

Reflections on Distance Learning and Quarantine in Spring 2020: The Oxbow School's Pandemic Story

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LOCATED IN NAPA, CALIFORNIA, THE OXBOW SCHOOL is a 1-semester boarding program for visual arts, critical inquiry, self-discovery, and community. Each semester, we welcome a new group of approximately 45 high school juniors, seniors, and gap-year students to engage in our interdisciplinary core curriculum designed to pique individual interests and curiosities while encouraging creative and intellectual risk-taking experiential learning.

Our pandemic story concentrates on a series of assignments designed to help students cope with the transition to emergency online instruction amid isolation and uncertainty. The images illustrating this article are excerpted from Oxbow's *Quaranzines*, two online publications that celebrated student work and reflections from these aforementioned assignments. Curated by Oxbow faculty, the publications were playful takes on the zine (short for "magazine") art form and its ethos of do-it-yourself publishing and self-aware content. Our digital zines shared students' philosophies for coping via creativity, vulnerability, and humor. Every student was included, and images in this article are shared with permission.

Coping With Loss, Planning for Connection

On March 13, 2020, halfway through their semester, Oxbow's students hurriedly packed their dorm rooms as the need to evacuate campus became imminent. During the weeklong spring break, which followed student departures, faculty redesigned art and academic coursework for virtual classrooms. Oxbow's pedagogy embraces an exploratory and experimental approach to artmaking, and this ethos proved key to engaging our students in emergency online instruction. Our newly designed assignments very intentionally did not require art studios or in-person technical instruction. To promote equity, students were encouraged to use

Figure 1.
Sample
page from
Quaranzine:
quotation
and "Who
Are You...?"
project by
Vaughn.

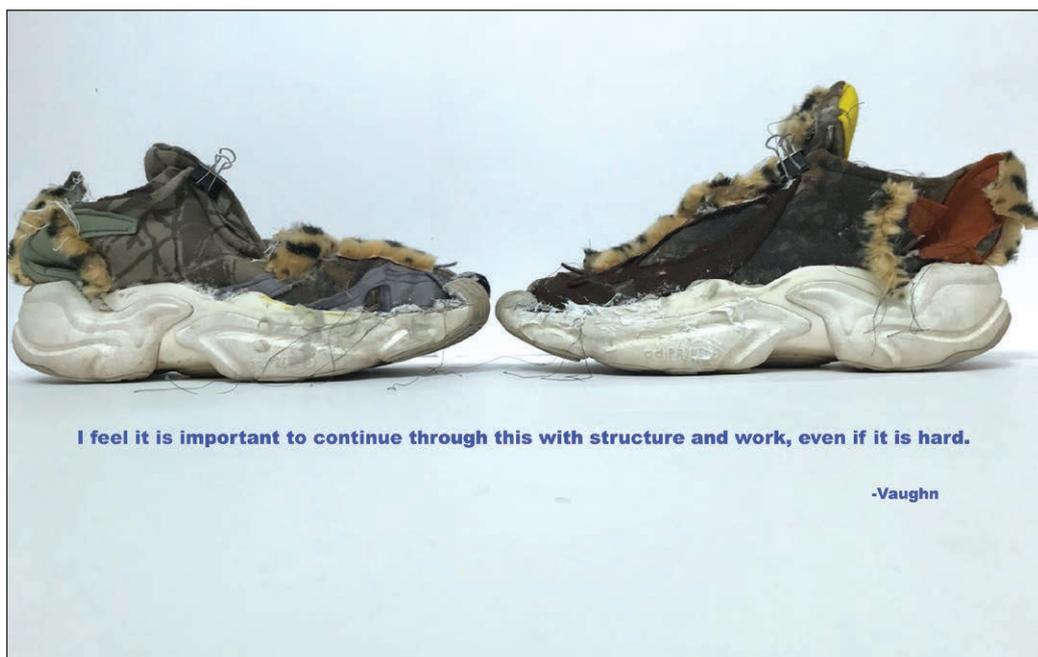
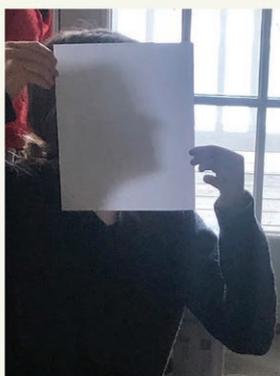
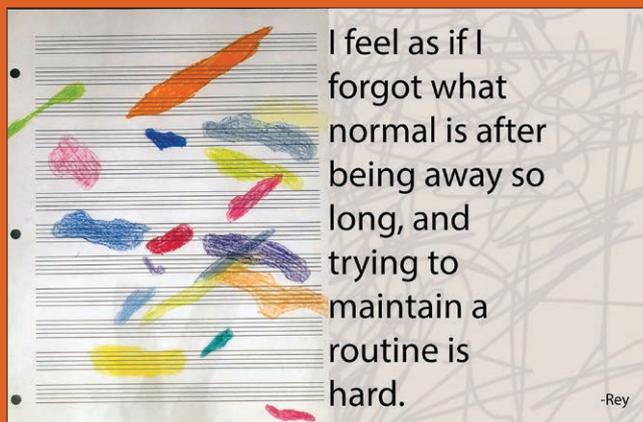


Figure 2. *Quaranzine*: quotation and “Time Based Drawing With Light and Shadow” project by Rey.



