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An Interview with Dr. Roger Lee

Peter Vietgen and Joanna Black

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Article abstract

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An Interview with Dr. Roger Lee

*With Interviewers Drs. Peter Vietgen
and Joanna Black*

Never before has the change from face-to-face teaching been so challenged as during COVID-19. In order to understand the present, we turn to the past. The interviewers interviewed Dr. Roger Lee about his first online Art Education program in Canada to shed light on our new day-to-day reality for many of turning to virtual teaching and learning on online platforms.

Keywords: COVID19; visual art education; EdTech; online learning; virtual teaching and learning; pedagogy and public education



An Interview with Dr. Roger Lee. November 13, 2020
With Interviewers Drs. Peter Vietgen and Joanna Black

Introduction:

In the age of COVID-19 the shift from face-to-face to on-line teaching and learning has been swift and drastic at all levels, from kindergarten to higher education. Mid-March, of 2020 brought us a radical new reality to any person involved in the world of education. For many, this produced anxiety, fear, and a sense of a topsy-turvy new world: educators often felt they were losing control of their professional practice. The virtual world, overnight, brought many into the digital unknown. As art educators navigating this new virtual environment, we asked, "Who has been down this road before? Who has explored this virtual territory of teaching art education online?" In Canada, some programs had individual online courses; however, there was only one program that enabled students to complete a graduate master's degree in Art Education completely virtually. This program was at Western University in London, Ontario.

Sixteen years ago, in 2007, Dr. Roger Lee (known as Dr. Clark at that time) envisioned

and implemented the program called Master of Education (Curriculum Studies). Dr. Lee was a past president of the Canadian Society for Education through Art (CSEA) from 1998-2000 and, in 2001, was presented as an honorary member of the society. Among his many accomplishments are two seminal texts written about art education in Canada: *Art Education: A Canadian Perspective* (1994), and *Issues in Postmodernist Pedagogy* (1996). For many years Dr. Lee served as Editor in Chief for the *Journal of the Ontario Society for Education* (1994-1997) and the *Canadian Review of Art Education* (1998-2000). In 1997, he received the Ray Blackwell Award for Excellence in Art Education from the Ontario Art Education Association (OSEA), and in 2011, he was honoured with the OSEA's Post-Secondary Art Educator of the Year Award for his many years of service to this provincial association. Dr. Lee retired on July 1, 2012. In this article, the authors share the contents of an interview with this dedicated and passionate Canadian art educator.

Peter: What do you think about online learning Dr. Lee?

Roger: First of all, I don't think that online versus on-site is a question of good versus bad. They're just different delivery systems. In some situations, on-site is really the better way to go and in other situations, online can do things that on-site cannot.

I think that elementary and secondary art educators are instinctively apprehensive about online delivery because younger learners require more direct supervision and instruction than adult learners; as a result, online home study or distance learning is perceived to be more problematic at the elementary and secondary school levels. Conversely, self-motivated adults are less likely to need somebody to make sure that they are on-task, and for such learners, online delivery can be a viable delivery option.

Some educators fear that technology will reduce the need for teachers in the classroom. Throughout my career, I have heard this concern about technology time and time again, but the demise of classroom teachers has never been realized, especially if we're talking about children in elementary schools. The need for a teacher in the classroom is never going to go away, even if the classroom in question exists in virtual form rather than the more traditional bricks and mortar variety.

The online art education program first started at Western University in 2007. It was only the second online graduate program at Western – not that anybody ever gave me any credit for this achievement. Many of my colleagues in the Faculty of Education felt that you couldn't possibly maintain academic standards or rigor online, and they denounced it as just a mail-in correspondence course.

Again, I don't think that online and on-site programs are, by definition, good or bad. In both delivery models, you can have exemplary programs, adequate programs, and deficient programs. Just because a program is delivered on-site doesn't guarantee that it is a high-quality academic program. All of us have had horrible on-site experiences, and the same can be true of online learning.

The difference between online and on-site is rapidly diminishing. For example, Zoom meetings were not possible when the Western art program was in existence. I never saw the students; I didn't ask students to post *selfies*. They never met except when I hosted potluck get-togethers at my home for students who lived within driving distance of Toronto.

I readily admit that there are certain things that on-site delivery models facilitate more easily than online, especially if young learners and motor skills are involved. But on-site delivery has its own inherent Achilles heel: the geographic and financial constraints that are part and parcel of on-site education. The reason that I'm proud of what I did at Western is that it leveled the field. You didn't have to quit your job and move to Montreal or Vancouver. Art teachers could get easy access to high-quality graduate education regardless of where they lived or their income level.

Online delivery models promise to level the field for young learners, as well. Many students in elementary and secondary schools live in rural areas and their local school is so small that it can never offer specialized art courses like those available at large technical schools or schools for the arts. I predict that someday in the not-too-distant future, every high school student will have access to specialized art programs online.

