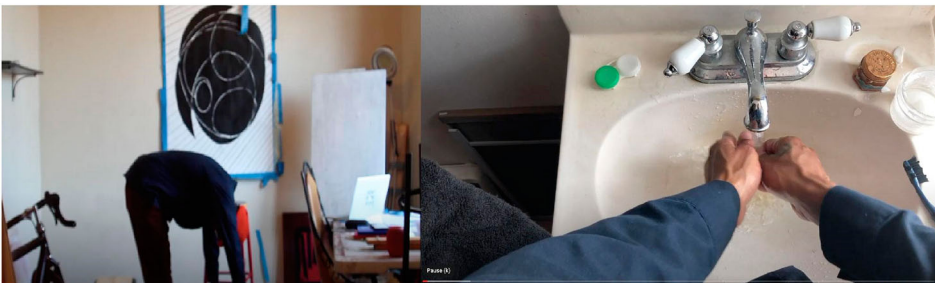
### ***Designing for holistic benefits of art to develop empathy and introspection through shared practices***

Like Shenequa, for bAnansi, openness was about listening to his elementary school students and following their lead so that each individual had ‘an opportunity to speak and be heard, to see and be seen.’ Before and after the move to remote learning, bAnansi designed open-ended art projects. By setting up a ‘playful’ and ‘constantly encouraging and reaffirming environment’ that pushed against the ‘paradigm of school,’ bAnansi aimed to develop ‘introspection and empathy’ with students through art making. bAnansi talked about being prepared for anything by operating from a mental space that he described as ‘openness for the unknown and the unexpected, be they an ever-changing roster, school-specific cancelations, conferences, strikes, or pandemics.’

bAnansi’s approach to openness was reflected in the projects he designed with his co-teachers and the shared practices around which he intentionally structured his classes. He engaged students in diverse, interdisciplinary forms of creative production, yet the core purpose of the shared practices was more holistically concerned with developing introspection and empathy as human beings in-development. bAnansi framed their creative exploration as about understanding oneself through art and also, better understanding how empathy could support developing relationships with others, including teachers, peers, and family members. bAnansi and his co-teachers conjectured that intentional, focused development of self-understanding and understanding of others could strengthen their relationships with students as well as improve students’ ability to positively engage in academic and creative work.

Openness in bAnansi’s pedagogy and curriculum is perhaps best exemplified through how he created shared rituals that were central to his work with students both before and after the move to remote learning. As bAnansi admitted, the shift to online classes was very difficult for him, as he found his best assets as a teaching artist to be in the ways he developed interpersonal relationships with his students. He tried to channel his energy through re-establishing a set of shared practices and rituals that he translated from the classroom to the online space. The purpose of these practices and rituals was to prepare his students for creative work during which they may need to ‘be still or seated for long periods of time’ and to prepare their minds and bodies for the creative production process. To center their joint inquiry of introspection and empathy, students engaged in shared practices that included focused breathing, yoga, and warm-up stretches bAnansi would lead at the beginning of class (see [Figure 3](#), left for still shot from instructional video), everyday preparation for creative work such as washing hands together (see [Figure 3](#), right), and journaling activities such as reflecting ‘on one good thing and one bad thing,’ modeling for students how to take ‘a bad thing’ and ‘build on the positivity around it.’

In one video example, bAnansi narrated for students how though he himself was struggling with the forced isolation, he found positivity in being ‘thankful for my mind,’ that he could ‘choose to be optimistic,’ and reflect on how ‘our minds allow us to escape seclusion.’ He opened



**Figure 3.** bAnansi modeling shared practices for his students.

up this discussion of his mind by also connecting it to how the creative process helped him cope with isolation:

You have to rely on your mind and your imagination ... so you can imagine that this place is anywhere, sometimes I imagine that I am isolated on the space station ... and I am broadcasting to NASA on earth to tell them what space is like.

His introspective example helped construct a digital space in which enlisting one's imagination contributed to a sense of much needed comfort, further grounded by established routine through shared practices.

Like Shenequa, bAnansi centered his relationship with students within the online learning environment, focusing on developing in his students the more holistic benefits the arts afford such as empathy and introspection. bAnansi demonstrated his adaptive expertise through an openness 'for the unknown and the unexpected,' which he channeled through the creative process and a reliance on one's imagination. In the transition to remote learning, the rituals with which bAnansi, his co-teacher, and his students engaged further offered a sense of normalcy and familiarity in a time of uncertainty and isolation.