Instead of trying to push away my current emotions, I have realized that incorporating them into my art will help me to stay connected to working on my piece, as well as help me cope with the emotions themselves.

- Katie

Figure 3. *Quaranzine*: quotation and “Time Based Drawing With Light and Shadow” project by Katie.

their powers of observation and imagination coupled with freely available resources. The assignments aimed to show that anything and everything became a medium for making art with a simple perceptual shift. Students were sheltering in place under differing circumstances, so we avoided normative language such as “parents” or “home” in our written assignments and did not assume that all students had access to the outdoors. For the first phase of emergency distance learning, the art faculty crafted a series of four projects that were deliberately rooted in the current moment of isolation and lockdown.

Situating Ourselves Together Within New Models of Time

The first assignment, “The View From My Window,” designed by our New Media teacher, invited students to use a window as a real-life viewfinder and consider occurrences within this frame as dynamic and engaging subject matter, thereby transforming a physical limitation into a conceptual possibility. Using the free app Stop Motion Studio, students created short animation clips to test various methods and imagery, then selected one final clip to contribute to a collaborative film montage that created a new, shared “home” that collapsed the distance between us.

After screening the film on Zoom, students discussed its formal components, asked questions about each other, and began to discover possibilities within their limitations. Our hope for this project was to situate everyone in their new locations by taking a collective breath and reset to acknowledge our new reality, appreciate what we could, and begin reconnecting with one another.

The next assignment, “Time Based Drawing With Light and Shadow,” was designed by our printmaking teacher and inspired by time-dependent printmaking processes. Meant to unify everyone by working with the sun as a universal light source, the project encouraged a deliberate slowing down. Watching a shadow tremble

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and glisten as it traveled over a wall or floor became an antidote to global chaos. Students observed the shadows in their domestic spaces and used unconventional materials to create experimental drawings by tracing the shadows in timed increments to record the sun's passage. The process of tracing launched further explorations with line, shape, texture, materials, and composition. Because many students were spending most of their time in one space and experiencing frustration from being so confined, we asked them to consider their spaces literally in a new light and examine the intricacies. (Examples of student works from this assignment are featured in Figures 2 and 3.)

Repurposing Reality and Considering Self-Reliance

Time, the everyday, play, and discovery became central to the art curriculum. Notably, the "Everyday Sculpture" assignment prompted students to test the sculptural potential within domestic space while also considering "balance, humor, narrative, and function" alongside formal elements, such as color, shape, and texture. Designed by our painting teacher, this project unfolded

into an understated delve into absurdity, encouraging students to turn a world already on its head upside down once again to achieve a "new" normal. Fabulous discoveries ensued, including a monumentally photographed bobby pin sculpture and precariously balanced hammers with delicate objects as counterweights. In Oxbow's art studios, students would have been constantly testing materials and processing complex research through their hands while making art. In the absence of that, it was essential to develop a commonplace materiality to exercise experimentation and resourcefulness. (An example of student work from this assignment is featured in Figure 4.)

After several assignments exploring the exterior world and its phenomena, students turned the process of exploration and discovery inward. Our new curriculum concluded with a two-part project titled "Who Are You, and What Have You Got to Work With?," shaped by our sculpture teacher. Students created lists of their materials and resources: 100 material items, 20 nonmaterial resources such as light or sensations, and 10 inner resources "to draw upon" such as perseverance or imagination. Finally, students listed 10 sources of support (with many citing pets, but also friends and teachers). The assignment then pivoted to students utilizing selections from their lists to create self-portraits in situ and in time. Some of the resulting artworks felt imbued with the uncertainty of the present moment amid a global pandemic, while others pointed toward discovery of the self, drawing ties between childhood and current lives, and many posed questions about the future. (Examples of this assignment are featured in Figures 1 and 5.)

The hope for "Who Are You...?" (and the deliberate order of assignments leading up to this one) was for students to rely on their immediate resources—very specifically, their unique inner resources—to sustain them. Oxbow students frequently

Figure 4. *Quarantine:* quotation and "Everyday Sculpture" project by Sekai.

When arriving back home after leaving Oxbow, I noticed how differently I viewed art. I started seeing it everywhere.