Joanna: Given that you established the first Art Education online graduate program in Canada at Western University, can you describe the impetus that created the program?

Roger: Most faculties of education in Canada deliver subject-based courses at the graduate level under the umbrella construct of curriculum studies. Given the long list of school subjects that are mandated by provincial curriculum guidelines, discrete graduate programs are limited to language/linguistics and politically important fields such as First Nations and STEM education. This graduate model works well for elementary teachers who teach many different subjects; they can mix and match subject-based courses that meet their professional needs quite easily. It also works well for secondary school specialists as long as they teach important subjects like English, math, or science. But for specialists in small subjects such as art, the curriculum studies model becomes more and more problematic. There may be only one



Joanna Black

Joanna Black is a Professor of Visual Art Education in the Faculty of Education and cross-appointed as an Adjunct Professor at the School of Art at the University of Manitoba, Canada. Her research interests are on subjects of new media education, youth social media usage, artificial intelligence in education, indigenous art pedagogy and curriculum, and digital arts pedagogy. For over thirty years she has worked as an art educator, art director, museum educator, curator, art consultant, and a K-12 teacher in formal and informal settings in Canada and the United States.



Peter Vietgen

Peter Vietgen is an Associate Professor of Art Education in the Faculty of Education, Brock University, Ontario, Canada. A former Visual Arts Consultant/Curriculum Advisor with the Toronto District School Board, Peter is the Past President of the Canadian Society for Education through Art. Peter's research interests include teacher education and the arts, social justice and equity issues and the arts, Indigenous ways of knowing and art education, and art gallery/museum and school partnerships. A passionate advocate for art education in our schools, Peter has presented his research at conferences locally, nationally and internationally.

faculty member, or none at all, who can help with coursework or act as a thesis supervisor. There may be one or two art courses, but more likely, there will be nothing more than one or two arts electives. The lack of faculty expertise requires graduate art students to somehow apply art education to generic curriculum courses with topics such as evaluation and current issues. Of course, this begs the question that if they can do this on their own, why are they pursuing a graduate degree? After all, they're supposed to be receiving higher education from the university, not providing it.

Joanna: So, how can faculties of education deliver graduate programming for small subject areas? Dr. Robert McMillan [the Associate Dean of Education at the University of Western in 2007] decided to augment the existing curriculum studies approach by developing a series of highly specialized cohort programs for small subject areas, and he selected art as the first to be developed. This brings us to another inherent weakness of on-site education: in order to have a financially viable program, you need to have an admissions pool that can generate an annual intake that is both sufficiently large and predictably reliable. If you need an intake of 25 new students every year, how likely is it that that quota can be met with art teachers who teach within driving distance of a given Faculty of Education? Not likely. But if the program is delivered online, the whole world becomes the admissions pool. In my graduate program at Western University, I had students who were living in Abu Dhabi, downtown Moscow, suburban London, England, and Japan.

Roger: Because of this international enrolment, the program, of course, was asynchronous. I remember two years before this started, I was asked to teach an online additional qualifications course, and the administrator said, "Well, we really appreciate your doing this. This is a new thing for us, and I don't want you to be stressed out about it. The technology guys will upload your course outline, and all you have to do is be at your computer between 7:00 and 9:00 on Tuesday evenings and interact with the students just like you would in a classroom. "Well, I knew she meant well, but that was not my idea of online education. I went online to see how my graduate students were doing at least twice a day, maybe three times a day, seven days a week. Online courses are inevitably more time-intensive than on-site courses.

Administrators may think that online courses are cheaper to run because they don't have to provide art studios and supplies, but the time component is a major consideration. University professors would require a teaching assistant to do the tedious and laborious tasks, such as responding to and keeping track of student discussions and posts online.

Peter: So that's how it started! Dr. Lee, can you describe the program you established from its beginning to your retirement? Speak to the whole duration, including the many years you worked in the program for.

Roger: At first, the university stipulated that I needed to recruit six graduate students each year. If enrolment went below six, the courses didn't make money; the courses could still run, but on a prorated basis for workload credit. Dr. Macmillan told me afterward that he never thought that I would find six registrants. Well, I got ten people within a month. The next year, the quota was raised to fifteen and the year after that, it was twenty-five. The program had its own dedicated applications and admissions stream, so one-third of the curriculum studies graduate students were art teachers. When I retired, I was the academic advisor for 44 art students, while most of my colleagues had two or three graduate students.