### ***Designing for expansive art practice and to connect with families***

Betsy found openness inherent to an artist's practice as they try to 'find that edge for [them]selves and then expand it.' She saw openness as an opportunity for her high school students to voice their own interpretive stance. Though Betsy's focus as a teaching artist had been on what is traditionally conceived of as visual arts, to her, art was more than that; she reflected on art as an 'expansive practice' that includes activities that we 'don't necessarily think of as art, but that totally definitely are.' For instance, in her personal time, Betsy maintained a garden and engaged in the culinary practice of pickling produce. She recalled her participation in a plant exchange, where she exchanged around 50 plants with others. With the onset of the pandemic, opportunities for connecting with others ostensibly diminished, yet an expansive view of art allowed for interpersonal connections to still flourish. Where art used to have a solitary focus as one used it as a medium for expression, post-pandemic, art turned to a form of communal practice, with a focus on what is of use here and now, where what we might think mundane took on a new meaning as it bound communities.

With the pandemic bringing uncertainty to the classroom, Betsy reflected on newfound priorities in teaching and engaging students given realities of remote learning. She thought maintaining old studio practices was 'just too uncertain, too unsatisfying,' in light of the significant changes that took root in one's daily routine. Betsy recognized the various forms classroom discourse could take (e.g., focusing on self-care, self-nourishment, or gift-giving), but, in her words, 'everything we do [should be] way more relevant and a little less theoretical right now.' It was not enough to talk about self-care, but to support it through action in ways that were more practical and timelier, with a focus on what was rudimentarily most important. Betsy thus came up with the idea of the remote 'Free Snacks' cooking club. What keyed Betsy into this design idea was 'just how food-motivated her high school students had been in other CAPE classes,' with the presence of food translating to both 'good attendance and good participation.' In the current tumultuous times, keeping students engaged and present is a foremost goal and building on their interests is a promising direction for achieving it. Over the span of the summer, the club was quick to gain traction, with 17 students attending the meetings regularly and proving Betsy right that her idea 'had legs.'

In a post submitted to the CAPE Network Forum, Betsy and her co-instructors reflected on the club's logistics, student engagement, and the learning opportunities – outside of cooking – the weekly lessons offered students. With 'logistics tougher' due to the remote nature of the activity, 'research and some trial and error' was a given, before establishing a routine that worked, with 'three nights on video meet, as well as a brief in-person interaction for grocery delivery.' Though



**Figure 4.** Betsy demonstrating a recipe (left) and a collage of the final product (right).

initially Betsy envisioned participants would make use of ‘what we have at home’ with ingredients on hand, after reaching out to her teaching partners, they thought grocery delivery to all attending the classes, tailored to the weekly recipes, would make for a more inclusive environment. Providing students with the necessary resources ensured that anyone, regardless of income and current situation brought about by the pandemic, if willing and committed to regularly attending the sessions, could do so. Incorporating grocery delivery as a regular part of the club’s operations meant that ‘we’re able to serve all these different populations this way within our class.’

During the online video sessions, Betsy ‘[led] the students through the recipe, demonstrating each step’ (see [Figure 4](#), left) while her co-teacher ‘translate[d] the directions into Spanish and field[ed] questions from chat,’ as the two worked in tandem. For instance, during Week 2, students learned how to make more than a wide range of different breakfast foods (see [Figure 4](#), right). Though most evidently students learned an array of cooking tips, techniques, and recipes, they further learned ‘to experiment, troubleshoot, adjust, analyze, and (most importantly) persevere.’ By taking an expansive approach to art aligned with the contemporary arts practice of meal preparation and food sharing exhibits and performance art (e.g., Rirkrit Tiravanija’s exhibit, *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Green*, Dingfelder 2019; CAPE teaching artist, Marc Fischer’s, *The Meal-Based Artist Residency Program*, Fischer 2018), Betsy and her co-teacher co-constructed a space that sponsored the development of skills characteristic of arts practice, such as experimentation and perseverance.