I recognized art in different ways. My home became an art installation. I could sit in my room for hours and notice details that were beautiful. I started noticing how many art materials I had access to.

Because of Oxbow, I was able to realize that I had an immense amount of art supplies in every room of my house. It made me feel grateful. I am now interested in doing more research about artists who use non-conventional materials to create their pieces.

-Sekai



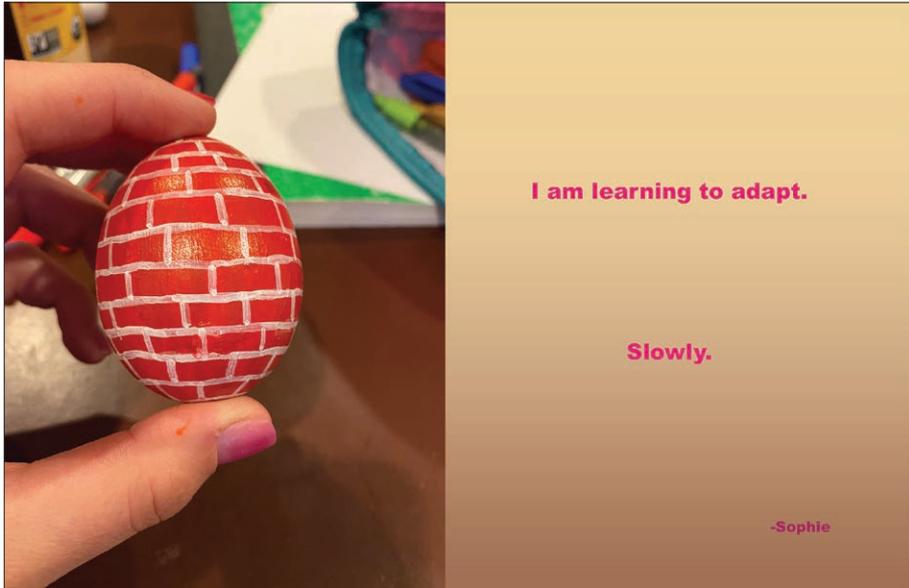


Figure 5. *Quaranzine*: quotation and “Who Are You...?” project by Sophie E.

pair their strengths (technical ability, creative thinking) with the tender areas of their lives, and we faculty support students wrestling with difficult subject matter through conversations and communicating with parents, guardians, and counselors as needed. Because our students were no longer on campus, they needed to support themselves more independently than they might while at Oxbow, and so our approach was geared toward activating all available resources. By this point, students had recognized and acknowledged their own inner supports, which enabled them to operate more independently as well as better support each other. Without explicitly stating so, we had all engaged in a strengths-based pedagogy well-suited for 45 different needs and environments during a time of great turmoil that demanded constant reconsideration and adjustment.

Reimagining Student Fulfillment and Celebration

Although virtual communication was often cumbersome, student artwork proved to be a very rewarding form of communication and connection. Students readily shared their art in virtual classrooms and continually proved that creativity could tame the chaos, lift spirits, and transform limitation into possibility. Continuing to create was our most effective source of inspiration and motivation, as was sharing this with others.

Oxbow’s digital *Quaranzines* revealed students’ invention, introspection, and wisdom, presenting their artwork in a way that was both intimate and widely accessible. After our whirlwind loss of physical community and all sense of normalcy, the *Quarazines* attempted to provide a semblance of closure to several chaotic weeks through which our community had shown great resilience.

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The zines consisted of student works from “Time Based Drawing With Light and Shadow,” “Everyday Sculpture,” and “Who Are You...?” Because “View From My Window” is a time-based and collaborative project not easily represented in one image, it is not included in the zine but can be viewed in entirety in the “News and Notes” section of the school’s website,¹ along with all emergency online instruction assignments and both *Quaranzine* publications.

Through the remainder of the semester, our students successfully engaged in a “Final Project,” the culminating experience of the Oxbow curriculum, which is modeled after an artist’s journey pursuing a line of inquiry through research and creative work. Students’ remote, independent, and self-driven work was possible because they had actively cultivated self-reliance, communication, and a supportive culture with peers and faculty mentors. Teaching and learning is a reciprocal relationship, which extends to teachers’ ability to support what they ask students to do. Care was at the heart of our faculty’s approach, and this meant welcoming student feedback and responding to their needs by making adjustments in class structure, deadlines, and discussions. Emergency online instruction demanded that our school community embrace fluidity while honoring each other and taking the time to be thoughtful. At Oxbow, we often liken a semester program to “planting the seeds” for growth, much of which lies beyond the scope of our program. However, in many ways, quarantine conditions helped these seeds sprout quickly in unexpected and inventive ways. Even in harsh conditions, creativity, curiosity, and community blossomed. ■

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Endnote

¹ <http://www.oxbowschool.org>