When I was asked to do this, I said, "Well, of course, I'll do it. You know, it's too important not to do this somewhere in Canada. Art teachers deserve to have a quality online option." Although I had already reached my normal retirement age (53) with 31 years of service, I promised to stay on for five additional years; I felt confident that by then, the art program would be completely in place. While I kept my end of the bargain, the Faculty of Education did not. The Dean and Associate Dean who created the art program left Western University after the second year of its operation. Their successors made no new appointments; when I retired, I was still all by myself. I refused to provide 'academic supervision/oversight' as a professor emeritus, so the program was discontinued after the 2011 cohort was admitted. You can have the best ideas in the world for reforms and innovations, but if you don't have administrative support, it won't make any difference. Deans can unilaterally decide to remove budgets, refuse to make appointments, and cancel programs, even when the programs are bringing in substantial revenue, as was

"In my graduate program at Western University, I had students who were living in Abu Dhabi, downtown Moscow, suburban London, England, and Japan."

certainly the case with my graduate program at Western University.

As to how the program was created, it began with two graduate arts courses that had been approved sometime in the 1970s but had not been taught in living memory. These two courses were dusted off and formed the core of the program. I then created a third, fourth, and fifth art course. We had an eight-course model consisting of two foundation courses (curriculum theory and research methodologies), five art education courses, and a capstone course to complete the program. Students opting to complete a thesis had one less art education course and a two-credit thesis course. It was a totally prescribed program; there were no electives. Students took one course after another in a set progression. The associate dean loved this model because it was so easy to staff and to timetable. Since we had an annual intake, the courses were never canceled. If an art student left the program, the space would be filled by a student in another graduate program since the art courses also acted as general electives. I had physical education teachers, school principals, science teachers, language arts specialists, one dance teacher, and even a professor from OCAD. They all did splendidly, and the art specialists always made a real effort to make them feel at home.

How was studio work accommodated online? Well, I dealt with studio in a way that I never personally experienced as an art student. All I ever got in university were studio courses or curriculum courses; the two never really intersected. I didn't like that, so I designed my program so that studio practice and curriculum theory were constantly merged. Students could opt to complete studio work in lieu of academic writing throughout the entire program. Some students completed a substantial body of studio work; at the other end of the spectrum, some students never submitted any studio work at all. All studio projects had to be digitally documented from conception to completion and had to be linked to the required readings with an artist's statement.

The model for each of the five art education courses was identical. Each course lasted for 12 weeks. Students spent the first week getting re-acquainted with each other. Since the program was delivered on a cohort model, the students rapidly developed personal and

professional links far beyond what would be possible in traditional programs. The students loved to share pictures of their art rooms, school buildings, and community attractions. Curriculum guidelines were also frequently compared and contrasted. The cohort structure gave students a sense of community and support; they were not 'alone.' The first week was also focused on the required readings for the first theme.

The subsequent eight weeks were divided into four broadly conceptualized themes, each lasting two weeks. The first week of each theme was spent discussing three assigned readings; three questions were provided for each reading to prompt and help structure online discussions. I made a point of trying to select articles written by Canadian art educators whenever possible. During the second week of each theme, the students applied some aspect of the readings to their professional practice. These applications to professional practice involved a wide variety of options: original artwork, an article on the same topic, relevant local curriculum guidelines, lesson plans, interviews, projects undertaken with their own students, and so on. Since everybody did something different, the students learned more from their peers than they did from the professor. All of the assigned reading commentaries and all of the applications to professional practice were posted online. Students were required to summarize and critique at least one peer's application to professional practice.

The final three weeks were spent on a capstone project. Again, the students could opt to submit an extended body of studio work or complete an academic paper. As usual, all of the capstone projects were posted online, and every student was required to submit a summary and critique of a classmate's capstone project.

Some teachers might find the online posting of student assignments problematic, but art is always an arena for public disclosure and student-to-student learning, and I wanted to try and replicate that online.

As for assessing student progress, at the conclusion of each of the four themes, the students had to send me privately a self-evaluation report card, which was both numeric and anecdotal; self-evaluations were also required for the capstone projects. Nobody fell behind.

Nobody could just put their head down on their desk or look outside the classroom window. Everybody knew where their marks came from and could follow their progress in the course.

Joanna: When you asked students to post their works online, was the work posted just within your course? Did only the students within your class have access to this online forum, or was it intended for an international audience using digital platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo?

Roger: Just within the course.

Joanna: You have said you believe your online program was successful. Can you explain the reasons?

Roger: Well, how does one define 'success' in the first place? I am sure that we would all agree that the ultimate goal of art education is to enrich the quality of art instruction and activities in elementary and secondary schools. As art education professors, we contribute to this paramount goal by preparing teacher candidates for their induction into the profession and by assisting career teachers in their quest for greater effectiveness in the classroom. Graduate study is one way in which these over-arching goals can be achieved, and online delivery platforms play an important role in facilitating access. So, I would suggest that my online graduate program was successful in that it allowed many art teachers to gain knowledge and skills that they could use to enrich the art experiences of their students.