Betsy further reflected on the importance of space for building community and strengthening existing family relationships. As the class took place in the kitchen, an open space that anyone could enter and exit at any point, other family members, naturally, got involved in the action, ‘talking to each other about the food,’ with siblings ‘discussing what’s happening and whether they can help.’ Betsy thus posited that ‘so much of community is what happens in the dynamics of whatever room you’re talking about.’ In a traditional classroom setting, community was built outside of the family home, with family members rarely getting involved so directly. Yet remote instruction provided a way to bridge the school and family environments. As Betsy found, ‘We’re this little online community that branches out into all of their actual homes and lives,’ enacting a form of synergy between settings. Moreover, sharing what was made with the rest of the family in the days to follow, and having them get involved, served as a way to strengthen existing relationships, thus bridging spaces and broadening notions of learning.

Betsy’s disposition toward pedagogical openness fostered an expansive view of art that centered activities, which hold more relevance in the present pandemic times, with students and families at home. In developing the ‘Free Snacks’ cooking club, Betsy and her co-teacher honored students’ interest in food and pivoted from what is traditionally conceived as studio practice to something that is ‘way more relevant,’ reflecting adaptive expertise. With sessions taking place digitally and physically in participants’ kitchens, the digital space enabled the formation of an online learning environment that built community and strengthened family ties.



## Discussion and implications

Challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic tested the limits of teachers' adaptability to a new normal. From case study analysis of three teaching artists, we found that their prior experiences in the arts and as teachers, coupled with professional development centered around the concept of openness, supported their adaptive expertise for designing online learning that aimed to meet students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Teaching artists designed the online space with resourcefulness, centering relationships, providing emotional support, cultivating introspection and empathy, expanding what counted as arts practice, and including families.

In terms of implications for research, this study provides a descriptive account of teaching artists' practice during the pandemic to offer a grounded view into what online teaching and learning looked and felt like during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is likely that studies with similar aims are currently in development, and if possible, those studies and others should aim to closely trace additional perspectives of the online learning experience, including students and families. Future studies might also look at qualitative shifts in teaching and learning from an infrastructure or institutional perspective that includes the perspectives of administrators and other decision makers. Furthermore, this study was situated within a very specific arts after school context, and additional work should explore if and how instructional practices shifted in schools for traditional academic subjects, especially those more highly constrained by standards and testing requirements.

Several implications for practice can be inferred from the study's findings. First, these cases can be used as examples of teachers demonstrating adaptive expertise in designing for student learning during a global crisis. Furthermore, explicit training in exploring pedagogical openness could be adapted for other contexts to prepare teachers in other subject areas for thinking about how openness might support their flexibility and adaptability in changing circumstances. Moreover, a disposition toward pedagogical openness led to the design of more equitable online learning environments that provided students with the resources they needed to engage with expansive art making (e.g., grocery delivery, as in Betsy's case). Operating from a place of openness broadened that notion in prioritizing resources available to students on hand, which further encouraged creativity and experimentation in students (e.g., creating sculptures out of pantry staples on hand, as in Shenequa's case). Acknowledging the importance of resources to taking part in educational activities and being open to sustainable alternatives that leveraged existing resources and challenged students' own creative inputs has practical implications for sustaining more widely accessible learning environments.

Pedagogical openness in the design of online environments allowed for the flexibility that was needed in handling the uncertainty and challenges brought about by the pandemic, as openness took the shape of reframing classroom expectations and centering student voice and input. For instance, in the case of bAnansi, open-ended projects were fully realized by means of student ideation and input. Additionally, though integrating care for self and others is not new in educational settings (e.g., Noddings 1995), this study surfaced the intentionality with which teaching artists designed to support students' emotional health and wellbeing, something worth attending to well beyond the pandemic. And finally, openness resulted in the design of online learning environments that met student needs in the present moment. In Betsy's words, in the shift online, she viewed 'old studio practices as too uncertain and unsatisfying' as she felt her priorities shifting toward the design of teaching and learning that was more relevant to students lives, connected with material objects in art making, prioritized relationships amongst the classroom community and with families, and focused on what was within their control.

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As CAPE's Education Director, **Scott Sikkema** has final oversight for all programs, partnerships, professional development, public exhibitions/events, and research. Scott spearheaded CAPE's development of research as an aesthetic and pedagogical practice, and he led discussions with staff, artists, and teachers towards articulating the CAPE model of the Artist/Researcher.

As CAPE's Research Program Coordinator, **Jenny Lee** coordinates after-school programming with the Chicago Public Schools district at CAPE, assisting in professional development design and classroom engagement. Jenny also assists in all research activities throughout CAPE programming, working to bridge the gap between schools, artists, and researchers.

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