The enrolment numbers speak for themselves, and the program generated substantial revenue. Empirical evidence of success can also be found in the course evaluations. The lowest course evaluation received by the graduate art education program was 90%; the average course evaluation was around 93%. Of course, since none of my courses hit 100%, improvement was always possible.

In reality, however, my online graduate program was ultimately a failure. My dean canceled the program upon her arrival in 2011. Art was removed as a teaching option in the preservice program. The art room was decommissioned and renovated to serve other purposes. After 25 years of service to Western and its Faculty of Education, I retired in 2012 knowing

that, seemingly overnight, art education had vanished without a trace.

Peter: Do you have any cautions for teachers immersed in the online environment today?

Roger: It's evolving so quickly that many of the challenges of online education are rapidly becoming less of a problem. Some concerns, however, should be focused on the fact that due to the current pandemic, everybody has suddenly been forced to go online. I think we can assume that this has resulted in a great many unfortunate introductions to online education. You have students who didn't sign up for online courses and are angry. You have teachers who didn't expect to be teaching online and don't feel confident in what they are doing. You have parents who don't have the time or expertise to help their children master a wide variety of curricula while working from home. Although the pandemic will surely pass, I am afraid that many students, teachers, and parents will retain unpleasant memories of their forced introduction to online education for years to come. They may never experience the joys and possibilities of online learning; only the shared horror stories will remain as a kind of communal folklore.

Joanna: Do you have advice for teachers who want to establish an online art education program at any level from middle years to higher education?

Roger: I think the younger the learner, the more problematic online education is, at least when it is the primary delivery model. I mean, one could always have some units or some work online in an on-site program, but if it is totally online you have to devise a program that doesn't leave the students lost or stranded. This requires constant professional supervision, guidance, and assessment. Above all, it requires much more time than onsite education.

Education is always changing, and it is nice to know that you can change things for the better. The sad part is that things can also deteriorate and, even in the case of important subjects and programs, curricular effectiveness can go up or down. Even in middle-sized cities art programs are frequently delivered by a solitary art teacher. Online education encourages isolated teachers to get together and share their highs and lows,

and I'm sure professional exchanges are happening with increasing ease and frequency. So, online education can help art teachers feel that they, too, are not 'alone.'

Peter: This is the last question Dr. Lee. Do you have any other comments about your experience teaching virtually that you haven't had the opportunity to talk about, but you want to add to this interview?

Roger: I think I have covered just about everything. It was a wonderful experience! If I were to devise another program, I'd include a course entitled '*Art Education Leadership and Advocacy*.' That's something that art educators always have to deal with, and my hat is off to art educators who segue into administrative positions. I certainly do not have an administrative temperament; I'm not somebody who follows rules just because "this has always been the policy." I try to do what I think is right and if I don't agree with something, I don't do it. I think a lot of art teachers see the world differently than teachers who come from science, physical education, and mathematics backgrounds. But if art educators are not in positions of administrative authority, our subject does not have a voice at the table, so it is important to have strong art education graduate programs.


Joanna: Well, Dr. Lee, thank you so much for being interviewed.

Conclusion

This future is one that encompasses online teaching and learning, traditional face-to-face formats of delivery, and hybrid models combining the two. From 2007 to 2011 the Art Education online graduate program thrived at Western University. As the sole faculty member involved in the program, Dr. Lee admitted that it developed and prospered due to the tremendous support of his administration at that time. He approached the delivery of the program with a student-friendly lens, engaging content, and a strong, innovative structure that enabled a diversity of approaches for success. Initially geared towards an Ontario student body, Dr. Lee discovered that what he had created attracted a program that garnered international student interest and enrollment. When asked about the validity of an online program, Dr. Lee was quick to remark that both

virtual and face-to-face learning can range from deficient to exemplary depending on a variety of factors. It is not the format of the delivery that is important but the well-thought-out content, pedagogical approaches, and commitment of the instructor and the students involved in the teaching and learning experience. In the last few years and particularly during COVID-19, ongoing cutbacks to art education have left not only educators, but our students worried. From our standpoint, we as pre-service art educators, are finding ourselves often saying to our students, "You are the future generation. Art education has survived because of dedicated people in the past who have advocated and fought for the survival of Art Education programs throughout our country. We are passing the baton to you." Dr. Lee echoes these sentiments in his retirement: he believes that Art Education leadership and advocacy are key to the future of our discipline.

During these controversial and demanding times in the pandemic, where we face online learning as a challenge we must also acknowledge successes of this form of program delivery. Dr. Roger Lee did just that. Through this interview, his words help us understand the complexities of the online educational world and help us understand and appreciate the first online graduate Art Education program in Canada.



"...Art Education leadership and advocacy are key to the future of our discipline."

